

Dryer, 30 Years of Genre as Social Action

This intro gives a nice overview of Rhetorical Genre Studies, and demonstrates how Miller's concept of genre as social action has produced over 30 years of research into genres.

Especially helpful to keep in mind are the five premises of RGS:

1. Established genres usefully consolidate our predecessors' successes at problem-solving
 1. So, studying other peoples' responses to recurring situations helps us solve problems.
2. Genres, strictly speaking, aren't things; they're responses based on intersubjective phenomena that we experience as recurrence
 1. Though "What's usually thought of as a genre—a routine set of inscriptions, broadly construed—is properly speaking only a material trace or residue of that response." So it is as if it is pointless to study these material traces (i.e. texts).
3. "[G]enres maintain the social motives which individuals interpret and enact as intentions" (Bawarshi 77)
 1. So, if we think of a particular thing you might want to do—to get funding for your research, or get a particular job; understanding the genres that maintain these social motives help us enact these intentions. I need to understand the genre of the grant application (for this particular field, granting organization, etc.), because that is the way this social motive (people wanting to get funding for their research) is maintained. Likewise for the job, there may be several genres that maintain this motive (the cover letter, CV or resume, writing sample, letter or recommendation), some relevant to this particular situation, some not.
 2. this also means that genres shape our behavior—the social motives maintained by genres shape our behavior in ways that affect who we are, what things we do, what we value
4. Although dominant genres are essential for academic, workplace, and civic socialization, they aren't free: humans have legitimately complex feelings about genres
 1. this is one of the major ways Miller's work has been extended, to think more about the social and ideological function of genres and the implications for genre knowledge
5. Execution of genre knowledge involves material and dispositional factors, so performing genre knowledge can be complex; because situations are never precise duplicates of previous situations, execution of this knowledge can have unexpected results
 1. "Given the contextually-dependent construct of genre RGS assumes, given that the perception of recurrence is always an approximation, and given the wide range of relations humans take in responding and reacting to those perceptions, the development and performance of genre knowledge is less linear and less predictable than most genre pedagogies assume"
 2. It is this premise which will motivate the non-linear, recursive process we undertake in writing projects 2 and 3; we move recursively through the analysis of texts and situations to performing genres in situated contexts and back again.

They conclude with a corollary to the five premises they laid out, one that they believe should drive future research: “if genre conventions produce and reflect social responses perceived as recurring, then those social responses are changeable by deliberate changes to those conventions, even at the level of routine inscription.” They call this “Motivated genre change, as *tactical social intervention*.”

- This is a concept I want us to think about as we study how genres work in our disciplines. In what ways are our disciplines open (or not) to this kind of intervention? How might we want to change our disciplines or genres in the future?

key terms and definitions

- *rhetorical genre studies*: a field of theory and research, largely emanating from Miller’s 1984, “Genre as Social Action.” Much of the readings we will be doing for the rest of the semester are considered a part of this field (Freadman, Bawarshi, Wardle, Spinuzzi, and Russell). Researchers in this field study a wide range of discourse, including workplace, legal, public, and academic.