Much composition pedagogy begins writing instruction within familiar territory. As a result, composition educators often structure curriculum and courses so that students first write in familiar genres, like personal narratives, and examine and critique their own lives, experiences, and even beliefs through those genres before turning to unfamiliar territory. Many compositionists also use that familiar territory to foster and develop students’ critical consciousness, defined by Paulo Freire in his influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (35). Composition educators, of course, want to help students develop their writing skills and abilities, but in doing so many also invite students to uncover, critique, and resist underlying ideological dimensions present in the discourses of their everyday lives through the critical examination of the familiar.

One impetus for beginning within the familiar can be found within Lev Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development,” which he defines as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86). Vygostky, and many others after him, suggests that teachers provide students with experiences that are within their zone of proximal development in order to encourage learning. Another impetus can be found within the works of John Dewey, in which he argues that educators must connect student interests to the material and classroom. For example, in *Interest and Effort in Education*, he suggests that to “make things interesting,” subjects should “be selected in relation to the child’s present experience, powers, and needs; and that . . . the new material be presented in such a way to enable the child to appreciate its bearings, its relationships, and its value in connection with what already has significance for him” (23-24). And yet another impetus can be found in the wide-scale admonishment of the “banking concept of education” and the adoption of various kinds of “problem-posing education” (Freire, Shor). An integral component of “problem-posing education” is, as Ira Shor suggests, to “situate learning in the students’ cultures—their literacy, their themes, their present cognitive and affective levels, their aspiration, their daily lives” (24). Certainly these theoretical foundations and arguments are not only reasonable, but valuable, and have lead to many productive uses of the familiar within
the writing classroom. However, as with all pedagogical approaches, there are some limitations to beginning with the familiar, especially when one of the goals of the composition classroom is to develop critical consciousness.

In this essay, I consider some of the problems students and teachers may encounter when beginning within familiar territory and then provide yet another option for how a composition course might begin writing instruction to foster students’ critical consciousness. To do so, I examine how one pedagogical approach, the explicit teaching of genre, incorporates the familiar, mainly through familiar genres, and then I explore the difficulties that students may encounter when beginning within familiar genres. I argue that these difficulties may lie within our own assumptions about composition pedagogy and critical consciousness as well as the ideological forces of genres and what I am terming as the genre effect. From this, I expand upon current approaches to the explicit teaching of genre by proposing and exploring a pedagogy that considers the genre effect and invites students to begin not with the familiar but with the unfamiliar.

The Explicit Teaching of Genre and the Familiar

The explicit teaching of genre differs from other approaches to writing instruction in that it understands genres as “typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (Miller 31). Genres, in this light, are not just forms or rules to follow; instead, as Charles Bazerman writes, “Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact” (“Life” 19). With this understanding, everyday texts like cereal boxes, horoscopes, and billboards are considered worthy of study as genres, in addition to traditionally identified genres such as novels, poems, research papers, personal narratives, movies, etc.

Genres, however, are not simply actions occurring within a void—they are actions based within specific, social, and recurrent rhetorical situations, thus making genre rhetorical in nature. As such, the explicit teaching of genre is grounded within analysis of not only genre but also the rhetorical situations (participants, subject[s], purpose[s], and setting[s]) in which genres are located since, as Amy Devitt writes, “genre and situation are tightly interwoven . . . it is genre that determines situation as well as situation that determines genre” (23). In other words, the relationship between genre and rhetorical situation is reciprocal, so the two are interrelated—one can look to a genre to understand elements of the rhetorical situation and one can look to the rhetorical situation to understand elements of the genre.
If genres are social actions based in recurrent rhetorical situations, then they also contain ideological components that structure and influence users’ perceptions of the world and actions (Schyrer, Devitt). Devitt explains that “because people in groups develop genres, genres reflect what the group believes and how it views the world” (59). Genres represent and reinforce what participants within certain rhetorical situations value, believe, and assume. For example, many engaged heterosexual couples within the United States create wedding invitations that employ certain rhetorical choices and moves (such as “Mr. and Mrs. John Smith request the honor of your presence at the marriage of their daughter Ann Smith to David Jones”) that reflect culturally prescribed and valued gender norms and promote heterosexual unions and cultures. If genres are understood as social actions with embedded ideological commitments that are grounded within rhetorical situations, then genres become ideal sites for students to develop a critical consciousness of the ways in which ideologies act on and through people.

Scholars such as Anis Bawarshi, Charles Bazerman, Robert Brooke and Dale Jacobs, Kevin Brooks, Richard Coe, Amy Devitt, Lorelei Lingard and Richard Haber, and Mary Jo Reiff argue that the explicit teaching of genre develops students’ writing abilities and critical consciousness by encouraging rhetorical flexibility and genre awareness. Students learn new genres and their rhetorical situations, experiment within genres, and both expose and critique the ideological dimensions of genres. The argument follows that by doing so, students can gain control over genres and work against their constraints (Coe). One of the goals set forth by these scholars, then, is to teach students how to analyze genres (identify rhetorical choices and moves) by “collecting samples of a genre, identifying and describing the context [including the rhetorical situation] of its use, describing its textual patterns, and analyzing what those patterns reveal about the context in which the genre is used” (Bawarshi 158). Another goal is to teach students how to critique a variety of genres by questioning and evaluating a genre to determine its strengths and weaknesses as well as its ideological import, such as issues of power (Devitt et al. 150). The final and overarching goal is that students can then use these skills when encountering, learning, and writing genres in academic courses as well as in jobs, hobbies, and many other realms of their lives.

