

A Sample Genre Analysis of the Complaint Letter

We have chosen the complaint letter as a model for our genre analysis in part because it is a genre you might have some experience with, and because it is short enough that we can include several samples (pp. 67–69). As noted above, the first step in doing genre analysis involves collecting samples of the genre. There are several ways to collect samples. You can ask participants in a scene you have been observing for copies of the genre they have been using. If the genre is a more public one, as in the case of greeting cards, classified ads, menus, Web sites, wedding announcements, etc., you can readily find samples of the genre. You can also collect samples from books about the genre. For the analysis that follows, we collected complaint letters from several business-writing textbooks that included examples of the genre.

The second step is to start collecting information about the genre's situation and scene. Before you look at the samples we have included, consider what you already know about the complaint letter as a genre:

- Who uses the genre?
- What is it about?
- Where is the genre used?
- When is it used?
- Why is it used?

There are several ways in which you can answer these questions before doing the deeper analysis of the genre samples. One way is to draw on what you already know about the genre. Another way is to observe the scene and situation in which the genre is used (see Box 1.2, pp. 44–45). The observation could include interviewing users of the genre, watching people use the genre, and observing what the genre does. In the case of the complaint letter, we know that, unlike a syllabus, a lab report, or a patient medical history form, the complaint letter is not solely used in just one concrete scene (a classroom, a lab, or a doctor's office, for instance). Individuals may write complaint letters from home, or an employee in a company's purchasing department may write a letter of complaint from the office. However, the general scene of this genre involves a group of participants (consumers)

who have the shared objective of seeking restitution for a defective product or inadequate service.

Once we have identified the scene, we can consider the elements of situation (setting, subject, participants, purposes) that prompt and define complaint letters. Drawing on prior knowledge, we know that complaint letters are letters written in any setting, mailed or e-mailed, about some sort of problem that has arisen, be it a billing error, poor or inadequate service, a defective or falsely advertised product, and so on. We also know that a complaint letter is often written by someone who has been either directly affected by the problem or represents an organization that has been affected by the problem in some way. In turn, readers of complaint letters are ideally people who are in a position to address the problem, ranging from the owner of a small company to the consumer affairs department of a large organization. Finally, we know that the purposes of the complaint letter are to bring the problem to the attention of the person or organization responsible for it, to convince them that the complaint is justified, and to request some sort of fair settlement or correction, which, if settlement is reached, often arrives in the form of a related genre called the adjustment letter. Gathering information about use of a genre (in this case complaint letters), either through your prior knowledge, interview, or observation, is the second step, after collecting samples, in performing a genre analysis.

The third and fourth steps in genre analysis are a little more challenging. They involve identifying a genre's linguistic and rhetorical patterns and determining what these patterns reveal about the people who use it, including their behaviors and activities, and the situation and scene in which it is used. You are probably already familiar with most of these patterns from past English courses in which you practiced doing textual criticism and analysis of works of literature.

To begin identifying the rhetorical and linguistic patterns of a genre, we need to read it closely, looking for any recurrent features that all samples of the genre share. In identifying recurrent features, it is best to move from the general to the specific:

- Identify content
- Identify the appeals to the audience
- Identify the structure used
- Identify the format used
- Identify choice of sentence style and words

We begin by looking at the **content**, at the information that is typically included and excluded in the samples.

Then we look at the types of **rhetorical appeals** that are used. Rhetorical appeals are ways of trying to persuade an audience, the names of which—logos, pathos, and ethos—are based in the classical study of rhetoric in ancient Greece. **Logos** is appealing to an audience's rational mind, to the persuasiveness of logical and reasoned arguments and evidence. **Pathos** is appealing to an audience's emotions, persuading readers by making them feel the writer's position, whether through sympathy, compassion, anger, or any other emotion. **Ethos** is appealing to an audience's belief in the personal qualities of the writer, persuading the readers that the writer should be believed or agreed with on this subject. For example, writers may try to convince readers they are credible because of their expertise, sympathetic because of their experiences, or believable because they are in positions of power.

