

### Getting Ready to Read

*Before you read, do at least one of the following activities.*

- Read or reread the introduction to Chapter 2
- If your teacher asks you to do so, quickly read the short Wardle and Kain selection defining activity theory in Chapter 2.

*As you read, consider the following question:*

- What examples from your own experience can you call upon to help illustrate the terms that Bazerman is defining?

Part I of this book provides conceptual and analytic tools to show how texts evoke worlds of meaning by representing content and using the resources of language, including relations with other texts, and other media, such as graphics. Part II to this point provides tools to examine how texts arise within and influence the living world of people and events. This final chapter proposes one more set of conceptual and analytic tools for viewing the work that texts do in society. This chapter provides means to identify the conditions under which they accomplish this work; to notice the regularity of texts in carrying out recognizably similar tasks; and to see how specific professions, situations, and social organizations can be associated with a limited range of text types. Finally, it provides methods to analyze how the orderly production, circulation, and use of these texts in part constitutes the very activity and organization of social groups. The analytical approach of this chapter relies on a series of concepts: social facts, speech acts, genres, genre systems, and activity systems. These concepts suggest **how people using text create new realities of meaning, relation, and knowledge.**

Consider a typical academic situation. One university's faculty senate after much debate passes a regulation requiring students to pass six writing intensive courses in order to be granted a B.A. The regulation defines several criteria that a course must meet before it can be approved by the curriculum committee as writing intensive, such as a minimum number of writing assignments with a minimum number of total required words across the term. This requirement then gets written into various administrative documents including the university catalogue and various student advisement documents. Students read these documents (or are reminded by advisors at critical junctures) and know they have to locate and register for courses that will fulfill those requirements if they hope to graduate. Memos and other administrative documents are sent to the faculties of various departments to encourage them to offer such courses. The faculty of those departments write syllabi indicating that students will be required to write the requisite number of assignments and words. Further, the faculty are likely to shape those assignments in relation to the intellectual challenges of their subject matter and the goals of the course such as improving

students' ability to understand and use economic models or to interpret 17th-century Spanish verse. The faculty then submit these syllabi for review by faculty committees, according to procedures set out in other administrative documents. Once the appropriate committee approves, the approval is noted in the minutes of the committee, in future editions of the catalogue, and each term's schedule of courses available for registration. Students then register and take these courses using typical registration forms and procedures; at the end of the term the teacher submits grades on an official grade sheet to be inscribed on the student's permanent record. When students get near graduation, these records will be reviewed by some official who will, among other things, add up whether six of these writing intensive courses have been taken. If all graduation requirements have been met, students gain diplomas useful for graduate school admissions, employment, and hanging on a wall. If not, students will be notified they need to take more courses.

In this sequence of events, many texts have been produced. But even more significantly, many social facts have been produced. These facts wouldn't have existed except that people have made them so by creating texts; graduation requirements, course syllabi defining the work of the various courses, criteria for courses to be labeled writing intensive, lists of approved courses, each student's record of writing intensive courses, and so on. In this cycle of texts and activities, we see well articulated organizational systems within which specific kinds of texts flow in anticipatable paths with easily understood and familiar consequences (at least to those people who are familiar with university life). We have highly typified genres of documents and highly typified social structures within which those documents create social facts that affect the actions, rights, and obligations of others.

When we look inside the courses where the required writing is actually done, we see even more typified structures in which writing takes place. In each course we have identifiable cycles of texts and activities, shaped by the syllabus, plans, assigned textbooks and readings, and assignment sheets which structure expectations and consequences. Typically, much of the first class of each course is taken up by laying out these expectations defined in the syllabus. Students then typically project how the course will unfold, how much work will be required, and whether the experience will be interesting and/or worthwhile in order to decide whether to stay in the course or replace it with another. Later in this chapter we look more closely at courses as structured activity systems built upon an infrastructure of genred texts.

This extended example suggests how each text is embedded within structured social activities and depends on previous texts that influence the social activity and organization. Further, this example suggests how each text establishes conditions that somehow are taken into account in consequent activities. The texts within this example create realities, or facts, for students and teachers live both in what they explicitly state and in the structures of relationship and activity they establish implicitly simply by fitting together in an organized way of life. Each successful text creates for its readers a social fact. The social facts consist of meaningful social actions being accomplished through language, or

speech acts. These acts are carried out in patterned, typical, and therefore intelligible textual forms or genres, which are related to other texts and genres that occur in related circumstances. Together the text types fit together as genre sets within genre systems, which are part of systems of human activity. I explain more precisely what I mean by each of these terms in the next section.

Understanding these genres and how they work in the systems and circumstances they were designed for, can help you as a writer fulfill the needs of the situation, in ways that are understood and speak to the expectations of others. Understanding the acts and facts created by texts can also help you understand when seemingly well-written texts go wrong, when those texts don't do what they need to do. Such an understanding can also help you diagnose and redesign communicative activity systems—to determine whether a particular set of document used at certain moments is redundant or misleading, whether new documents need to be added, or whether some details of a genre might be modified. It can also help you decide when you need to write innovatively to accomplish something new or different.