Like other writing curricula, these recent calls for the explicit teaching of genre incorporate the belief that students should begin writing instruction within the familiar. For example, Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres, a genre theory based first-year writing textbook co-authored by Amy Devitt, Mary Jo Reiff, and Anis Bawarshi, outlines how to perform genre analysis and critique while providing specific writing activities and
assignments. In a chapter on genre critique, the authors ask students to begin with genres they already use:

Think about how the genres that you use might be changed to suit you better. Consider genres you use at work, in school, in your public life, or in your private life. Select one that you would most like to see change and briefly describe how the genre works currently, the specific changes that might make the genre work better for you, and what these changes would achieve. (180)

At the end of the chapter, the authors also provide a writing assignment in which they use the word “familiar”; they ask students to “find a genre that you are familiar with and that usually is not longer than one page. Various forms fit this specification, but so do everyday genres like bills, obituaries, party invitations, and flyers” (183). Several genre scholars propose other methods for beginning the explicit teaching of genre within the familiar, but when one of the goals of a pedagogy is to teach and develop critical consciousness (as it often is in many genre-based pedagogies), beginning with the familiar may not be the only effective approach.

Over the past five years, I have discovered that the unfamiliar, in addition to the familiar, may help students learn to analyze and critique genres and their rhetorical situations. When I first taught genre explicitly in my first-year composition classroom, I, like many others, began with the familiar. The first writing assignment, based on the suggestions in Scenes of Writing, asked students to select a familiar genre to analyze, critique, and then re-create. As the weeks progressed, I was pleased with the range of genres chosen and the level of genre and rhetorical analysis taking place, but I soon discovered that most students experienced difficulty when critiquing their chosen genres and corresponding rhetorical situations. For example, when considering what actions genres allow and do not allow their users to perform, when perceiving the ways in which genres succeed or fail, or when recognizing how genres limit their users’ actions, students struggled and lacked critical insight.

One group of particularly avid sports players and fans consistently and adamantly presented me with an intriguing problem regarding their chosen genre of the sports ticket—“The sports ticket is perfect,” they insisted, “It simply could not be changed.” They argued it fulfilled its sole purpose of admitting them to a game. I kept asking them to consider other information on the ticket, such as seating, concession stands, advertisements, and legal ramifications regarding the reselling of tickets. I asked, “Does this other information serve no purpose? Does it not forbid certain actions?” But I was always met with the same, and slightly annoyed, response, “Of course, but it still just gets me into the game.” This group was not the only one that experienced difficulty critiquing their genre. Regardless of
genre, whether horoscopes, billboards, scoreboards, advertisements, music reviews, movie reviews, box scores, or embarrassing moments (popular in teen magazines), each group often insisted, “It works as it is; why would we want to change it?”

Student reactions like these are not limited to my classroom. Adrian Clynes and Alex Henry, in their article “Introducing Genre Analysis Using Brunei Malay Wedding Invitations” (2004), find themselves in a strikingly similar situation. They discover that their students experienced success in analyzing the familiar wedding invitation, but “the students were less successful with the other more important aspect of the task namely, relating and explaining the language found in the moves to the purpose(s) of the moves and to the overall communicative purpose of the genre” (240). In other words, the students experienced difficulty seeing the rhetorical possibilities and purposes of the genre. Instead, Clynes and Henry encountered “bald statements of the type, ‘The function of the Formal Invitation is to formally invite the reader’” (240). Like my students, their students also asserted that the wedding invitation genre serves only one primary purpose, to invite the reader to the wedding, and resisted seeing other purposes of the wedding invitation.2

We certainly are not alone—other educators experience similar moments of student resistance. C. H Knoblauch, for example, identifies the majority of students within the university as mostly “from the comfortable middle of the American middle-class” (12). Since most students occupy this position, he questions the plausibility of students engaging in critique of social structures and categories when “teaching in circumstances where there is a powerful self-interest, rooted in class advantage, that works actively, if not consciously, against critical reflectiveness” (19). More specifically, he asks, “What do my students have to gain from a scrutiny of values and conditions that work to ensure their privilege?” (19). For Knoblauch, many students are resistant to examining the conditions of their own lives (familiar territory) because its works against their own self-interests and privileges.

One situation, then, that educators who invite students to begin within familiar territory may face is student resistance. While compositionists like Knoblauch may certainly be right to locate resistance as a “student problem,” I believe that we can and should also read student resistance as a possible “pedagogical or teaching problem.” For instance, when Clynes and Henry examine their assumption that students should begin genre analysis with a familiar genre, they continue to identify their approach as a “great benefit to [the students]” despite their discovery of its weaknesses, mainly the students’ lack of success with this other more important aspect of analysis, “relating and explaining the language found in the moves to the purpose(s) of the moves and to the overall communicative purpose of the genre” (240-41).
Genre scholars have also acknowledged that familiar genres may be difficult for students to analyze and critique. In *Writing Genres*, for example, Devitt advocates teaching genre awareness and beginning genre analysis and critique with familiar genres, yet she also suggests that “once [students] are full participants in the genre, resistance becomes more difficult (some say futile) and choices become less visible (some say invisible)” (196). In other words, when students analyze and critique familiar genres, their ability to resist their ideological forces and imagine different rhetorical choices within genres is difficult.

