

Miller, Genre as Social Action

A few things to keep in mind, having read Miller

- This is widely considered *the foundational* text for an entire field of theory and research called Rhetorical Genre Studies. We'll read more about that and how Miller's work has been taken up tonight in the brief Dryer piece.
 - We will see, especially, that this definition of genre has been very fruitful in the study of workplace and disciplinary communication, something we should be especially interested in
 - We will use this notion of genre as *action* as the basis of how we proceed through projects 2 and 3, performing genre analysis.
- Genre is a sound concept insofar as it "contributes to an understanding of how discourse works—that is, it reflects the rhetorical experience of the people who create and interpret the discourse" (152). This is our unit of analysis for the class; and the object of using this unit of analysis to study genres in your discipline is to better understand how the language
- Miller defines genre as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (159).
 - The key to this definition seems to be that genre is most fully defined by what it does in a rhetorical situation. She places this definition in opposition to definitions that emphasize form and/or suggest that genre emerges out of rhetorical situations with "factual" external reality. She suggests that this definition can help critics to evaluate texts and help students to understand the roles their discourse can play.

key quotations, questions, and examples

"And if genre represents action, it must involve situation and motive, because human action, whether symbolic or otherwise, is interpretable only against a context of situation and through the attributing of motives" (152).

- so, if our aim in this course is to understand the *genres* of your disciplines, then it is necessary for us to try to find ways to better understand the contexts of situations in your disciplines and (as best we can) the motives of the members of your disciplines
 - we'll start this kind of work in WP2 and continue it in WP3 and it will require studying the situations and motives of the rhetors involved in the production of the genre (in fact, much genre research in my field begins with pure observation, without a sense of what genres exist in that scene or situation and then maps genres according to what actions and motives exist in that situation).
 - this approach is what she calls "ethnomethodological" on p. 155; which is basically a fancy word for the study of everyday practice (through discourse)

"What is particularly important about rhetorical situations for a theory of genres is that they recur" (156); that is, they repeat (or elements of them repeat, since no two situations are ever materially the same). So studying these situations and typified responses to these situations (genres), helps us better respond to these situations when they recur. "[O]ur stock of

knowledge is useful only insofar as it can be brought to bear upon new experience: the new is made familiar through the recognition of relevant similarities” (156-67).

- For example, if your boss asks you for a ‘rundown’ of your clients, you likely use your knowledge of the previous rhetorical situations that mirror this one, how you responded, whether it was successful, etc. in how to respond to this situation appropriately
 - what is included in a ‘rundown’? how it is structured? is there special language used in it? how does your boss use it? who else sees it (is it an internal or external-facing document)? how long should it take you? should you print it or email it? who else should get copies?
 - if you have no knowledge of the genre of the rundown, then you need to get this information another way in order to understand how you should (or could) respond in an appropriate way.

“[This perspective on genres] suggests that what we learn when we learn a genre is not just a pattern of forms or even a method of achieving our own ends. We learn, more importantly, what ends we may have: we learn that we may eulogize, apologize, recommend one person to another, instruct customers on behalf of a manufacturer, take on an official role, account for progress in achieving goals. We learn to understand better the situations in which we find ourselves and the potentials for failure and success in acting together. As recurrent, significant action, a genre embodies an aspect of cultural rationality ... **for the student, genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community**” (165).

key terms and definitions

- *discourse*: we remember from Grant-Davie that discourse simply means language or communication
- *genre*: “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (159). According to Miller, genre refers to a category of discourse based in typified rhetorical action (i.e. ways people respond to situations that arise from similar situations and social contexts. As such, “[g]enre is distinct from form” (163), and is dynamic and changeable (rather than formal and stable).
- *ethnomethodological*: for Miller, the study and classification of genres, according to her definition of genre as social action, “seeks to explicate the knowledge that practice creates” (155).
 - so Miller says genre study is interested in, or takes seriously, “homely discourse,” meaning everyday language (she mentions user manuals, lectures, eulogies, etc.). Her work, as we will see throughout the semester
- *exigence*: a “social motive” rather than a *cause* of discourse or as an intention; by defining a particular situation I encounter as ‘typical’ (a recurrent situation), “I find a way to to engage my intentions in a socially recognizable and interpretable way” (158).