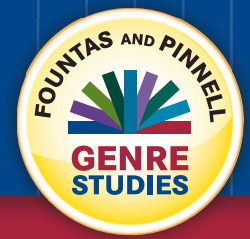


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SECTION

1

An Inquiry Approach to Genre Study

Chapters in the first section present the central idea of this book—an inquiry approach to genre study within a readers’ workshop. In Chapter 1, we define an inquiry approach and focus on the idea of learning from mentor texts. Chapter 2 focuses more closely on the description of genre study as a process. In Chapter 3, you will find the foundational understandings that students need to develop regarding genre. These understandings are critical in deeply comprehending texts. Chapter 4 describes the readers’ workshop as well as how genre study may be integrated into language arts instruction. Finally, in Chapter 5 you will find a discussion of the systems of strategic actions that are involved in reading comprehension. Each is discussed through the lens of understanding genres of text.



CHAPTER

1

An Inquiry Approach to Genre Study

Learning from Mentor Texts

*If there is certainty, or only one view, there is nothing to discuss
and nothing to learn. Uncertainty is the foundation
of inquiry and research.*

—PETER JOHNSTON

When we think of school, we think of wonderful books, and for good reason. What students read in school has profound lifelong effects. Books provide a foundation for all kinds of learning. We expect our students to become competent readers and writers who enjoy a variety of book types and know how to access the information in them. We also expect them to appreciate the writer’s craft—the exquisite language and text features found in books. As our students read, they also learn how to write. But even more important, we envision our students living a rich reading and writing life in school—developing the habits, attitudes, and interests that will ultimately be the foundation for a lifetime of literacy. Good books will engage their intellect, wonder, and passion and become central to their lives.

For many of us, books are constant companions. We carry them everywhere, in a variety of forms—digital, audio, print—but no matter the form, they are still books. As we read, we meet new friends and revisit old friends, solve problems, enter different worlds, or wake up to new ideas and perspectives. And, as Anna Quindlen has said, “We read in bed because reading is halfway between life and dreams” (1998).

What Is Genre?

Genre refers to any type or kind of literary or artistic work or a class of artistic endeavor that has a characteristic form or technique, including music, drama, and studio arts. Written genres can include fantasy, biography, memoir, realistic fiction, forms, bills, brochures,

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maps, ads, magazine articles—hundreds of kinds of texts. Even televised sitcoms, plays, mysteries, and news items are written genres that people are reading aloud or reciting from memory.

Genre has changed over time. Genres like tragedy, epic, comedy, and satire used to be widely recognized and produced. They are still around today but are usually in different forms or are embedded within other genres. New genres have emerged, and the rules have changed. For example, in the eighteenth century, genres for writing were highly prescribed and writers were expected to follow those prescriptions if they wanted their writing to be appreciated (Gamble and Yates 2008). Today, we recognize that “genre boundaries are fluid, that new genres emerge and old ones fall out of common use” (Gamble and Yates 2008, 85).

As proficient readers with a lifetime of experience, we have built a large body of knowledge about text genres, and we use this knowledge every time we read, most of the time unconsciously. We enter texts with *expectations* that have everything to do with our enjoyment and appreciation (or dislike) and the meaning we take from them. As experienced processors of written texts, we automatically adjust reading (or listening) to suit the genre. When we receive a bill, we scan it for charges and the “bottom line.” When we read a recipe, we look for the list of ingredients. When we read an ad, we are on guard for hidden costs or false advertising. When we read a mystery, we look for clues. When we watch a particular kind of television show, we know what to expect (although a fresh, new approach can still surprise us).

Purpose, Genre, and Audience

Genres have developed over centuries, and writers have always found ways to structure texts for their own purposes. A specific genre is a tool writers use to communicate with their audience and accomplish their purposes. Genre and purpose are interrelated in a complex way, and the audience must be considered in the process.

We might imagine a writer having a purpose and then selecting a genre appropriate for that purpose—

one that will appeal to the desired audience. For example, if you want to tell a story, you use some kind of narrative, fiction or nonfiction, set in the past, present, or future. You shape the narrative to engage the audience. Sometimes writers have a favorite genre they gravitate to because of previous successes they’ve had communicating with an audience. They may use the genre for different purposes or multiple purposes and for speaking to many different audiences.