Perhaps Clynes and Henry’s, Knoblauch’s and my students demonstrated signs of resistance not because they could not or did not want to critique and analyze familiar genres and their rhetorical situations but because doing so is a difficult and potentially threatening act. When students begin analysis and critique with familiar genres, they might perceive those genres and their rhetorical situations as important and even necessary for their successes in various avenues of their lives (as Knoblauch suggests). While it may be fruitful to examine resistance in terms of students, perhaps it is time that we also consider resistance in terms of pedagogical methods and approaches. Doing so would require us to engage in the same activity that we ask students to perform and to question our own pedagogical methods and assumptions, not just our students.

**The Genre Effect:**
*“But It Still Just Gets Me into the Game”*

In addition to beginning writing instruction with familiar genres, something else appears to be influencing students’ understandings of genre and rhetorical situation than what is currently addressed in rhetorical genre theory. The very nature of genre, which current genre scholars have delineated, acts to suppress students’ awareness of familiar genres and their situations as rhetorically complex. I believe that considering what I am terming “the genre effect” in conjunction with previous rhetorical genre theory work on “the ideology of genre” may help to account for student reactions and to critique our own pedagogical assumptions about the familiar. Students, like all readers and writers, come with a set of assumptions about how all genres work that makes it difficult for them to see the complexity, multiplicity, and variation within a specific genre and its rhetorical situation(s).

Student resistance to fully analyzing and critiquing familiar genres and their rhetorical situations may be understood, in part, by considering the effect of their overall conception of genres, what I am terming the *genre effect*: the overarching idea of genre that affects how we understand all individual genres working. The genre effect, as a mental construct, exists within users’ minds and informs how they view, understand, and perform
the conceptual system of genre. This effect operates on all writers at all times, whether or not they are consciously examining their texts for genres, though, of course, its effect is particularly troublesome for educators using genre to teach rhetorical analysis and critical consciousness. Part of the genre effect, I argue, emerges from at least four distinct assumptions and beliefs that people hold about the system of genre: 1) Rhetorical situations in which a genre exists are not just similar but equivalent; 2) a current and specific rhetorical situation becomes representative of all rhetorical situations in which the genre may occur; 3) genres achieve one primary action; and 4) rhetorical differences between individual texts within a genre are often inconsequential.

To begin, differences within rhetorical situations are often masked by the genre effect. In genre theory scholarship, the rhetorical situation is not conceived in terms solely of materiality, but, instead, “situations are social constructs that are the result, not of ‘perception’ but of ‘definition’” (Miller 156). In this sense, one constructs rhetorical situations through one’s performance of genres, so when people encounter a rhetorical situation, they respond to it based on the genres that are available to them. Yet no two rhetorical situations are identical; every time a student attends a sporting event, the situation is different—it is another game, another date, another time, another sport, etc. But despite these differences within rhetorical situations, “recurrence [is] perceived by the individuals who use the genre” (Devitt 21). Users perceive different instances of the rhetorical situation to be similar, and I would argue, even the same, despite minor or major differences within them, such as settings, purposes, participants, and subjects. The likelihood of students distinguishing these differences—sometimes very slight differences—in rhetorical situations is diminished if the genre effect creates the illusion that variations within a rhetorical situation do not exist.

Moreover, as a result of masking these differences within rhetorical situations, the genre effect also works to hide the rhetorical complexity of the rhetorical situation. Users may feel compelled to view the current and specific rhetorical situation in which they are currently engaged and their position within it as representative of all the possible rhetorical situations in which the genre may occur. So even though a rhetorical situation may have many different participants, purposes, settings, and subjects, the genre effect collapses that complexity into simplicity. For instance, while I constantly encouraged students to consider more fully the rhetorical situation by examining the writers of sports tickets and other potential users, they continued to focus on their participation in the genre as sports players or fans. For this reason, analysis of the genre in conjunction with the rhetorical situation is often not enough to overcome the genre effect.
Another way in which the genre effect reduces complexity into simplicity is by masking the complex, multiple purposes of each particular genre and, thus, creating the belief that genres achieve only one primary action. Within rhetorical genre theory, genre is, generally, understood as “sociorhetorical habits or rituals that ‘work,’ that get something done, that achieve desirable ends” in a social context (Paré 60). For example, the sports ticket (genre) allows its users to gain admittance (“desirable end”) to a sporting event (social context). Yet regardless of the multiple other social actions the genre achieves, users often perceive the sports ticket as performing a typified social action. They overlook other social actions that the sports ticket also achieves, such as controlling sale and distribution, promoting the consumption of concessions, or creating the status of the sporting event. Since other social actions do not forbid or interfere with users’ “desirable end,” admittance to the game, users are likely to neither see nor consider nor care about other positive or negative effects as long as the genre creates a primary positive effect for its users. Since genres provide meaning and focus for complex rhetorical situations users encounter every day (Bazerman, “Life” 23), they allow us to forget and avoid all the complexities surrounding our admittance to a sporting event, such as security, ticket sales, or seating. As a result, users may not feel compelled to consider other social actions a genre may achieve because the genre effect renders them not only less visible but also as unimportant or inconsequential for the primary social action to occur.