Understanding the form and flow of texts in genre and activity systems can even help you understand how to disrupt or change the systems by the deletion, addition, or modification of

a document type. While this may tempt textual mischief, it also provides the tools for thinking about social creativity in making new things happen in new ways. If, for example, you are sitting around with friends after dinner, you may have a choice of pulling out the TV listings, mentioning the newspaper's lead political story, taking out the book of photos of your last trip, or turning on the computer to look at the latest Web site. By introducing these different texts not only are you introducing different topics,

*Each text is embedded within structured social activities and depends on previous texts that influence the social activity and organization. . . .*

*Each text establishes conditions that are somehow taken into account in consequent activities. The texts . . . create realities.*

you are introducing different activities, interactional patterns, attitudes, and relationships. The choice of a text may influence whether you make bets and wisecracks over a football game, debate politics, admire or envy each others' adventures, or make schemes for your own shared projects. Once one of these patterned activities are taken up they can shape opportunities of interaction until the mood is broken and a new activity is installed. In a classroom, a teacher's lessons often serve to define genres and activities, thereby shaping learning opportunities and expectations.

## Basic Concepts

**Social Facts and the Definition of the Situation.** Social facts are those things people believe to be true, and therefore bear on how they define a situation.

is. That is, intertextual reference can attempt to establish the social facts upon which the writer is attempting to make a new statement. In making a plea to the registrar of my school I will need to bring transcripts from the prior institution, perhaps copies of syllabi, and maybe letters from current professors indicating I have the skills that would come from having taken that course.

Many of the social facts, such as the ones described in the last several examples hinge on speech acts, whether certain verbal formulations were accurately and properly done. If properly accomplished, these words are to be taken as fully completed acts that should be respected as having been done.

**Speech Acts.** The philosopher John Austin in his book, *How to Do Things with Words*, argued that words not only mean things, they do things. His argument builds on such examples as two friends making a promise or a preacher declaring a pair of people married. These acts are done just by the words themselves. As a result of a set of words said at the proper time in the proper circumstances by the proper person, someone will be obligated to do something, or the life arrangements of two people will change. In considering written documents, you might equally say that applying for a bank loan is carried out purely in the words and numbers you use to fill out and submit the application. Equally, the bank's approval is simply accomplished by a letter being issued saying you have been approved. From such striking examples Austin goes on to argue that every statement does something, even if only to assert a certain state of affairs is true. Thus, all utterances embody speech acts.

Of course for our words to carry out their acts these words must be said by the right people, in the right situation, with the right set of understandings. If two potential bettors were strangers likely not to meet after the football game, if no stakes were set, if the event wagered upon had already passed, if the context and intonation suggested a joke rather than a formal bet, or if a thousand other things were not right, one or another of the parties might not believe a real and proper bet had been made. Similarly, if the person making a marriage declaration were not a member of the clergy or judiciary with power in this jurisdiction, or if the people were not legally eligible for marriage with each other, or if they were taking part in a dramatic performance, there would be no real and binding marriage. A loan application by someone under 18 is not a legal application and a letter of approval signed by the night janitor at the bank or that does not set terms of repayment is not a real approval. All these represent "felicity" conditions that must be right in order for the speech act to succeed. Without the felicity conditions being met, the act would not be an act, or at least the same sort of act. Austin and John Searle, who continued the analysis of speech acts, pointed out that speech acts operate at three levels. First is the locutionary act, which includes a propositional act. The locutionary act is literally what is said. So in saying that "it is a bit chilly in this room," I am reporting on a state of affairs and making a certain proposition about the temperature in the room.

Quite possibly the act I was attempting to accomplish, however, was to request my host to raise the thermostat. Or perhaps I was disagreeing with

People then act as though these facts were true. The sociologist W. I. Thomas (1923) states it so: "If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." If people believe that their country has been offended or threatened by another country, they may even go to war over what they believe to be fact. Sometimes these social facts bear on our understanding of the physical world. As long as some people believe Elvis is around they will act as though it were true, even though most people accept his burial as definitive. Even statements that are socially held as scientifically verified, may not be recognized by some people as true. So even though it is well established that airplanes do fly and have safety records far better than land vehicles, many people do not securely believe such facts and prefer to go by train.

More often though social facts bear on subjects that are primarily matters of social understanding, such as whether or not a mayor has authority to make certain decisions and act in a certain way. That authority is based on a series of historically developed political, legal, and social understandings, arrangements, and institutions. As long as people continue to believe in the legitimacy of those understandings, arrangements, and institutions, they will accept the mayor's authority in appropriate circumstances. These social facts are a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, for the more the mayor seems to exercise legitimate authority, the more people are likely to recognize and grant that authority. Under certain conditions, however, such as after a conviction for felony or after the violent overthrow of a government, people may no longer respect the authority of that mayor.

Very often social facts bear on the words people speak or write and on the force the utterance carries. If all the students in the class understand the teacher's syllabus to require a paper to be turned in on a certain day, they will act on this. If, on the other hand, they all understand him to have said during one class that the deadline can be extended, many will likely pursue what they perceive as a new option. The professor may or may not share this social belief about what was said, with consequences for conflict or cooperation. Similarly, if my friend and I believe we have made a bet by saying the right verbal formulas in the right situation, then one of us will pay up the other at the appropriate moment. On the other hand, if I believe a bet was being made, and my friend only believes we were making a joke, then there is no shared social fact and conflict may result.

Similarly, my right to attend a college may depend on whether I had enrolled properly, whether I had sent in a check to pay back tuition, whether I had received a diploma from high school, and a whole list of other social facts determined by texts. In order to be allowed to attend, I need to respect the institution's definition of required social facts and then be able to produce acceptable textual tokens of each. If, for example, I claim that in fact I had taken a course at another school but there is no record of it, or the new school rejects the record of that course, we do not share that course as a social fact. For institutional purposes it might as well have been a figment of my imagination.