After the largest elements of content and rhetorical appeals, we look at the largest **structural patterns** (What are the various parts? How are they organized? In what order do they appear?) and then **format** (the layout of the sample texts, their appearance, length, etc.). Then we focus on the more specific linguistic features, on the **syntax** or sentence structure and the **diction** or word choices. Syntactic choices include sentence length and complexity and other patterns in sentence style, such as using the passive or active verbs, as we discussed earlier. We also look at the kinds of words that are used within the samples: What kinds of words are used to convey the subject matter? Are they mainly words used by specialists (jargon) or slang? What do the words connote? Recall our earlier discussion of the difference between the connotations of the words *bed* and *rack*. How would you describe the writer's voice (the personality or presence of the writer that is conveyed through the words)? *Everything from the content to the structure to the word choices within a genre makes up its rhetorical patterns.* With this brief overview in mind, we will now walk you through the process of identifying rhetorical and linguistic patterns typically found in complaint letters. As you read the samples on pages 67–69, see what rhetorical patterns you can identify.

IDENTIFYING CONTENT

Beginning with content, we see that each complaint letter describes a specific complaint, something that went wrong or did not work as promised. The letters also include detailed information about the products or services that are the cause of the complaint, often listing invoice numbers, purchase dates, model numbers, etc. And each letter makes some request of the reader: Asking for a new product, a repair of the old product, or compensation to the writer for the bad service or product.

Sample Complaint Letter 1

Rudi's Country Store
R.D. 1
Ft. Mark, PA 15540
August 22, 19

Mr. Franklin Morrison
American Paint Company
537 Schoolyard Road
Messina, PA 15540

Dear Mr. Morrison:

I am writing to you because I have been unable to reach you by phone, even after leaving messages on your machine. Your painting crew just finished painting my store and I am not entirely satisfied with the job or the bill.

Your workers tended to arrive late, about 9:30 a.m., and leave early, about 3:30 p.m. Once they missed a whole afternoon because, according to the foreman, they had another job to do. As a result, they were on site for four days instead of the estimated three.

The crew's behavior on the job was also unnecessarily disruptive. They worked with no shirts on and yelled to each other. My store stays open until 10:00 at night, and I would have appreciated it if they had cleared away their empty paint cans and other paraphernalia from around the front and sides of the store after work every day, but instead they left each afternoon without cleaning up.

I also seem to have been billed for a can of paint that the workers over-turned, staining the parking lot. I fixed the stain, but I would like my bill adjusted accordingly. I hope you will pass these complaints on to your foreman. Because you are a successful company, I am sure that these practices are not normal. Your bid was low, and the paint job looks good. I look forward to doing business with you again, if you can assure me that the problems I mentioned will not arise.

Respectfully,

Sample Complaint Letter 2

1390 Southwest Twentieth Street
Davie, FL 33326
22 September 2000

The Doubleday Store
Customer Service Department
501 Franklin Avenue
Garden City, NJ 07769

Re: Account #96-299-38934

Gentlemen:

Please review my account for a credit. On 12 July 2000 I received the Pierre Cardin canvas luggage set from your company which I ordered on 15 June 2000. When I received the luggage from your company, it was on a trial basis for 60 days. After examining the luggage, I determined that it was not substantial enough for my needs, and I returned the entire set on 12 August 2000.

The charge of \$279.95 has continued to be shown on my last two monthly statements. I wrote a note on the statement each time indicating the date and return of luggage and sent the statement back to your company. Copies of these notes are attached to this letter. To date, I have not received an adjusted statement.

Would you please credit my account for \$279.95 and send me an adjusted statement?

I will appreciate your prompt attention to this matter.

Very truly yours,

Ruth Burrows

Sample Complaint Letter 3

ROBBINS CONSTRUCTION, INC.
255 Robbins Place Centerville, MO 65101 (417) 555-1850

August 19, 19XX

Mr. David Larsen
Larsen Supply Company
311 Elmerine Avenue
Anderson, MO 63501

Dear Mr. Larsen:

As steady customers of yours for over 15 years, we came to you first when we needed a quiet pile driver for a job near a residential area. On your recommendation, we bought your Vista 500 Quiet Driver, at \$14,900. We have since found, much to our embarrassment, that it is not substantially quieter than a regular pile driver.