The genre effect also creates the illusion that rhetorical differences (such as content, format, structure, language, etc.) within individual instances of a genre are insignificant, especially for the main social action to occur. In my class, the sports ticket group collected many visually distinct tickets with a variety of information—some were in color, others in black and white; some contained advertisements; and some were much larger or much smaller than others. These differences, which certainly allow other social actions than merely admitting the students to the game, appeared unimportant as long as they still got the ticket holder into the game. In spite of differences within genres and the choices available to their users (as explored by Christie), the genre effect creates the perception that these differences and choices are irrelevant. In other words, even if we can see differences within a genre, those different instances still help to achieve the same (and valued) “typified rhetorical action.” Regardless of shape, size, or color of the ticket, these different instances did not interfere with students’ entrance into the game. And if the genre effect reinforces the belief that differences between instances of an individual genre do not matter for the primary social action to occur, asking students to locate and consider the effects of those differences certainly constitutes a difficult task.
The genre effect, then, is the overarching idea of genre in users’ minds, and this overarching idea of genre reflects the beliefs that similar rhetorical situations are equivalent, that a specific rhetorical situation is representative of all possible rhetorical situations, that genres achieve only one primary social action, and that rhetorical differences within the genre features are often inconsequential. People come to understand this conceptual system of genre and how genres work in these similar ways through their daily interactions and experiences with individual, textual instantiations of genres. For genres to work, as genre theorists have elaborated, people must treat individual instances as though they are repetitions of prior experiences, with a purpose in common with other seemingly different individual instances. So genres, no matter how diverse or dissimilar they might appear, share a common bond—they work to create and reflect an overarching idea of genre, the genre effect, in the users’ minds, which then, in turn, informs how users interact with future genres. This overarching idea of genre works to disguise or mask differences within, and elements of, social actions, rhetorical choices, and rhetorical situations within individual genres, thus creating an understanding of genre that transcends yet does not supersede experiences with individual genres.

In this light, the genre effect may account for why so many are willing to reduce genres to rules or formulas. If people generally reduce the rhetorical complexity of genres and their corresponding rhetorical situations and understand both as variation-free, then of course they would de-contextualize genres and conclude that every instance of an individual genre could be captured within a formula and that they can construct a genre based on its formula. And if the genre effect masks the complexities and variations within genres and rhetorical situations and allows users to go about their daily lives with little thought about how they are achieving their goals, then why would users and students possibly want or need to consider the complexities of genre and their rhetorical situations if they help users achieve their desirable ends? Students may have resisted critiquing familiar genres not only because of their investment in those genres but also because the genre effect masks the complexity of genres and their rhetorical situations while also creating the belief that variations within genres and their rhetorical situations do not matter, especially for the primary social action to occur.

In addition to the genre effect, previous work on the ideology of genre helps to account for student reactions to critiquing familiar genres. Many past and current genre scholars have examined how individual genres, genre sets (Devitt) or genre systems (Bazerman) create and reflect assumptions and beliefs of a social group, power, or institution within particular contexts. These assumptions and beliefs, then, affect the way those genre users view and interact with the world. While much scholarship has been
interested in what kinds of actions genres allow, recent scholarship has focused on the ideological components of genres, specifically addressing what actions genres forbid or discourage and how genres constrain users’ actions and create controlled subject positions for their users. For example, by examining a student essay within a women’s studies course, Gillian Fuller and Alison Lee argue that the performances an individual genre (the student essay) position users (Ripley, the student) as certain kinds of generic subjects (student-subject, feminist-subject). Generic subjects are not formed prior to their performance of genres; rather “performing a genre concerns a joint agreement to perform certain positionalities within an institutional regime—to ‘be’ or ‘become’ certain kinds of subjects” (215). In other words, when users perform genres—either as a writer/speaker or a reader/listener—they take on pre-determined specified roles, mentalities, beliefs, and, thus become inculcated into the specific genre’s ideology. Users then are not only positioned as certain kinds of generic subjects when performing a genre but are also positioned within the larger social apparatuses (University, Women’s Studies, Feminism) that figure into the construction of the subject.

If the genre effect is paired with the work that exposes the ideological constraints of individual genres, then the picture I have painted thus far appears bleak. Genre is an even more complicated and messy system than previously theorized and imagined. If individual genres’ ideologies shape users’ actions (Ripley from Fuller and Lee’s essay, for example) and the genre effect masks differences within and complexity of a genre and rhetorical situation(s), then achieving critical consciousness of genre seems exceptionally difficult.

I am not suggesting at this point, however, that the genre effect or our interactions with specific genres forbid the formation of critical consciousness within individuals, even though many might argue that critical consciousness is not achievable in any case since we can never sufficiently step outside of ideology. I believe that such a suggestion would deny the existence of individuals, presumably myself included, who possess the ability to be critical about a wide range of subjects. Many individuals develop the ability to be critical without the explicit teaching of genre; however, many of the students in my first-year writing course encountered difficulties. Most of us do. How, then, can composition instructors engaged in the explicit teaching of genre attempt to counteract the complacent positions we all find ourselves in during our less critical moments? My concern is how educators and students, together, can work against the genre effect and individual genres’ ideologies in the classroom to foster critical consciousness.
The Explicit Teaching of Genre through the Unfamiliar

When educators engage in the explicit teaching of genre within the classroom, especially with the goal of critical consciousness, they need to consider both the genre effect and the specific genre’s ideological components. Asking students to begin genre analysis and critique with familiar genres invites students to question their assumptions about genre (the genre effect) and also the ideologies of that specific genre. Although not impossible and often achievable, these are still challenging tasks. Students are often personally invested in the system of genre—genres do, after all, help people easily achieve their goals—and they are also personally invested in certain kinds of genres, as Knoblauch suggests. The sports ticket, for example, allows students easy access to the game, and the tickets represent a sport’s ideology that those students already accepted. Familiar genres, therefore, also often reflect part of the individual, part of the “I.” Asking students to begin a composition course by analyzing and critiquing familiar genres also often requires students to critique and question themselves. It is important, then, for compositionists to consider alternative approaches to the explicit teaching of genre, and one possible option that I outline here starts with the unfamiliar.