As discussed in chapter 4, intertextuality often seeks to create a shared understanding of what people have said before and what the current situation

the rather "cold" remarks being made about someone. By speaking indirectly I intended my words to have a specific illocutionary force, which I assume others would recognize given the immediate circumstances and the manner of delivery of the sentence. The act I intend my hearer to recognize is the illocutionary act.

The listeners, however, may take my comments to mean something else entirely, such as a complaint about the stinginess of the host or an attempt to change the subject of an unpleasant discussion. Their own further responses will take into account what *they* thought I was doing, and not necessarily what I thought I was doing, or even what I literally said. How people take up the acts and determine the consequences of that act for future interaction is called the perlocutionary effect. To make the issue even more complicated, listeners may not be happy or cooperative with what they understand me to be doing, and in their further utterances and acts they may not go along with it. I may intend to request an adjustment of the thermostat, and the host may even understand my request, but still might then say something like, "I have been reading how energy shortages may lead to international economic instability." Where did that come from? Why is the host reporting on his economics reading? Perhaps he is trying to tell me that he does not want to waste fuel and intends to keep the thermostat low.

This three-leveled analysis of speech acts—what was literally stated, the intended act, and actual effect—is also applicable to written texts. You may write a letter to a friend telling of the latest events in your life, but your illocutionary intent may be to maintain a low-key friendship or to trigger an answering letter that would reveal whether a certain problem had been resolved. And the reader's perlocutionary uptake may be that she believes that you miss her greatly and are trying to rekindle an intense romance. So as not to encourage you, she may never write back.

This three-leveled analysis of speech acts also allows us to understand the status of claims or representations made within texts about states of affairs in the world—the propositional acts, as Searle calls them. Many texts assert propositions, such as a new scientific finding about the health value of chocolate, or the news "facts" of a public demonstration, or the "true meaning" of a poem. Thus the illocutionary force is to gain acceptance of the propositional act. However, only under some conditions will the readers believe these assertions as fact. In the case of the wondrous effects of chocolate, if there are contrary scientific findings or obvious flaws in the procedures followed, or the authors have no medical credentials, or if it becomes known they received major funding from the chocolate manufacturer's association, the proposition may well not be accepted by enough relevant readers to achieve status as a "fact." Other conditions may effect how people take up the assertions about news events or literary interpretation. The only perlocutionary effect may remain that the proposition is seen only as a dubious assertion. With only that more limited act accomplished, the resulting social fact will only be that the authors are trying to convince certain people of this or that claim. If, however, the authors do gain wide acceptance, new social facts about the value of chocolate, an historical event, or the meaning of a poem will be established until someone undermines

those facts or replaces them with new "truths." When viewed through this analysis, the matter of arguing for the truth of propositions becomes a matter of meeting those felicity conditions that will lead the relevant audiences to accept your claims as true, thus matching the perlocutionary effect with your illocutionary intent.

**Typification and Genres.** The three-leveled distinction among what we say or write, what we intend to accomplish by what we say or write, and what people understand us to be attempting points out how much our intentions may be misunderstood and just how difficult may be coordinating our actions with each other. The lack of coordination is potentially much worse when we are communicating by writing, for we cannot see each other's gestures and mood, nor can we immediately see the other's uptake in a perlocutionary effect that does not match our illocutionary intent. That is, we can't notice our host immediately saying, "Oh, I didn't realize that you were uncomfortable" and step toward the thermostat, when we only wished to be ironic about the nasty turn in the conversation. If we spot misunderstandings in face-to-face situations, then we can always repair the damage with a comment like, "Oh, I was just joking." But in writing the opportunities for repair are usually extremely limited, even if we have enough information to suspect we may have been misunderstood.

One way we can help coordinate our speech acts with each other is to act in typical ways, ways easily recognized as accomplishing certain acts in certain circumstances. If we find a certain kind of utterance or text seems to work well in a situation and be understood in a certain way, when we see another similar situation we are likely to say or write something similar. If we start following communicative patterns that other people are familiar with, they may recognize more easily what we are saying and trying to accomplish. Then we can anticipate better what their reactions will be if we followed these standardized, recognizable forms. These patterns are mutually reinforcing. Recognizable, self-reinforcing forms of communication emerge as **genres**.

In creating typified forms or genres, we also come to typify the situations we find ourselves in. If we recognize that when a guest in someone else's house comments about bodily discomfort, the host typically understands that as an obligation to make the guest feel comfortable, then we can adjust our comments so as not to say things that would mistakenly put our host in a state of obligation. The typification gives a certain shape and meaning to the circumstances and directs the kinds of actions that will ensue.

This process of moving to standardized forms of utterances that are recognized as carrying out certain actions in certain circumstances and to standard understandings of situations is called **typification**. Thus in some professions if we wish to seek a position, we need to prepare a resume on curriculum vitae to list all the relevant facts and professional accomplishments of our life and to highlight our desirable qualities for the potential employer. Standard formats direct us toward what information to present, such as address, education, and prior experience. The standard format also directs us how to present that information. Following the standard format, as well, helps the employer find and

interpret the information. Further, there are standard differences in format for different professions. In academic employment, publications and research take a central role, whereas in business listing responsibilities in each prior position and a record of specific training and skills are often important. Of course, even within the standard forms people try to express their particular characteristics and make their resume distinctive and memorable, so as to stand out from the others. Yet as soon as someone invents a new element or format that seems to work, it is likely to be picked up by others and become fairly standard within that field. Such, for example, is the newly established practice on resumes for a number of professions of listing computer programs one is familiar with.