While “writers of fiction would all agree that they set out to tell a story, it is true that sometimes they have other purposes in mind” (Wilson 2002, 103) as well. They may wish to expose discriminatory treatment or help people understand aspects of the human condition. It is also true that readers may attribute purposes to a piece of fiction or nonfiction that were not intended by the writer. Sometimes writers target a particular audience and are surprised to find they have communicated with readers in ways they did not expect or have connected with untargeted audiences.

If you want to inform or persuade, you select some kind of nonfiction genre—usually categorical. You shape the text with the audience in mind, making it easier or more difficult depending on how much background knowledge you expect your audience to have.

Purpose in nonfiction genres may seem more straightforward, but it too can be complex. There are many nonfiction genres, and even factual texts may be organized in different ways. The way you select and organize facts may work to misinform and/or persuade.

As a reader, you choose texts in relation to your purpose. If you are seeking enjoyment or escape, you select a favorite genre that relaxes you. If you want to become immersed in a story, you choose realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, or biography. If you want to gather information, you may choose nonfiction (although you may also get a great deal of information from some works of fiction).

In both reading and writing, there is a feeling that somehow purpose and audience come first and are related to choice. But as you become immersed in the acts of reading and writing, it is very likely that your purposes may change or you may develop multiple purposes.

Then, too, sometimes reading and writing are assigned. Choice does not play a role, and purpose and genre are inherent to the assignment. When students have undertaken the task of learning, there is some acceptance that with teacher support, they will accept the assignment for a purpose. In this case, any and all previously built knowledge will be very useful.

The Role of Genre in Understanding Reading and Writing

As we encounter book after book, we not only become absorbed in the story or interested in the information, we are also awed by the power of the writer’s decisions about language. The genres that have existed through centuries of written language (and even before that in oral storytelling) have developed because writers needed ways to make their meaning and their message clear. Looking at aspects of genre, we see the writers’ decisions—the essence of their craft. Everything—language, word choice, dialogue, structure or organization—rests on the choice of genre. As readers, we learn that knowing about the genre helps us make the predictions that support our thinking as we read the text and even help us remember it long afterward.

In this book we focus on the characteristics of literary genres in books—fiction, including realistic fiction, historical fiction, and fantasy; and nonfiction, including narrative nonfiction, expository nonfiction, and biography. Both fiction and nonfiction texts can take a variety of forms, each with its own defining characteristics—mysteries, survival stories, or graphic texts, for example.

When you want to write in a particular genre, you think about what you have read that is like what you want to write. If you were trying to write a mystery, for example, you might think about the crime or secret, the characters, what they are like, and what their motives might be. You’d think of the place(s) the characters inhabit, their relationships to one another, and the all-important series of steps they take to solve the mystery. You’d try to give the reader just enough information to



stay engrossed in the story but not enough to solve the mystery before the characters do. Of course there are variations, but the process of construction is similar. You have learned the characteristics of mystery from your reading, listening, or viewing experiences.

If you are writing a biography, on the other hand, you might think about the importance of the subject and conduct research to uncover information about her life. You wouldn’t want to write a dry collection of facts; instead, you would engage the reader by writing passionately about the person’s impact or achievement, relating significant events, describing documented feelings or motivations, and exploring the hard or courageous decisions the person made throughout a particular span of life, in order to communicate the significance of the person’s life and what it means for others.

The writing process varies by genre. Writing fantasy, we create an entirely imaginary world; writing historical fiction, we make the setting authentic; writing informational texts, we research, organize, and present

facts in an accurate, logical way. As we write, we use deeply held concepts of the way texts are organized. But we also use this knowledge as we read. Imagine that you can see the internal structure of a skyscraper, including the hundreds of feet of foundation that lie underground, the skeleton of steel, the infrastructure of wiring that carries the electricity throughout the building, and much more. As proficient readers, we bring knowledge of the same kind of hidden organizational structure to a text, and we access it unconsciously because it is already in our brains. No one has to tell us the genre of a particular book—we recognize it soon after we begin to read (or perhaps even by looking at the cover), and we unconsciously access all the knowledge that we have about it. It helps us interpret and navigate our way through the text.

A Workshop Approach

We advocate a workshop approach in which students read extensively, make choices about what to read, and see reading as thinking. They take responsibility for their reading and understand its purpose in their lives. Teachers provide explicit instruction to the whole group, small groups, and individuals. The students view themselves as readers and writers and spend their school lives engaged in real reading, writing, and talking.