It may be useful to first isolate the genre effect so that students and instructors together can analyze and critique it before turning to familiar genres, like the sports ticket. Anthony Paré suggests that “genre’s illusion of normalcy may be cracked or exposed at certain moments,” such as when a “genre is stretched too wide, and its forms and actions are inappropriate or ill-suited to the occasion” or when “newcomers first begin to participate in genre and find it ‘unnatural’ or counter to their own discourse habits and aims (developed in school, for example)” (61). I would extend Paré’s observation and argue that one way compositionists can force these “cracks” into their pedagogies is by inviting students to first analyze and critique unfamiliar genres and their rhetorical situations in order to isolate and expose the genre effect (the illusion of regularity and similarity). In other words, the genres that educators select for students to analyze and critique can be ones the students have not regularly performed in their daily and academic lives.

When students examine unfamiliar genres, they are most likely not already inculcated into the ideologies of individual genres, especially since they are not full participants in the genre. Moreover, students may not desire to become full participants in the genre since it seemingly lacks practical relevance in their daily lives. The lack of familiarity and desire might allow students to resist, even if just momentarily, indoctrination into an individual genre’s ideology. If this resistance does occur, the possibility of isolating and uncovering the genre effect becomes greater; and if the genre effect can be
isolated within the classroom, then students may be able to begin to ques-
tion and examine it.

In my own classroom, I have asked students to explore the unfamiliar
through historical and cross-cultural samples of genres. Many genre scholars
already examine the historical progression of certain genres (see Popkin’s
examination of the resume, Bazerman’s discussion of the U.S. patent, and
Jamieson’s exploration of the State of the Union and papal encyclicals).
If genre scholars see the merit in examining genres historically, certainly
students could benefit from such examinations as well. And while the propo-
sition of examining genres cross-culturally has not yet been as popular an
avenue for genre scholars, I have found that it works in a similar fashion
to examining genre historically within the composition classroom.

While the focus of this essay is not necessarily on my own pedagogi-
cal methods (instead, I hope that I have laid some theoretical groundwork
within which others will experiment), I do want to briefly explore what did
take place in my first-year writing classroom to illustrate what the pedagogi-
cal stance that I advocate might look like. For several semesters, students
have begun my first-year composition course by researching, collecting,
analyzing, and critiquing historical and cross-cultural genre samples. While
I provide students with several options, including loyalty oaths, campaign
posters, war advertisements, playbills, census documents, political car-
toons, wanted posters, and circus posters (of course, many other options
exist), and sources in which to locate those genres so that I can guarantee
the availability of samples, I have consistently been impressed with their
range and variety of samples. Some examples include loyalty oaths rang-
ing in topics from Hitler’s and the Kamikaze Oath to a Stem Cell Research
and a Bush-Cheney Voting Oath. Other students located Russian, British,
Canadian, Australian, Chinese, and American War posters from the Civil
War to the Iraq War.

Most students, of course, have encountered these genres sometime in
their lives, but most have not regularly performed these genres as writers
or readers. And even though students may have occasionally encountered
these genres, they become unfamiliar when placed within historical and
cross-cultural contexts. For example, examining campaign posters or war
advertisements from other cultures—or from other time periods—changes
the context (including the rhetorical situation) and the genres themselves
in significant ways so that these genres become unfamiliar, even strange.
Moreover, historical and cross-cultural genres have little to no practical use
for students because the samples exist in cultural or historical contexts that
differ considerably from the contexts in which students regularly operate.
Since the practical, everyday use of the genre is diminished, the students
and I can focus our attention on matters other than solely genre acquisition,
proficiency, and production, such as analysis and critique.
Once students have collected samples, they begin the process of genre analysis, paying particular attention to how rhetorical features—including content, format, structure, diction, sentence structure, and rhetorical appeals—within a genre have changed over time within one culture and/or vary between different cultures. For their first writing project, I ask students to first compose, as a group, an annotated bibliography of their genre samples in which they describe two rhetorical features that they found to be most significant or revealing and briefly evaluate those genre features by discussing their significance (for example, what might the content, format, diction, etc. tell us about what the users value?). I then ask each student to compose an individual essay in which she [1] provides a comprehensive overview of the existing rhetorical choices or options of one genre feature, [2] creates three future rhetorical possibilities of that genre feature, and [3] identifies a present-day rhetorical situation in which the genre would be used and discusses which rhetorical choice within the genre features a writer would make in that situation (See Appendix 1). This essay is far from traditional (or even familiar) in the first-year composition classroom, but the primary goal here is to allow students to explore the many ways in which the rhetorical features in genres can and do change, often quite dramatically.