The definition of genre presented here is a little different from the everyday sense we have of genres, but is consistent with it. As we walk through life we recognize very rapidly texts as being one or another familiar kind, usually because we recognize some features of the text that signal us what kind of message to expect. On an envelope, bulk rate postage and slogans signal us about junk mail advertisements and solicitations; a memo format signed by someone high up in the organization signals an announcement or directive. So we tend to identify and define genres by those special signaling features, and then all the other textual features that we expect to follow.

This identification of genres through features is very useful knowledge for us to interpret and make sense of documents, but it gives us an incomplete and misleading view of genres. By seeing genres as only characterized by a fixed set of features we come to view genres as timeless and the same for all viewers. Everybody always knows what we know—right? Wrong. Common knowledge changes over time as genres and situations change; “common knowledge” even varies from person to person, or even the same person in different situations and moods. The definition of genres only as a set of textual features ignores the role of individuals in using and making meaning. It ignores differences of perception and understanding, the creative use of communications to meet perceived novel needs in novel circumstances, and the changing of genre understanding over time.

We can reach a deeper understanding of genres if we understand them as psycho-social recognition phenomena that are parts of processes of socially organized activities. Genres are only the types individuals recognize as being used by themselves and others. Genres are what we believe they are. That is, they are social facts about the kinds of speech acts people can make and the ways they can make them. Genres arise in social processes of people trying to understand each other well enough to coordinate activities and share meanings for their practical purposes.

Genres typify many things beyond textual form. They are part of the way that humans give shape to social activity. When you are at a football game and recognize that the crowd is taking up a chant for your team, as you join in you are being drawn into the spectacle and emotions of the community athletic event. As you read and are convinced by the political pamphlet of a candidate for Congress you are being drawn into a world of politics and citizenship. As you learn to read and use research articles of your field you are drawn into

a professional way of being and work. When a new Web site develops and attracts attention, your local community service organization may evolve into a clearinghouse for corporate donation of excess products. You and your fellow volunteers may then find yourselves drawn into an entirely new set of activities and roles.

To characterize how genres fit into and comprise larger organizations, roles, organizations, and activities, several overlapping concepts have been proposed, each grabbing a different aspect of this configuration: genre set, source system and activity system.

A Genre Set is the collection of types of texts someone in a particular role is likely to produce. In cataloging all the genres someone in a professional role is likely to speak and write, you are identifying a large part of their work. If you find out a civil engineer needs to write proposals, work orders, progress reports, quality test reports, safety evaluations, and a limited number of other similar documents, you have gone a long way toward identifying the work they do. If you then can figure out what skills are needed to be able to write those reports (including the mathematical, measuring, and testing skills that are needed to produce the figures, designs, calculations, etc., in the reports) you will have identified a large part of what a civil engineer has to learn to do that work competently. If you identify all the forms of writing a student must engage in to study, to communicate with the teacher and classmates, and to submit for dialogue and evaluation, you have defined the competences, challenges, and opportunities for learning offered by that course.

A Genre System is comprised of the several genre sets of people working together in an organized way, plus the patterned relations in the production, flow, and use of these documents. A genre system captures the regular sequences of how one genre follows on another in the typical communication flows of a group of people. The genre set written by a teacher of a particular course might consist of a syllabus, assignment sheets, personal notes on readings, notes for giving lectures and lesson plans for other kinds of classes, exam questions, email announcements to the class, replies to individual student queries and comments, comments and grades on student papers, and grade sheets at the end of the term. Students in the same course would have a somewhat different genre set: notes of what was said in lectures and class, notes on reading, clarifications on assignment sheets and syllabus, email queries and comments to the professor and/or classmates, notes on library and data research for assignments, rough drafts and final copies of assignments, exam answers, letters requesting a change of grade. However, these two sets of genres are intimately related and flow in predictable sequences and time patterns. The instructor is expected to distribute the syllabi on the first day and assignment sheets throughout the term. Students then ask questions about the expectation in class or over email, and then write clarifications on the assignment sheets. The assignment sheets in turn guide student work in collecting data, visiting the library, and developing their assignments. The pace of their work picks up as the assignment deadline approaches. Once assignments are handed in, the professor comments on and grades them. Similarly the instructor prepares, then delivers lectures and

classes. Students are expected to take notes on readings beforehand and then on what the instructor says in class; then they study those notes on class and readings before the various quizzes and exams. Typically the instructor looks at the lectures and assigned readings in order to write questions for quizzes and exams. The students then take the exam and the teacher grades them. At the end of the term the instructor calculates by some formula the sum of all the grades to produce the content of the grade sheet, which is submitted to the registrar to enter into an institutional system of genres.

This system of genres is also part of the system of activity of the class. In defining the system of genres people engage in you also identify a framework which organizes their work, attention, and accomplishment. In some situations spoken genres dominate, but as you move up the educational ladder and into the professional world, the system of written genres become especially important. In some activities physical aspects take on a highly visible and central role, and the spoken and written genres are peripheral or supportive rather than central. Playing basketball may be mostly about moves and ball handling, but there are rules, strategies, cheers, league organization, and newspaper reporting which engage spoken and written genres. Factory production similarly is closely tied to orders, control and quality reports, production records, machine instructions, and repair manuals. In knowledge-based fields, such as medicine, and especially fields where the primary product is making and distributions of symbols, such as journalism, then the activity system is centrally organized around written documents.

Considering the activity system in addition to the genre system puts a focus on what people are doing and how texts help people do it, rather than on texts as ends in themselves. In educational settings, activity puts the focus on questions such as how students build concepts and knowledge through solving problems, how instructional activities make knowledge and opportunities for learning available, how instructors support and structure learning, and how and for what purposes student abilities are assessed.