Elsewhere we have described a comprehensive framework for literacy education (Fountas and Pinnell 2001, 2006). In this book we concentrate on three major instructional contexts for reading and writing:

1. Interactive read-aloud.
2. Readers' workshop, which includes booktalks, a minilesson, conferences, independent reading, guided reading, literature discussion (book clubs), writing about reading, and group share.
3. Writers' workshop, which includes writers' talks, a minilesson, conferences, independent writing, guided writing, and group share.

Within these three contexts, we can have a deeper conversation about genre and its role in high-quality literacy programs.

An Inquiry Approach to Learning About Genre

In exploring genre study, we are not proposing an academic study of the labels and characteristics of each genre. Instead, we advocate teaching and learning in which students are engaged in exploration. By engaging deeply and constantly with a variety of high-quality texts, they build an internal foundation of information on which they can base further learning. They learn how to develop genre understandings and can apply their thinking to any genre.

People have always engaged in inquiry to make discoveries. Perhaps the strongest example of inquiry is the scientific method, but we also use the inquiry process in our daily lives. On the surface, it may seem that we learn things by taking in information or following directions (as with a recipe); in reality, learning is somewhere in between using what we are told and the discoveries we make ourselves. Using acquired information in the process of trying something out makes learning more memorable and more meaningful.

Inquiry also requires a change in how we teach:

If we now see children's learning differently, then we must now see ourselves, these children's teachers, differently as well. If the child is not the receiver of delivered curriculum, then we cannot be the deliverers of it. . . . Above all, the teacher is inquirer, inevitably providing—living—a demonstration of inquiry's way of turning toward puzzling phenomena and toward one another in exploring them. (Lindfors 1999, 117)

Through inquiry, students learn to think more critically about the decisions authors make as they plan and write texts. When they know how to look at a crafted work of fiction or nonfiction, the writer becomes real, and the search for the message is more exciting.

Taking an inquiry stance enables students to *learn how to learn*. They become empowered and develop a sense of agency. "A sense of agency empowers learners. It is the notion that gives children the mindset that if they 'act and act strategically, they can accomplish

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GENRE STUDY	
Teacher-Directed Approach	Student/Teacher Inquiry Approach
Teacher provides a series of lessons related to the genre.	Students investigate the characteristics of each genre with teacher participation and guidance.
Teacher delivers the information to the students who make notes to help them remember it.	Students construct the understandings for themselves. Teacher facilitates and expands what they notice, making their understandings explicit and usually recording them.
Students remember the information.	Students learn “how to learn” about different text types so they can apply the process again.
Teacher assesses students’ ability to share genre information.	Teacher assesses students’ ability to use the noticing and naming process with a variety of text types.

Figure 1.1 Learning about genre: two different approaches

their goals’” (Johnston 2004, 29). They believe in themselves and their ability to *find out*, and the process itself is inherently pleasing to human beings. Ray describes the energy and satisfaction that results when students are able to influence the direction of their learning:

Imagine what it would be like to go to school every day as a six-year-old or a sixteen-year-old, and to know how important your thinking is to what will happen in the classroom that day. To know that your teacher is waiting for you and your classmates and that her “Lesson Plans” for the day have huge spaces in them that she’s waiting for you to fill with your thinking. (2006, 33)

We can assure meaningful, powerful learning by establishing readers’ and writers’ workshops in elementary and middle school classrooms and then using a large variety of high-quality texts to help students understand their inner workings. Genre study is much like exploration in science or social studies. Scientists gather data and organize information, looking for patterns. They make hypotheses and explore further to test them; they come to tentative conclusions that are always open to revision when more data are

accumulated. Inquiring into genre with your students is an exciting exploration. “It is a line of inquiry—a road of curriculum, a trail of teaching, an excursion of knowing something about writing. It is some big thing that you and your class are digging into over time” (Nia, 1999).

Some educators have approached teaching about genre as direct instruction, and that is one choice for teachers. They explain the characteristics of various genres to students and then provide examples; students learn to name and identify these genres. But we have found that learning is deeper and more meaningful if students construct the understandings themselves.

Notice the difference between teacher-directed genre instruction and a student and teacher inquiry process (Figure 1.1). In student/teacher inquiry, you learn alongside your students. You are intentional in your teaching; you definitely have the goal of expanding students’ specific knowledge of genres and their characteristics, and you are far more expert than your students. But when you inquire into texts together, there is always something more to notice and be surprised by. Your students are fully engaged, and most importantly, they learn a process they can apply for the rest of their lives.

