

Introduction

For many years now, I've kept in my office a growing collection of genre samples made up of texts I can use with students to explore genre through representative artifacts. It started as a collection of wedding invitations, thanks to Johns' (1997) suggestion that these offer an excellent springboard for introducing students to genre. Eventually, I started adding other interesting genres that I came across, such as charity donation request letters, political campaign flyers, spam emails, and bad-news memos from university administrators. Always on the lookout for new texts for my collection, I became particularly interested in off-beat instances of genres, like the lease-renewal letter shared in Figure 1.1 of this book or the wedding invitation in Figure 1.2 (a–c). These texts, it seemed to me, demonstrated the power of convention . . . by breaking from it.

Genre theory has long acknowledged variation as inherent to genre, with theoretical discussions typically mentioning the possibilities for creativity, disruption, or flouting of convention. As a reader, I found myself repeatedly underlining such comments in notable texts but always wanting a bit more. What actually *were* the possibilities for writers, and particularly student writers? It is not uncommon, after all, to hear teachers remark that “students must show that they know the rules before they can break them.” While struggling with questions of why, when, and how different writers can manipulate conventions, I became increasingly interested in related research into voice and identity in academic writing. Scholarship in this area has offered interesting insight into how individuals present themselves in unique ways within available generic options (Hyland, 2012; Matsuda, 2001), and research has also highlighted *readers'* roles in constructing author identities (Matsuda & Tardy, 2007; Tardy & Matsuda, 2009). In conducting a study of voice in student writing, I became intrigued by how the same features of a student's text could be read by one teacher as a

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sign of a developing writer and by another as a sign of a creative and confident writer (Tardy, 2012b). Readers clearly play a pivotal role in characterizing texts and writers as deviant or innovative, but it also seemed that genre, setting, roles, and relations were relevant as well.

While my encounters with “real genres” and engagement with writing scholarship were both instrumental in the genesis of this book, it has perhaps been my work as a writing teacher and teacher educator that has had the most impact on my thinking. I am particularly attentive to critiques of genre pedagogy that caution that genres may be perceived by students (and teachers) as templates or formulas and that conventions may be interpreted as rules; I have seen this potential in my own classrooms as I struggle to engage students in the dynamic, social nuances of a text that they are experiencing out of context and as a graded assignment. Yet, I remain convinced that genre offers a valuable tool for writing students and teachers to explore expected conventions as well as the possibilities for quirky or transformative innovations—that is, the possibilities for real engagement in the processes of written communication. This book attempts to engage directly with these complexities and tensions in genre from both theoretical and pedagogical perspectives.

With writing and writers as its focus, *Beyond Convention* draws on relevant scholarship across disciplines, looking most heavily to work in applied linguistics and writing studies. Together, these fields offer tools for blending systematic analysis of text with rich understandings of how texts shape and are shaped by sociopolitical contexts—both vital pieces of genre innovation. I adopt Lemke’s (1993) metaphor of ecosocial systems as a framework for bringing these pieces together and highlighting the dynamic and inter-related features that influence how language is used and how it is evaluated by others. With an interdisciplinary spirit, I have also tried to make the terminology and descriptions throughout the book accessible to a range of readers.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach is also valuable for understanding genre innovation in ways that are inclusive of diverse writers and writing contexts. Toward that aim, this book considers a range of learning and teaching settings, including first-year undergraduate writing, undergraduate writing in the disciplines, and the advanced

academic writing of graduate students and professionals. While my discussions will not be tied to first language or multilingual writing, I hope that they might be informative to both. At the same time, I acknowledge that my interpretations and explorations are bound by my own experiences, which have been predominantly in teaching adults in higher education.

As should by now be clear, this book is intended for those interested in the complexities of written communication, whether their interests are grounded in genre theory, academic discourse, discourse analysis, or writing instruction. With its attentiveness to context, discipline, and community, it offers a resource for those interested in English for Academic Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, and Writing in the Disciplines. At its heart, this is a book for teachers and teacher educators, though I hope it can inform our research and theoretical work as well. In the end, perhaps the discussions and examples in the book can inspire us to think of the potential for innovation in academic writing and writing instruction, while also keeping a close eye on the very real constraints that are at play for novice writers.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 situates this book within a larger conversation of genre and the heteroglossic nature of written communication. This chapter offers a working definition of genre innovation as effective departures from convention, and it explores examples of innovation in a range of non-academic genres. The chapter concludes with an argument for an extended study of genre innovation particularly in the context of academic writing.

In Chapter 2, I explore research on innovation and creativity from fields like rhetoric and composition, pragmatics, applied linguistics, and psychology. The chapter then turns to the related issue of identity, highlighting research on writer identity, ethos, voice, and symbolic capital to demonstrate how these issues may influence readers' perceptions of effective innovation within a text. These discussions are followed by a synthesis of major theoretical principles of genre innovation and an application of these principles to a short analysis of an

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unconventional text. The chapter concludes with an overview of methodologies for studying genre innovation, focusing particularly on the value of methods that examine social context and reception.

Chapter 3 turns to the specific context of academic writing. Carrying over much of the conceptual work developed in the first two chapters, this chapter considers the functions that innovation may carry out in academic contexts, and it offers numerous illustrations from a range of disciplines. This chapter then turns to the task of sketching out a framework or heuristic for exploring some of the ecosocial elements that can shape possibilities for, impediments to, and the nature of innovation in academic genres.

The framework developed in Chapter 3 is put into play in Chapter 4, which shares a study of an undergraduate research class in environmental science. Through an examination of course discussions, student and teacher interviews, and student writing, I explore how genre innovation and creativity are constructed and valued in the process of teaching disciplinary writing and research. By exploring a context of disciplinary acculturation and learning as an ecosocial system, the chapter highlights how the classroom conditions possibilities for genre innovation by disciplinary novices.

In Chapter 5, I turn directly to the role of genre innovation in the academic writing classroom. The chapter explores how research into language play, creativity, and genre awareness suggests that genre play and manipulation can hold a valuable learning function. The latter half of this chapter offers principles and practices for incorporating innovation as a means of building both genre knowledge and genre awareness, including numerous examples that could be adapted to different teaching settings.

Finally, Chapter 6 draws out the main conclusions from the book and their implications for learning and teaching academic writing. It ends with a discussion of potential future directions of inquiry into genre innovation.