## Methodological Issues

The textual analysis in this chapter aims at genre and the larger aggregations (genre sets, genre systems, and activity systems) that genres are part of. The concepts of social fact and speech act provide a basis for understanding the analytical approach of this chapter. We do not, however, in this chapter provide focused analytic tools for investigating social facts and speech acts. Empirical research and analysis of social facts and speech acts would raise many additional methodological concerns of sociology, anthropology, and linguistics than we have space for here. To keep our task simpler, we will keep our analytical focus at the level of genre, and particularly genres of written texts, setting aside methodological issues that pertain primarily to spoken utterances.

Before getting to methods of studying written genres, however, we need to address one issue that arises from considering extended written genres as speech acts. The concept of speech acts was developed by Austin and Searle using brief

utterances, for the most part spoken. Linguists and linguistic anthropologists who have used the concept of speech act in their investigations typically have stayed with brief spoken utterances—typically of the length of a short sentence. The shortness of the utterance makes the task of identifying distinct propositional and illocutionary acts simple. A single sentence can be seen as making a single request, or a single bet, or a single claim, and little more. And the immediate response possible in spoken interaction gives strong clues about the perlocutionary uptake of the listener. Further the initial speaker's response can give evidence of whether he or she felt the intent or force of the initial statement was understood correctly (i.e., whether the perlocutionary force was close or distant from the illocutionary intent).

Written texts typically do not have these advantages for analysis. Written texts are typically longer than a single sentence. The sentences within the texts themselves are typically longer and more complex. So that each sentence may contain many acts, and the many sentences of a text compound the problem infinitely. Nonetheless, we usually see the overall text as having a single or few dominant actions that define its intent and purpose, that we take up as the perlocutionary effect or the fact of social accomplishment for the text. An application to graduate school can be seen as the aggregate of writing numerous identifying and descriptive facts about ourselves, boasting about our accomplishments, presenting our thoughts about our professional goals, photocopying a paper completed earlier in our schooling, requesting several people to write letters of recommendation, filling out forms to several institutions to forward our scores and record, and writing a check to cover the application fee. How do we as analysts recognize this aggregate genre, with the actions and contexts implied?

Further, written texts usually provide little immediate evidence of the reader's uptake. That uptake may be more complex and considered than in response to spoken utterances because the reader may find varying meanings and develop multiple responses in reading through the long text. The reader then may ponder the text for some longer period. Because the reader's response is usually separated in time and space from the moment of writing, and is often buried within the privacy of silent reading, the writer may gain little evidence of any reader's uptake. Furthermore, even with knowledge of readers' uptake, the writer usually has few opportunities for corrections, repairs, or elaborations to resolve misunderstandings or differences between illocutionary intent and perlocutionary effect. Finally, a written text more easily than a spoken utterance can travel into entirely new situations where it may serve unanticipated uses for new readers, as when a private email gets spread around the Internet, or a politician's medical records get into the press.

This methodological dilemma of identifying speech acts in written texts is similar to the dilemma we face as readers and writers of texts. How do we make sense out of the complexity, indeterminacy, and contextual multiplicity that a text presents us with? We use genre and typifications to help us with just this sort of dilemma. As readers and writers we use whatever we have learned through our lives about texts, text types, and situation types to get

a sense of the text at hand and to attribute a dominant action for each text. But there are serious methodological difficulties with relying totally on our "native speaker intuitions" as anything more than a first approximation. Technically, relying on our intuitions already makes us assume many of the things we want to investigate. We are already assuming that everybody understands these texts exactly as we understand them—that they share exactly the same kind and level of textual and social knowledge, and that we all share the same textual culture. This in a sense assumes the problem of genre understanding is always trivial and always solved—and in fact requires no education, socialization, or acculturation. If we all understood each other's texts so easily and well, many teachers would be out of a job. But mutual understanding of texts is not so easily achieved. Genre studies are needed precisely because we do not understand the genres and activities of unfamiliar fields that are important to us or to our students. Even those genres and activity systems that we already are to some degree familiar with could bear more analysis, so that we can act more effectively and precisely with a more articulated sense of what is going on.

So how do we get out of this dilemma of multiple understandings of genres and acts? How do we move beyond our "naturalized" user's view of genres and activity systems to a more carefully researched, observed, analyzed knowledge? How do we incorporate an understanding of the practices and knowledge of others—and then understand how these very practices come about and are learned? This is essentially the methodological problem of genre studies to which there is no simple and quick answer. Rather we have only a bootstrapping operation of increasing our knowledge and perspective through research such as examining more texts in a more regularized way; interviewing and observing more writers and readers, and ethnographically documenting how texts are used in organizations. The richer and more empirical a picture develops, the less we are dependent on the limitations of our own experience and training. The following methodological comments are aimed precisely at expanding our perspective on genres and the systems they are part of.

**Methodological Issues and Analytic Tools: What Is a Genre and How Do You Know One?** Over the last few pages I have developed a complicated answer to something we recognize every day in fairly straightforward ways. When we look at documents we notice certain features that seem to signal them to us as belonging to one genre or another and therefore attempting to accomplish a certain kind of interaction with us.

You get a mail offer for a credit card. You immediately recognize what it is, perhaps without even opening the envelope. How do you do this? It is in a standard envelope, but with the glassine window for the address, so we recognize it as business or institutional. We recognize the bulk rate postage, and know it is some kind of impersonal solicitation. We notice the offer to lower our interest rates. We already know that inside the envelope we will find an application for a credit card along with a letter. Even more we know whether we want to have anything to do with what they are offering.