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The differences may seem subtle, but these two approaches play out very differently. In the inquiry approach students take more responsibility and ownership of learning. As they learn about genres, they simultaneously develop a process for finding things out, for comparing and contrasting texts, for detecting the characteristics that are truly indicative of a particular kind of text. They develop a scientific method for approaching and analyzing texts.

In the inquiry approach students explore texts so that they can *notice and name* the characteristics of each genre and *construct* a working definition that guides their thinking as readers and writers. The inquiry approach takes advantage of human beings' natural curiosity. We learn by searching for and identifying patterns in our environment, and these patterns help us make predictions. Inquiry empowers learners to construct new understandings. Inquiry also empowers us as teachers to teach both reading and writing in ways that make sense for our students and enable them to learn even more about reading and writing without us.

By genre study, we mean more than just learning the specific characteristics of each genre. We mean helping students learn how to learn about genre from other writers—how to study the way writers use craft and conventions in communicating meaning to their readers. Students think about the writer's purpose and audience and notice the features that help the writer achieve an effective communication. What is learned

about genre in this way is *generative*—it can be applied to all the reading and writing students do for the rest of their lives.

Understanding Mentor Texts

Throughout our discussion of genre study in readers' and writers' workshops, we refer to *mentor texts* (Ray 2007 and Anderson 2005). You can probably think of someone who has been a mentor to you at some time in your life. A mentor is a trusted friend or peer with greater expertise than your own, someone who guides you and supports your learning and development. A text can have that same mentoring influence on an individual. After all, an author wrote (and probably researched or experienced) the text, so you are learning from that author's expertise and voice whether you are aware of it or not. Books and authors become models for what we may want to achieve in our own writing or the kinds of books we most admire. As the writer Cynthia Rylant says, "I learned how to write from writers. I didn't know any personally, but I read" (1995, p. 6).

Your own expertise in examining and analyzing a text plays a mediating role that helps your students learn how to look at mentor texts. The advantage of such texts is that you can revisit them again and again to seek answers to your questions and use them as models. Once you have read a book aloud to your students, it becomes a resource throughout the year. Ray says, "I study books with students so that they are able to stand on the shoulders of writers, to learn directly from them when I am not around. . . . The texts are just full of curriculum potential" (2007, 147).

Educators have written extensively about the powerful use of mentor texts as valuable resources for helping students as writers (Anderson 2005; Ray 2006; Calkins 2010). Student writers can borrow techniques from mentor texts and try them out when they draft pieces; they can consult mentor texts when they revise a text. If they have been introduced to a large number of high-quality texts, they have excellent models in many different genres. According to Fletcher, "If you want to improve your writing, you have to apprentice yourself to the best writers you can find" (2001). Mentor texts are also important for developing readers.



Through mentor texts, you simultaneously strengthen your reading comprehension and writing ability.

Throughout this book, we advocate for using high-quality picture books as mentor texts. These shorter texts are ideal for read aloud and allow you to share many clear examples of the genre. However, at the upper grade levels, and especially when exploring certain genres, like modern fantasy, it may prove challenging to find grade-level appropriate picture books or shorter texts. In these instances, you may choose to read aloud two or three chapters a day, over a period of a week or two, from a longer chapter book, as students read longer texts independently. We discuss this in more detail in Chapter 14. We have provided a list of mentor texts for each of the fiction and nonfiction genres in Section 2 in the appendix of this book (see Appendix A). These texts are meant to be used as exemplars of the genre, but they are only suggested texts—you may have others that you prefer to use.

Goals and Purposes of This Book

We have been working with a variety of genres for many years and have found that the more texts you encounter and study closely, the more you learn about the basic tools of the writer. Our primary interest in this book is to build your knowledge of genre and to help you apply genre knowledge to the effective teaching of reading comprehension, though we also make a link to writing. All of this teaching and learning takes place in a readers' and writers' workshop structure.

In writing this book we have three goals:

1. *To build your expertise in understanding specific genres and their characteristics.* Text genres are complex. Here we focus mainly on books and short stories rather than attempting to cover the entire world of texts (for example, newspapers, brochures, advertisements, and articles). We have written about the range of everyday reading elsewhere, but here we focus on the fiction and nonfiction books that students read in school and at home, including poetry, short stories, short informational texts, picture books, chapter books, and graphic texts.