We received the contract to do the bridge repair here in Centerville after promising to keep the noise to under 90 db during the day. The Vista 500 (see enclosed copy of bill of sale for particulars) is rated at 85 db, maximum. We began our work and, although one of our workers said the driver didn't seem sufficiently quiet to him, assured the people living near the job site that we were well within the agreed sound limit. One of them, an acoustical engineer, marched out the next day and demonstrated that we were putting out 104 db. Obviously, something is wrong with the pile driver.

I think you will agree that we have a problem. We were able to secure other equipment, at considerable inconvenience, to finish the job on schedule. When I telephoned your company that humiliating day, however, a Mr. Meredith informed me that I should have done an acoustical reading on the driver before I accepted delivery.

I would like you to send out a technician—as soon as possible—either to repair the driver so that it performs according to specifications or to take it back for a full refund.

Yours truly,

Jack Robbins, President

IDENTIFYING RHETORICAL APPEALS

Second, we look for the kinds of rhetorical appeals the writers use. The writers of these complaint letters use a variety of rhetorical appeals to register their complaints in a forceful yet restrained and reasonable manner. They use *logos*, approaching the subject logically and treating the reader as a rational person who will surely see the problem and try to correct it. The writers offer facts and details about the situation and evidence of the problem to appeal to the reader's logical mind and to demonstrate that the writers are also rational and credible individuals. In order to create a credible and sympathetic *ethos*, or image of the writer, the letter writers portray themselves as reasonable people, who did what they should have done and yet encountered difficulty. Although the complaint letters rarely show anger (which might harm their sympathy or credibility), they do indicate how troubling or inconvenient the problem was, what pain and suffering was caused, appealing to *pathos* or to the reader's emotions for sympathy. In order to create sympathy between reader and writer, complaint letters often end on a note of optimism, suggesting that the writer believes the reader will respond conscientiously ("I will appreciate your prompt attention to this matter"). These complaint letters use logos, pathos, and ethos to try to persuade the reader to do what the writer is requesting.

IDENTIFYING STRUCTURE

After describing what we can of the content and rhetorical appeals of the genre, we turn to describing the structure of the complaint letter—its parts and their order. We notice first that, for the most part, writers begin the genre by identifying themselves as customers of the company or organization being addressed. The first part of the complaint letter also sometimes includes the specific product or service that has caused the complaint, which the company or organization will need in order to issue repairs or refunds. The second part of the complaint letter provides a specific description of the nature of the problem. Included here is a description of what happened, especially what went wrong. This section does more than just describe, however; it also tries to convince the reader that the product is defective or the service is inadequate by giving detailed examples, primarily through personal testimony but sometimes supported by more objective data. The final part of these complaint letters usually proposes or requests some kind of action, solution, or adjustment in relation to the problem. Some conclude with a curt request; others conclude with a more courteous optimism, signaling the writer's hope that the reader will respond fairly and promptly.

IDENTIFYING FORMAT

In terms of format, layout, and appearance, these complaint letters generally follow standard business letter format, with a heading that includes the writer's address or letterhead as well as the date, an inside address with the name and address of the recipient, a salutation ("Dear Ms. Webber"), the body, the closing ("Sincerely" or "Respectfully"), and the signature. Although they are not represented among our samples, we have seen complaint letters that have been handwritten as well as typed, but even handwritten letters tend to follow the standard business letter format.

IDENTIFYING SENTENCES, WORDS, AND TONE

On the sentence and diction levels, we notice that complaint letters tend to be slightly formal and often direct. The writers of these letters use mostly active sentence constructions, such as "I ordered," "We have used your product for years," "Your workers arrived late," and "I think you will agree we have a problem." Writers of the complaint letters periodically use sentences that begin with introductory phrases, such as "As steady customers of yours for over 15 years, we came to you first . . .," "On July 9, I ordered . . .," and "Because you are a successful company, I am sure that . . ." These introductory phrases provide background to the claim that is about to be made in the sentence. As such, they serve as a way to create a narrative, a sort of cause-and-effect relationship that leads up to the point the writer is making. At the same time, they also help justify the credibility of both the writer and the complaint.