You walk into a cafeteria and glance at a newspaper lying on a table. You immediately know many things about what it will contain and what the articles will look like, the style they will be in, how they will be organized, and even where in the newspaper different kinds of articles will be found. Again, this quickly assessed knowledge helps us structure what we do with that newspaper.

Most genres have easy to notice features that signal you about the kind of text it is. And often these features are closely related to major functions or activities carried out by the genre. The bold newspaper headlines mentioning major events are designed to grab your attention by pointing out the exciting news that you will want to read more about. The date and place of the story lets you know where in the world the news comes from (of course this really only became an important feature after telegraph and other forms of distant communication made the newspaper more than a local report). The lead sentence typically gives you *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when* so you can decide whether to read on about the details. The cheap paper is chosen because the paper's content gets old fast, and newspapers are usually thrown out within a couple of days. These features direct how we attend to the newspaper and even how long we keep it.

Because genres are recognizable by their distinctive features and those features seem to tell us so much about the function, it is tempting to see genres just as a collection of these features. We then are tempted to analyze the genres by picking out those regular features we notice and tell a story about the reason for these features, based on our knowledge of the world. Much, in fact, can be learned about familiar genres current in our time and community by proceeding in this way, but only because they are part of our immediate cultural world. There are, however, limitations and problems with identifying and analyzing genres by making up plausible reasons for easily spotted features.

First, it limits us to understanding those aspects of genre we are already aware of.

Second, it ignores how people may see each text in different ways, because of their different knowledge of genres, the different systems they are part of, the different positions and attitudes they have about particular genres, or their different activities at the moment. A wanted poster, for example, is read very differently by and has very different meanings for an FBI agent, a parent nervous about the safety of children, and the fugitive. Researchers in a particular field, for another example, may be able to distinguish many different kinds of articles that appear in the journals of their field, while graduate students may only recognize a few, which they will not understand the full implications of. How is a review of the literature at a research front that appears in a top research journal different from a textbook review or a seminar-assigned review of literature? First-year undergraduates may not even know research literatures exist and may think all scientific writing looks like the textbooks they are familiar with. In the business world, someone familiar with the texts that circulate in an insurance company may not be so familiar with those in a wholesale hardware operation. Even within the same

industry sets of typical documents may vary in significant respects from one company to another.

Third, such a collecting of features may make it appear that these features of the text are ends in themselves, that every use of a text is measured against an abstract standard of correctness to the form rather than whether it carries out the work it was designed to do. If a news article is printed on high quality paper is it less a news article? If it does not list the "who, what, where, and when" in the opening paragraph is it seriously faulted? Of course, every example of a genre may vary in particulars of content, situation, and writer intent, which may lead to differences in the form. Yet we still use our genre knowledge to understand it. We may even use multiple genre models to understand and use it. The features and genres invoked have their only justification and motive in the understanding and activity that occurs between people, and finally what ever works, counts.

Fourth, consequently, the view of genre that simply makes it a collection of features obscures how these features are flexible in any instance or even how the general understanding of the genre can change over time, as people orient to evolving patterns. Students writing papers for courses have a wide variety of ways of fulfilling the assignment, and may even bend the assignment as long as they can get their professor or grader to go along with the change. Newspaper stories now have a different "feel" than those of a century ago—which can be attributed to changes in the understanding of articles—such as the expectation of rapid communication, the quick dating of stories, the recognition of the role of celebrity and famous people, the critical culture.

To deal with these issues, then, we can suggest several different approaches to identifying and analyzing genres that go beyond the cataloging of features of genres that we already recognize.

First, to go beyond those features we are already aware of, we can use a variety of less obvious linguistic, rhetorical, or organizational analytical concepts to examine a collection of texts in the same genre. In that way we can discover if there are consistencies within a genre that go beyond the most obvious identifying features. By examining typical patterns of subject and verbs, we may, for example, consider whether or not state education standards attribute agency, and of what sort to students, or whether those documents put most of the decision making in the hands of teachers, or administrators, or abstract principles of knowledge. Or we may see how science textbooks use graphic images and tables and compare those uses to those in more professional scientific documents to see whether students are being given the opportunity to become familiar with scientific practices of graphic representation. Most of the methods of textual analysis in this book can be considered with respect to genre, although not all of them will necessarily reveal a pattern in any particular genre.

Second, to consider variation in different situations and periods, we can extend the sample to include a larger number and range of texts that still might be considered within the same genre. More examples allow us to see how the form of the text varies. Even more importantly, if you are able to gain information about the rhetorical situation of each of the examples, you can analyze

how those variations are related to differences in the situation and the interaction being carried out in the situation.

We may further consider how there may be patterned differences between what is called the same genre in different areas or fields. If we start looking at experimental research articles in biology and psychology we can notice characteristic differences between them. We may then consider the way in which these are the same genres and the extent to which you might consider them different. And we can then consider how differences in the form are related to differences in the social and activity organization of the fields.

Similarly, we can compare front-page news articles in different countries to consider the different roles news takes within the differing political, economic, and social lives found in those countries. Or we can compare front-page stories in a national paper of record like the *New York Times* and a tabloid or a local paper. These kinds of investigations will reveal how expectation of genres can become highly specialized in different areas, how what people recognize is very much a local cultural matter, and how news enters into the complex of organized life activities.