2. *To help you understand an inquiry process you can use with your students to study the characteristics of any genre.* Learning is deepened and more likely to remain permanent and applicable if it is built from experience. The teaching we describe is intentional in the way it guides students' inquiry toward explicit understandings of a genre's characteristics. The students actively construct their own knowledge of each type of text.
3. *To show you how to help students apply their knowledge of genres in talking, reading, and writing.* It is through using genre understandings that your students think, talk, and read texts with deeper understanding and write effectively.

Others have written about using inquiry in learning, notably Lindfors (1999), who has studied language learning as a foundation for understanding other learning. Several renowned literacy experts have written extensively about the study of genre as inquiry—primarily as a way of teaching writing. Carl Anderson, Randy Bomer, Lucy Calkins, Ralph Fletcher, Heather Lattimer, Katie Wood Ray, Isoke Nia, and others have helped us understand that when students study text genres, they can apply their understandings to their own writing in those genres.

It is our hope to help students lay the groundwork for a lifetime of literary exploration, and understanding genre is a critical part of that foundation. As students explore different genres and their characteristics, they are more easily and confidently able to identify characteristics of texts that appeal to them as readers and as writers and can more fully engage with the texts they are reading. They are able to identify and understand the writer's craft and the writer's choices and confidently critique the accuracy and quality of a text. When they understand genre, they can engage more deeply with texts.

The following chapters help you take an inquiry stance in your teaching that will be exciting and interesting for you and your students as you guide them through a rich array of wonderful books.

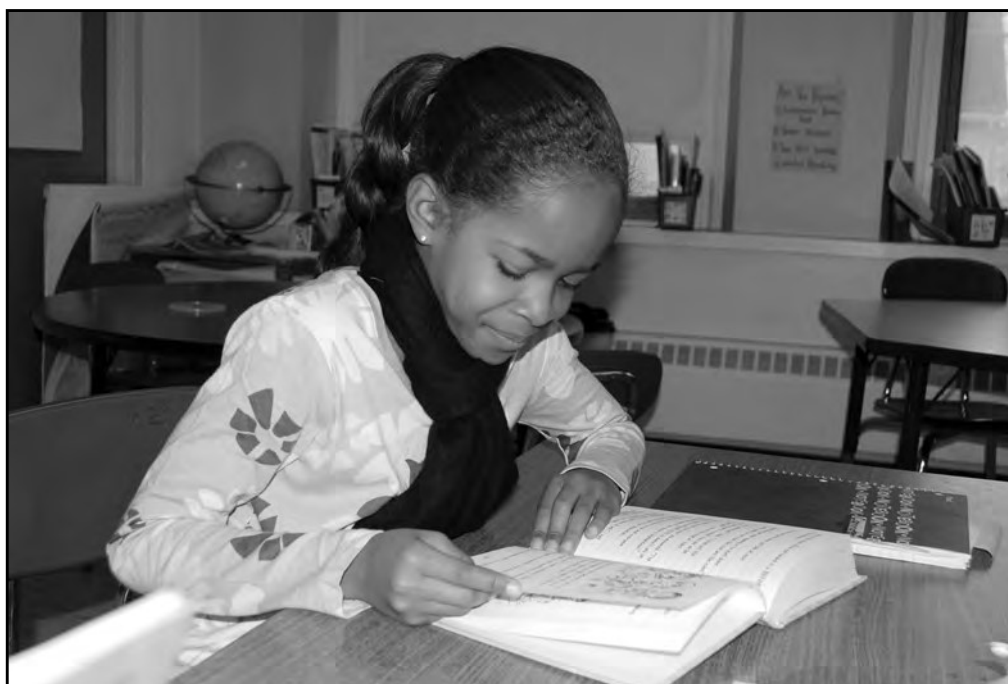
SAMPLE

Suggestions for Professional Development

Make a list of some of your favorite books. Review the list. What types of books are you reading? Are you reading a range of different types of books? If you are working with a group, share some of the characteristics of the types of books you read. Do not worry about assigning the appropriate genre to your description. You may want to revisit this list later with colleagues once you have read and studied more about genre and see how your thinking about your own reading has deepened or changed. Discuss what you like about

these types of books and what you expect as a reader when you pick up these books. Use the following to guide your discussion or thinking:

- What types of books do you like to read? (Don't worry about correctly "labeling" the genre; just name some of the characteristics of the types of books you like to read.)
- Give some examples of these types of books.
- What appeals to you about this type of book?
- What do you expect as a reader when you pick up this type of book?





Thank you for sampling this resource.

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