In this first writing assignment, students seem to be more willing and able to describe and imagine the possibilities of rhetorical choices within a genre because the variations in rhetorical features are more pronounced in historical and cross-cultural samples of genres than in samples from the same time period and the same culture. For example, one student examined the differences within diction across historical samples of American campaign posters. She found that campaign posters employ patriotic terms (“liberty,” “loyalty,” “democracy,” and “free”), economic terms (“prosperity,” “money,” and “prestige”), alarmist terms (“public safety” and “DANGER”), or personal pronouns (“you,” “you’re,” and “I”) based upon the candidate’s primary emphasis or message in the poster. Another student examined images (as part of content) within war advertisements to find that earlier images (often drawings) included presidents, rulers, or the political leader, whereas more recent war advertisements use images (often photos) of “everyday people working and fighting for their country.” In addition to highlighting differences within genre features, this assignment also begins the process of connecting genre to rhetorical situation by essentially inviting students to become writers of the genres and make rhetorical choices based upon their created rhetorical situations. For example, the student who examined campaign posters decided that within a highly contested campaign, a current poster that would be located in someone’s yard should use more shocking or alarmist diction to attract drivers or walkers passing by. While this was not the primary emphasis in this project and we did not focus
on it within class (nor did the students in their essays), my hope was that students would begin to heighten their awareness that genres can and do change in response to contextual and situational elements (a process that is furthered emphasized within the second writing project).

Once students acknowledge in the first writing project that genres can and do change, they begin to discuss more explicitly why those changes might happen by considering how the context and rhetorical situations and, correspondingly, the social actions of the genre have changed. The second writing project builds on the first by asking students to locate a rhetorical feature(s) that has changed within their genre samples and speculate about the possible historical or cultural reasons for why that change(s) took place (See Appendix 2). In other words, if the genre features have changed, then they changed for a reason, and students are asked to connect changes in rhetorical features to changes in context and rhetorical situation. For example, some considered why the content or diction or images in a campaign poster from the 1800’s is different from one in the 1900’s. How might the rhetorical situations have been different? What kinds of different social actions are these two posters meant to achieve?

For this project, I do not provide students with extensive information regarding the historical or cultural contexts for their genre samples, nor do I require that they do outside research to fully discover those contexts (primarily due to time constraints). Instead, I ask students to speculate about what rhetorical situations the genres are responding to based upon the features that they have located within their genre samples. I believe that this is a possible task since, as Miller writes, studying genres “tells us less about the art of individual rhetors or the excellence of particular texts than it does about the character or culture of a culture or an historical period” (31). I do recognize, though, that there is a possible danger in this aspect of the assignment: students may oversimplify the complexities of rhetorical situations and provide much too neat of an analysis. But my concern is not necessarily with having students get the rhetorical situations “right.” Instead, I am more concerned that they see the relationship between genre and rhetorical situation and that they use their genre samples (often the only material artifacts that remain from certain cultures or time periods) to help understand and discern elements of their rhetorical situations.

That being said, I do know that students are not always merely speculating because most of the sources for the student samples provide contextual information that students can read (this is one benefit of providing sources for students to use). In addition, some students perform cursory research in to broadly understand the contexts of their samples. Another way to address this issue would be to ask students to consult Cultural Studies Readers that provide contextual information for various historical periods or cultures. Still, because I am ultimately asking students to speculate about possible
historical or cultural reasons for change based upon their genre samples, we spend much time in the classroom discussing the importance of qualifying statements as well as exploring how to avoid stereotyping of historical periods or cultures by grounding their analysis within the genre samples. For example, we discuss the difference between providing concrete details from their genre samples to speculate about the rhetorical situation—such as “the image of Jimmy Carter leaning on a fence with the countryside in the background suggests that the voters may have been seeking a down-to-earth ‘everyday man’”—and providing generalized statements about the context and rhetorical situation—such as, “During 1976, the country sought a down-to-earth ‘everyday’ man.”

This second writing project invites students to see genres as intimately connected to rhetorical situations and contexts and to see how genres can and do change in response to rhetorical situations and contexts. The results of this project have been immensely fascinating for both me and the students. For instance, the student who looked at campaign posters found that her genre samples suggested that the “changes within rhetorical appeals are a direct reflection of what kind of leader or cause the country was seeking during various time periods.” Another student examined loyalty oaths to find that “by examining these samples, one is able to see that over the course of time, the loyalty oath has become increasingly official in its content and format as a result of people’s evolving dependency on proof of validity and completion of an oath.” While these speculations may seem obvious (as in the first case) or may not be entirely “right” (as in the second case), students arrive at these speculations by analyzing the different rhetorical choices within their genre samples and seeking possible situational reasons for those choices. This second writing project also leads to the unforeseen benefit of allowing the class to focus closely on the composition and writing of the analysis paper itself, since students had already done the necessary genre analysis of their samples in the first assignment. We explored in-depth how to develop claims and subclaims, how to select and frame evidence, how to link evidence to claims and subclaims through analysis, and how to compose introductions and conclusions. These analysis papers, overall, were a success—so much so that a teaching mentor of mine at the time suggested that these were some of the best analysis papers that he had ever seen during a first semester composition course (and I agreed).

With a heightened awareness of the rhetorical features of a genre and their relationships to their rhetorical situations, I saw students begin to realize that differences in rhetorical features, social actions, and rhetorical situations are not inconsequential but important to the genre’s performance. Once students began to acknowledge that genres do not have to be “simply the way things are,” that genres do offer many possible social actions, that rhetorical differences do matter, and that rhetorical situations do, in
fact, vary, the genre effect may have been diminished, if only momentarily. Moreover, with these experiences, students encountered fewer difficulties critiquing their unfamiliar genres. While the students implicitly critiqued their unfamiliar genres (at least critique is difficult to avoid) during the first two writing projects, we then briefly turned our attention to explicit critique, examining their unfamiliar genres for strengths, weaknesses, and ideological commitments. Critique seemed to be much easier when students could see patterns over time or ways in which genres have changed in order to accommodate inequalities, problems, etc.