Because the complaint letter refers back to an event that already occurred, writers mostly use the past tense when describing the nature of the problem. In the final paragraph, however, when the writer shifts from a description of the problem to a request for settlement, the tense shifts as well, signaling future or conditional action often with the use of the auxiliary verb *would*. Overall, the sentences in these complaint letters tend to be slightly long and embedded, using a variety of transitions such as coordinating conjunctions (*and, but*), subordinating conjunctions (*because, after, though*), and interrupting phrases (phrases that add information or explanation such as "we were able to secure other equipment, *at considerable inconvenience*, to finish the job on schedule"). Such embedding creates a **narrative effect**, helping the writer describe a chain of interconnected events and their effects. Indeed, it seems that one of the rhetorical functions of the interrupting phrases in particular is to allow the writer to insert his or her feelings of annoyance into the description without drawing explicit attention to the annoyance.

A calm and rational tone, even when the writer may be annoyed, is perhaps the most typical feature of complaint letters, and it is evident at both the word and sentence levels. While moments of anger do appear, they are usually embedded within the larger description of the problem, as we saw in the embedding of “at considerable inconvenience.” Even though first and second person pronouns (*I/we* and *you*) are primarily used—reflecting the relationship between writer and reader—the writers of these complaint letters temper this directness by depersonalizing the *you*. Rather than pinning the blame directly on the reader personally, writers instead often identify the reader as a representative of the company or organization or even the product that is to blame, hence we see phrases such as “because you are a successful company,” “your Vista 500 Quiet Driver,” “your painting crew,” “your Newark, New Jersey parts warehouse,” etc. Other examples of restraint and calmness include the selection of more formal words such as *informed* instead of *told*, *telephoned* instead of *called*, *arise* instead of *come up*, *paraphernalia* instead of *stuff*, *indicating* instead of *saying*, and so on.

INTERPRETING GENERIC PATTERNS IN THE COMPLAINT LETTER

Now that we have described rhetorical patterns in the complaint letters, genre analysis turns to the *significance or meaning of those patterns*:

What do these rhetorical patterns tell us about the genre of the complaint letter and the situation and scene in which it is used?

What can we learn about the actions being performed through the genre by observing its language patterns?

These questions mark the final step in performing a genre analysis.

There are, of course, many ways we can answer these questions and many conclusions we can make and support. One argument we can make—our **thesis**, if you will—is that the genre of the complaint letter tries to create a situation that depersonalizes the relationship between the writer and the reader. In a relatively uncomfortable situation of complaint, the complaint letter genre enables the writer to complain without it “being personal.” The writers present themselves not as the managers and company presidents that some of them are but as “customers.” We see this especially at the beginning of the complaint letter, where the writer assumes the role of customer: “On July 9, I ordered nine TV tuner assembly units,” “Your painting crew just finished painting my store,” or “As steady customers of yours for over 15 years, we came to you. . . .” In this role of customer, the

writer then presents his or her complaint in fairly *objective terms*. That is, he or she mainly describes how the service was inadequate or the product was defective rather than how he or she felt about the service or product. By couching any personal resentment or anger in a less emotional, relatively objective description of what happened to him or her as a “customer,” the writer achieves credibility in the complaint letter. Likewise, the reader is also depersonalized. Rather than being addressed as personally responsible for the problem, the reader is addressed as the company or organization. This way, the reader is less likely to become defensive.

In mainstream U.S. culture, there are various “scenes” in which we can communicate our complaints. Some of them include genres with more emotional expression than others—for example, when a baseball player complains to an umpire about being called out. People in other cultures may treat complaints differently, and the genres that respond to their problems will reveal different attitudes and relationships, through different rhetorical patterns. When we write a complaint letter that reflects the habits and patterns that we have just analyzed, we probably are not even aware that the scene of writing is being shaped in a way that maintains a delicate and distancing relationship between the writer (customer) and the reader (company or organization). How we write about the problem and the sort of demands we make are all partly shaped by the genre we are using.

Discuss some ways the authors could have gotten more information about the genre to deepen their analysis.