
Reviewed by Kelly Kinney, State University of New York

Listening for the mail carrier with a diligence equal to my Shepard-Chow housemate, Rio, I waited expectantly to receive Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff’s Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy. I couldn’t wait to tear open the publisher’s package, to dig into the theory that—compared to much of the reading I do in a busy administrative day—feels more like a reward than a punishment. But as much as I anticipated biting into the cutting-edge theory I knew Bawarshi and Reiff would provide, my appetite was also piqued as a practitioner. Indeed, what strikes me most about the sub-field of genre studies is that it reflects a characteristic that Stephen North associated with composition studies close to a quarter century ago: that is, like the field in 1987, genre studies today embraces a variety of disciplinary and methodological traditions, seeks its legitimacy (at least in part) through empirically-driven research, but—in the end—draws its greatest potential from its ability to influence practitioners. I suspect that most readers of Composition Studies will find Genre at its best when it illuminates how to improve our work as writing program administrators in general, and writing teachers in particular.

As one of the latest volumes in Charles Bazerman’s Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition, Genre is targeted at newcomers to genre studies, if not composition studies generally conceived. In keeping with the other titles in the series, Genre seeks to broaden knowledge and deepen understanding of an important area of study, providing not just a thorough reference, but a helpful glossary and annotated bibliography by Melanie Kill. The book pulls from research made popular by its authors, as well Amy Devitt, Anne Beaufort, and other leading lights in the North American genre studies community, but it also includes perspectives informed by South American, European, and Australian genre scholars.

Accordingly, part 1 of the book, “Historical Review and Theories of Genre,” guides readers through the range of academic fields that contribute to genre studies. After a brief introduction to the book as a whole, chapter 2 focuses on genre in the literary tradition, distinguishing between “bipolar attitudes toward genre”—that is, genre as either aesthetic object or artistic constraint—and a “larger landscape for genre action” that embraces “socio-rhetorical studies of genre” (14). Clearly aimed at writing instructors with English department affiliations, the chapter charts conceptions of genre maintained by a range of neo-classical, romantic, modern, and post-modern literary traditions. Chapters 3 and 4 branch out from literary studies to the
fields of systemic and corpus linguistics and English for Specific Purposes, synthesizing each discipline’s provocative class- and language-based critiques of process pedagogy. Chapter 5 examines genre in rhetorical and sociological traditions and (among other aims) offers a helpful summary of Carolyn R. Miller’s groundbreaking article “Genre as Social Action.” Rounding out part 1, chapter 6 focuses on the tradition referred to as “Rhetorical Genre Studies,” or RGS. While I found this chapter to be the most dense and, subsequently, the hardest to follow, it walks readers through the various ways RGS can be used as a “rich analytical tool for studying academic, workplace, and public systems of activity” (104). The authors end part 1 by acknowledging that RGS researchers are often left with more questions than answers, and leave the work of examining the “pedagogical implications of teaching genres” (104) to the second and third sections of the book.

Part 2 moves into an analysis of “Genre Research in Multiple Contexts” and examines empirical genre research in academic (chapter 7), workplace (chapter 8), and new media and public contexts (chapter 9). Given my own area of specialization, I found chapter 7 the most intriguing: it explores how academic writers’ genre knowledge influences their performances, explains intercultural conceptions of genre in K-16 settings, and examines second-language learning in graduate-level contexts. What I appreciated most about part 2 was how it emphasized the potential pitfalls that accompany genre approaches to writing instruction: it seems clear that regardless of educational context, genre approaches must strike a careful and complicated balance between helping writers expand their knowledge of conventions and enabling them to critique and challenge dominant discourses (128). As a writing program administrator, I also appreciated part 2 for the empirical studies it synthesizes and the way it demonstrates how and why writing instruction must vary according to student demographics and disciplinary contexts.

But while there is much for administrators to value in part 2, I believe classroom teachers will be most attracted to part 3, “Genre Approaches to the Teaching of Writing.” In fact, the way that Bawarshi and Reiff compare and contrast different genre approaches helped to deepen my understanding of how genre should influence the methods writing teachers use, the textbooks we adopt, and the assignments we create. Debunking a common criticism waged at genre approaches, this section also clearly articulates that genre approaches “do not focus so much on the acquisition of a particular genre as they do on the development of rhetorical awareness that can transfer and be applied to various genres and their contexts of use” (197). In particular, I found the authors’ discussion of “anti-genres” provocative for the ways such assignments “develop students’ critical awareness [and help them] produce alternative genres that mediate between constraint and choice” (200). As a teacher who struggles to reconcile composition’s service ethic with my own liberatory commitments, I found the guide’s ability to unite the call to teach for transfer with the mantra to teach to transgress especially refreshing—and, in a word, praiseworthy.
My two criticisms of the text are minor, the first having to do with the formulaic structure of the guide as a whole: the authors develop a routine for the beginning, middle, and end of each chapter that is perhaps helpful for readers trying to navigate the text quickly, but monotonous for those digging in from cover to cover. Of course, this may be a knee-jerk criticism, because readers of reference guides turn to them for skimming ease, not reading pleasure. Given that the guide’s targeted audience includes those unfamiliar with the specialized nomenclature of genre studies, however, I believe my second criticism is sound: that is, the authors use acronyms excessively throughout the text—EMP, EOP, ESL, ESP, LSP, SIGNET IV, RGS, SFL, WAC, WID, etc. While Bawarshi and Reiff define each term in its early use, it was hard for me to recall what several abbreviations represented as I encountered them later in the text. It stands to reason that newcomers to genre studies would be even more inhibited by their (over)use.

Acronyms aside, *Genre* clearly succeeds in its aims. Analyzed rhetorically, the guide demonstrates that like composition studies at large, genre studies has distinguished its disciplinary aims, legitimated its research methods, and—to return again to Stephen North’s observation—placed administrators and especially practitioners “at the center of the field’s knowledge-making explosion” (371).

Rio and I had good reason to be excited about the mail.

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**Works Cited**


*Reviewed by Megan M. McKnight, California State University*

In *Before Shaughnessy: Basic Writing at Yale and Harvard, 1920-1960*, Kelly Ritter makes similar sets of identifications of Basic Writers as Shaughnessy did in *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing*. Ritter outlines four types of basic writers that she has encountered: Type I: limited or minimally competent; Type II: competent or highly competent; Type III: not competent or lacking control of language; Type IV: fundamentally deficient. Ritter’s experiences with these types of basic writers led her to investigate basic writers across institutional types and populations. In doing so, Ritter found that “basic” is a cross-institutional and cross-demographic construct that is shaped by the individual needs and the location of each