The opportunity to at least partially expose the genre effect in the first two assignments opened the doors for critical examination of familiar genres. After students analyzed and critiqued unfamiliar genres, I invited them to select familiar genres so that they could analyze and critique them. My hope was that the first two assignments allowed students to develop some level of critical consciousness that would allow for the possibility for them to see their familiar genres as more than “simply the way things are.” I did not anticipate a seamless transition nor did I expect one. However, students, on the whole, seemed to have a much easier time critiquing their familiar genres, as I encountered far fewer complaints and moments of resistance—I did not once hear, “[the genre] works as it is; why would we want to change it?”). While no students selected the sports ticket, one student, an African American male athlete who spoke with me at length about his desire to become a professional track runner, did choose to analyze and critique posters for track. Through his critique, he quickly and easily discovered that the posters focused almost exclusively on African American male track runners, thereby portraying the idea that only African American males ran track—and ignoring female track runners, white male track runners, and other track runners of color. Of course, he may have arrived at similar conclusions if we had begun genre analysis and critique with familiar genres; however, my previous experience as well as other scholars’ experiences indicates that he might have experienced difficulty doing so.

**Reconceptualizing the Unfamiliar in the Composition Classroom**

The pedagogical approach outlined here, which invites students to begin with the unfamiliar rather than the familiar, may seem counterintuitive, even contrary, to the current approaches that some compositionists, including genre scholars, use to foster students’ critical consciousness. Students in my classroom did not begin genre analysis and critique with familiar genres, nor did they use familiar genres as a way into unfamiliar genres; rather they began genre analysis and critique with unfamiliar genres and used unfamiliar genres as a way into familiar genres.
I believe that the sequence of exercises, such as the one outlined above, allowed students to develop some level of critical consciousness and to develop their writing skills. In the first writing project, students gained the experience of locating the rhetorical features of their genres, defining them through a common vocabulary (content, structure, format, rhetorical appeals, sentence structure, and diction), articulating those features through detailed, written descriptions, and then using those features within later analysis (in the second project). Here, students learned how to locate and articulate concrete rhetorical choices and strategies used within genres, which provided them—and us as a class—with a common language or vocabulary for talking about writing (others and their own). The second writing project furthered students’ writing abilities to develop claims and subclaims and support them with detailed evidence and substantial analysis, common rhetorical strategies used within academic writing. And through developing those claims and subclaims, many students recognized that genres can and do change in response to contexts and rhetorical situations and that genres often achieve more than one social action. Many students transferred the skills that they learned when examining unfamiliar genres to their examinations of familiar genres and experienced far fewer moments of difficulty and resistance while doing so.

I willingly admit that my pedagogical approach did not miraculously solve all problems or entirely eliminate moments of student resistance. Certainly the processes of developing critical consciousness and writing skills are not easy or seamless tasks. Students may need several courses, much more experience examining historical and cross-cultural genres, or much more practice analyzing and critiquing both familiar and unfamiliar genres and their rhetorical situations to fully develop their abilities. And other options already exist within the explicit teaching of genre. For example, Sarah Andrew-Vaughan and Cathy Fleisher use an “unfamiliar-genre research project” (2006) in which they invite their high school and pre-service teaching students “to investigate a genre of writing that they find challenging or unfamiliar, recognize the characteristics that define the genre, and then write an original piece in the genre” (36).5 Another option may be found within Dylan Dryer’s work where he suggests that teachers place students in uncomfortable (and unfamiliar) writing situations.6

In addition to the explicit teaching of genre, I imagine that other pedagogies would benefit by beginning within unfamiliar territory, especially pedagogies with the goal of developing critical consciousness. I see many other possibilities, and I invite others to experiment with the theoretical and pedagogical frameworks that I have provided here. Regardless of the pedagogical approach, beginning with the unfamiliar in addition to beginning with the familiar may help students develop critical consciousness within both unfamiliar and familiar territory as well as develop more control and
insight into their own and other writing practices. And perhaps like our students, we, as compositionists, can also foster our own critical consciousnesses and develop insight into our own familiar pedagogical practices by turning first to the unfamiliar.7

Notes

1. Other examples can be found in Brooks; Brooke and Jacobs; Coe; and Reiff. Brooks draws on Bazerman’s claim that “genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and [are] guideposts to explore the unfamiliar,” to argue that this statement “should be at the heart of a genre-based hypertext pedagogy” (342). He suggests that familiar genres help his students into the less familiar creative hypertext genre since “genres are the familiar places to which our students can go to compose in unfamiliar electronic writing spaces” (342). Brooke and Jacobs also seek to engage students in unfamiliar material through the use of familiar material. They explain that in their genre-based first-year writing courses, “students are invited to write frequently, to choose their own topics and genres, and reflect on the many purposes, strategies, and uses of writing throughout their lives” and that “students . . . are encouraged to explore new material through genres familiar to them, but also encouraged to explore new genres using material familiar to them” (218).

Coe proposes that students investigate a familiar topic by asking students to choose “a topic in which you have special knowledge” and then “communicate technical or specialized knowledge” to readers who are “moderately literate . . . and have little to no background in the specific subject matter” in the form of a brochure (164). Similarly, Reiff advocates that students perform mini-ethnographies in communities in which they are already participants (or ones in which they intend to become participants) to develop their understanding of genre as contextually situated.