Another way to extend your sample is to look historically. With sufficient examples of the genre over time, we can get a sense of how the genre understandings change as a field and historical context change. These changes may be so great that the names of the genres change or very different things count as a genre. The earliest scientific articles look more like letters than anything we see now in *Physics Review*. The more we hold all other aspects of the situation constant, the more we can see how much of the change is due to changes in genre understanding. To compare news stories from a century ago to today, it helps to look at newspapers from the same size town with the same level of readership in a similar region, so as to identify what differences are likely to result from historical changes in newspaper format rather than differences of the audience served.

Third, to deal with the problem of characterizing genres that you may not be familiar with or that others may understand differently than you do, you need to gather information not just about the texts, but about other people's understanding of them. One broad way is to ask people in a certain field to name the kinds of texts they work with (i.e., to identify their genre set). If you find that all people in a field make a similar list of kinds of texts that accountants or insurance claims adjusters use, then you may have some sense that they do have common understandings. The existence of a well-known name for a genre within a world of practice suggests that this is indeed common knowledge to practitioners, but people may in fact understand somewhat different things by a single shared name. To check the degree of agreement as to understand the particulars of the genre, collecting samples of what they would consider each of those named genres gives you a chance to examine how similar they are in form and in function they are. Sometimes professional or legal or administrative documents define and specify what must go into various documents and how they are to be used. Procedures and regulations manuals, for example, may identify 12 kinds of forms to be filled out, the occasions on which they are

to be filled out, and the manner of completion. However, be careful, because people do not always do things exactly as the regulations tell them to or they interpret the regulations differently, or they try to accomplish other things beyond the mandate of the regulations.

Fourth, to extend beyond the explicit understanding of what people in a field name, in order to see the full range of implicit practice, you can do ethnographic research in the workplace, classroom, or other site of text production, distribution, or use. By collecting every text people use over a day, or a week, or a month, as well as noting on what occasions they use them, for what purposes, and how they produce, work with, and interpret these texts, you will get a more complete picture of their textual worlds. If you do this, make sure you are as complete as possible, including such things as email messages, personal notes jotted on the margins of other forms, or other things people might not consider formal documents worth noting. Interviewing people in the process of using texts can give you further insight into the meanings, intentions, uptakes, and activity of the participants.

In the course of this ethnographic work you may also record the sequence particular documents come in, in relation to which activities, and which documents are referred to in the course of reading and writing each new document. This data will help you document and understand the genre set, genre system, and activity system. Examining the genre set allows you to see the range and variety of the writing work required within a role, and to identify the genre knowledge and writing skills needed by someone to accomplish that work. Examining the genre system allows you to understand the practical, functional, and sequential interactions of documents. Understanding these interactions also allows you to see how individuals writing any new text are intertextually situated within a system and how their writing is directed by genre expectations and supported by systemic resources. Finally, considering the activity system enables you to understand the total work accomplished by the system and how each piece of writing contributes to the total work. Analysis of genre and activity systems also allows you to evaluate the effectiveness of the total systems and the appropriateness of each of the genred documents in carrying forward that work. This analysis could help you determine whether any change in any of the documents, distribution, sequence, or flow might improve the total activity system.

## Methodological Guidelines: How to Frame and Pursue a Genre Investigation

1. *Frame your purposes and questions to limit your focus.* As with any form of research and analysis the first and most important task is knowing why you are engaged in the enterprise and what questions you hope to answer by it. Depending on your purposes, what you have access to, the amount of time and energy you can commit to the project, you may carry out an investigation at any of the levels discussed in the previous section. Each

level has its problems and benefits. No one is right or wrong. You just need to be aware of the limits and values of each.

2. *Define your Corpus.* Once you know what you are looking for and why, the next task is to identify the specific texts or collections you want to examine, making them extensive enough to provide substantial evidence in making claims, but not too broad to become unmanageable. There is no magic equation to determine what gives you adequate evidence of a genre or stability, but a good rule of thumb is the point of diminishing returns plus a couple more. That is, the sample size should be large enough that adding additional samples will be unlikely to give you major new news or variations. Once you have found that point, add a couple more just to make sure.

On the other hand, if you are examining the history of a journal, or a comparison across several subspecialties, your sample should be rich enough to include more than a few from each period or domain.

If you are gathering the genres from a genre set or a genre system, again the point of "diminished returns plus a couple" is a good guideline. If the genres and work are organized within a limited and coherent cycle, then you can use that cycle to organize and limit your collecting. For example, in looking at a class, you may look at the entire cycle of the term's work; or you may examine the cycle of texts involved in a single unit or assignment sequence. You need not examine every student's paper for every assignment, but you should have a reasonable sample of all assignments, all sets of notes, etc. If you are working with a small peer editing group in the class, all the texts they work with could define your sample of collected work.

3. *Select and apply your analytic tools.* Based on the purposes of your investigation, you need to select appropriate analytic tools to examine the consistencies and variations of features, functions, or relations over the collection. These are the tools discussed in the previous section on how to recognize a genre. As you carry out the analysis, it should be evident whether you are tapping into some fairly stable patterns of text and activity.

After extensive collecting and analysis, if no stable patterns emerge this may be because of one of two difficulties.

- The collection does not reflect the actual practices of users or a coherent flow of documents. For example, if you collect all texts looked at or worked on by students sitting in the student center lounge, you may be tapping into so many different activity systems brought there by students who are just passing through, that you will find no coherence. If you wanted to get a sense of the many genres that pass through a student's life, you might do better to follow a single student around over a day or several days.
- The analytical focus may be misplaced. For example, if you are looking at television advertisements assuming the purpose is to give

information about the product, you may find in many ads little product information to consider. You may be stymied, because ads often seek variety and novelty in order to gain the attention of jaded viewers and give little information. Sometimes the ads withhold even identifying the product until the end to keep you wondering. Perhaps, therefore, your analysis might be better framed around novelty and attention gaining devices. The drive for attention gaining novelty may be so strong that the recognizable features of ads change very rapidly, which your analysis will need to take into account.