2. Clynes and Henry offer a solution for fostering “students’ ability to note and articulate the functional aspects of the analysis”; they suggest beginning with a “less complex homely genre” before analyzing more complex genres, such as the Brunei Malay Wedding Invitation (240). Less complex genres with their “less complex communicative purposes,” they argue, would allow students to more easily see how the linguistic features relate to purpose (240). As I demonstrate, beginning with “less complex genres” (if such a thing exists) does not address the genre effect that helps to account for student responses like these.

3. I want to briefly explore how my theoretical concept of the “genre effect” differs from Bawarshi’s “genre function” since, at first glance, they may seem similar. Bawarshi posits that the “genre function” allows us to study all kind of texts as “complex rhetorical actions that socialize their users into performing social roles and actions, roles and actions that help reproduce the realities they describe and enact” (357). In other words, all genres create participant
roles or subject positions for readers/listeners and writers/speakers, which users then reinforce and create through their genre performances. If genres “assign genre roles, both to the characters who participate within them to the writers and readers who interact with them” (347), then the genre function provides us with one way to examine how all individual genres establish genre-specific subject positions for their users.

The “genre effect” is also concerned with the larger system of genre that extends beyond individual genres and includes most, if not all, genres; however, it is concerned with the ways in which users come to view texts generically, not just the position that a given genre creates for them. Instead of claiming that all genres create genre-specific subject positions for their users, I claim that users come to understand how the larger system of genre works through their interactions with individual genres.

4. Miller goes on to provide an example: “Kaufer makes a telling point about classical Greek rhetoric when he observes that the ‘number of definable types of rhetorical situations in Classical cultures appears both curiously small and stable’ (1979: 176). The three Aristotelian genres signal a particular and limited role for rhetoric; according to Kaufer, but a very important one: maintaining ‘the normal functions’ of the state” (31).

5. Some unfamiliar genre examples they include are flash-fiction, cookbooks, microfiction, scrapbooking, sonnet, novel, and how-to books (32, 39). Asking students, as Andrew-Vaughan and Fleisher do, to select a genre they find “foreign or intimidating” (36), in other words unfamiliar, is another approach to the explicit teaching of genre that might enable students to examine the genre effect apart from the ideological effects of a particular genre.

6. Dryer asks students to compose either a first-person “project proposal” or a second-person “paper assignment” for a response paper prompt and then answer it after they had routinely composed eight response papers in response to his prompts (7).

7. Acknowledgements: I am especially indebted to Amy Devitt for her insightful comments on multiple versions and drafts of this piece as well as for her unwavering support and encouragement. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful readings and thoughtful suggestions. And I extend my appreciation to the many students who inspire me to be a better teacher and scholar.
Appendix 1

Writing Project 1: Tracing and Analyzing an Unfamiliar Genre

**Goals:** To collect primary evidence, practice genre analysis (as explored in Scenes of Writing), and use that genre analysis in your own writing.

**Tasks:** This project involves both a group and individual component. For both components, you should consider your readers (audience) to be members of the class and others already familiar with key terms.

**Group Component:** Each group will select a genre from the list provided and collect 9 (groups of 3) to 12 (groups of 4) historical (genres from various time periods) and/or cross-cultural (genres from other cultures) samples of your chosen genre. It is important that your group collects a wide range of samples from many different time periods and/or cultures. You will want as much variation as possible, so the following parameters apply:

1) No more than 1 sample from the United States in the last 25 years;

2) Samples cannot be from one time period (the early 1900s, for example) or from one culture (for example, France). In other words, you need either multiple time periods or multiple cultures;

3) Samples must be from at least three different sources.

Your group will then work together to identify and analyze the scene and rhetorical situation of the samples and to compose an annotated bibliography in which you perform a genre analysis of each sample.

**Individual Component:** Each group member will compose a 2-3 page response in which he or she:

1) Describes the existing choices of one genre feature (format, structure, content, diction, etc.) in all (9 or 12) of your samples;

2) Describes three future possibilities of that genre feature (choices that currently do not exist but might in the future);

3) Identifies and describes one possible rhetorical situation (partici-
pants, subjects, settings, and purposes) a present-day writer may encounter when using this genre (for example, running for a local political office, protesting a public education reform, enlisting in the United States air force, advertising a brand new off Broadway play, etc.)

4) Explores what genre feature choice (one of the existing and future possibilities you identify in the paper) this present-day writer may select in this rhetorical situation and why he or she would make that choice over other possible choices.

Appendix 2

Writing Project 2: Analysis of an Unfamiliar Genre

**Goal:** To create an analysis paper about your genre samples using sub-claims, evidence, and analysis to support your controlling idea (thesis).

**Tasks:** You will begin by considering what you find interesting, revealing, or strange about the genre features (content, format, diction, structure, etc.) in the sample genres that your group collected. Make sure you have received copies of your group members’ annotated bibliography entries and genre samples. For example, you may consider what significant genre features changed in the samples over time and/or in different cultures. You could examine more than one genre feature in just a few (two-three) diverse samples, or you could select one feature to examine in several samples—the choice is yours. From this initial exploration, you will want to develop a controlling idea that speculates about the possible historical and/or cultural reasons (scene and situation) for why the genre feature change(s) took place. In your controlling idea, you will want to demonstrate (make a claim) why the genre feature(s) change throughout history and/or in different cultures. Then construct an analysis paper with sub-claims, evidence, and analysis that explains and demonstrates the controlling idea.

**Works Cited**


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