### Applied Analysis

The following case demonstrates the value of considering genre, genre sets, 63 genre systems, and activity systems in evaluating the learning potential and consequences of a set of classroom activities. I would like to thank Chris Carrera and Kambiz Ebrahim for their help in collecting the data.

Over a 6-week period during the late fall of 1998 in a sixth-grade class 64 in a suburban California public elementary school, students engaged in a social studies learning unit on the Maya, which was to some degree integrated with simultaneous learning units in mathematics, language arts, and video production. As part of this unit they read and wrote a variety of texts. Texts they wrote included worksheet and outline completions, notes on the readings, quizzes, exams, informational reports (with drafts), collaboratively written scripts (with drafts) for an adventure story about an expedition to the land of the Maya, and final reflections on what they learned from the unit. These documents are the genre set of student writing during this unit. Each student's genre set was collected in a file of the student's work. The student work also included art on Mayan sports, a map of an imagined Mayan city, collaboratively built models of the imagined cities, a board game about the Maya which incorporated words and text (produced by pairs of collaborating students), and videos of their adventure stories (collaboratively produced in teams of about four students each). We can call this an **extended graphic genre set**, although all parts were not collected and placed within the student file of work—suggesting a difference in the evaluation of these productions. Among their readings were a number of assignment sheets and blank worksheets, packets of information about the Maya, supplementary reference books and Web sites, each other's reports and drafts of reports, and drafts of their mutually constructed projects and scripts. Many of these were collected in the student work files.

In traditional terms the aim of this unit could be described as learning social 65 studies facts and concepts with some reinforcement activities. The inclusion of the final reports, the worksheets, outlines, exams, and information sheets in the work file reinforces that impression. The final reports of most students were collections of facts gleaned from handouts, textbooks, encyclopedias, and online reference materials, presented with only minimal organization and

no transition between different topics and the fact sheets, quizzes, and exams equally show only the accumulation of fragmentary facts and ideas. Only a few students were able to achieve a level of articulated synthesis that gave a sense of totality of vision to their papers. On the other hand, students seemed to have understood the expectations of the genre as to require a collection of information. One student, Maria, in the opening sentences of her paper articulates exactly this understanding of what she has to do.

Okay, before I pour all this information on you, let me introduce you to the Maya. They had six prosperous cities: Tulum, Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Mayapan, Tikal, and Palenque. Got that? Great.

Here comes the rest . . .

They were the first people in the New World to have written records. They also had numbers. One was a dot. • Two was two dots. ••

This goes on for about 500 words presenting information on chronicles, calendars, ball games, human sacrifice, geographic and historical extent, trading, and demise. In fact, almost all the papers from the class were similar to Maria's in content, organization, and diction, varying mostly in length and amount of information reported.

That students had such an understanding of the task and the genre is not surprising given that the original assignment packet for this unit described this assignment only as a "three-page typed report describing the Mayan culture." This was embedded within a much more elaborate set of activities, described shortly, but the specific genre of this assignment was very narrow. The narrow information collection focus of this assignment was reinforced and supported by a number of other activities that occurred between the original assignment and the due date of the paper (December 4). First, with the assignment packet and in the days after several handouts were distributed to the class photocopied from reference works covering history, calendar, religion, number system, sports, cities, sacrifice, geography, art, and similar topics. Second, each week in class specific topics of the information were reviewed, with an informational quiz; on Friday. Third, on November 9, students had to fill out a preprinted informational outline on the Mayan civilization providing four points of information for each of three categories: The Land and Region; Classic Period; Mayan Knowledge (see Fig. 11.1 for Janine's response). Fourth, due November 30 just before the final reports was a research chart to be filled out by students working in pairs, first by hand on the worksheet, and then transcribed on a spreadsheet. For five cities, each pair of students had to identify the location, record an important discovery, describe the region and select an interesting cultural fact. Figure 11.2 is the research chart produced by Maria and Sau-lin.

The product here is a mechanically organized set of factual fragments, selected and transcribed from the distributed informational sheets. The further transcription of this material onto a spreadsheet beyond providing new technical skills, reinforces the idea that information (and research) consists of such fragments organized into formal categories. Thus it is not surprising that

# Ancient Maya Outline November 9, 1998



You are to complete this outline with information from our Maya packet, classroom discussions, and research materials. Remember to keep the information brief and to the point.

## I. Maya Civilization

### A. The Land and Region

1. Harsh living conditions
2. Jungle, rain forest
3. Mountains
4. Mexican

Southeastern states, Yucatan Peninsula  
Guatemala, south into Guatemala, northern Honduras

### B. Classic Period

1. Beginnings of Mayan greatness 300 AD
2. Flourished until 900 AD
3. Schools
4. Markets for trading goods

Centers for practicing religion.

### C. Maya Knowledge

1. Master astronomers
2. " " mathematicians
3. " " architecture
4. " " writing
- " time & calendars

Figure 11.1 Informational outline for students to fill in.

students understand the final research report as they do and do not feel challenged to rise to a higher level of synthesis, analysis, or discussion.

The apparently student-produced genres of outlines, worksheets, and quizzes are in fact collaboratively produced with the teacher in the very specific sense that the words on the final page include words produced by the teacher and the students. The teacher produces the topics and categories and structure for the outline and chart and the questions for the quiz. He further produces the instructions on each of the assignment sheets. In this latter sense,