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Rhetorical Genre Theory and Workplace Adaptation for Modern Professional Writers

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Rhetorical Genre Theory and Workplace Value for Modern Professional Writers
By Alyssa Speicher

Introduction

The professional writing field is constantly changing. As technology and business develop and adapt to a changing world, the tasks and writing of professional writers must adapt as well. Professional writers no longer solely write reports or technical documentation; they can write blog posts, web content, memos, emails; they can design content and information for marketing or usability; and they can edit any form of content for the organization in which they work.

Not only do the types of writing change, but the variety expected from professional writers also changes. Some professional writers specialize in one form of writing, but most are expected to reproduce many forms of communication in their everyday workplaces. It is crucial that professional writers be flexible and adaptable.

However it can be challenging to be well versed in so many different forms of communication because elements from one form can overlap into another. In some situations, professional writers can even have difficulty determining what form their writing should take, and it is the job of the professional writer to discern the best possible way to communicate for the audience and situation.

Scholars suggest that rhetorical genres are an effective tool for modern professional writers. In this article, I use the rhetorical genre theory to demonstrate how genres can help professional writers choose the appropriate form of communication for any given workplace-writing situation

when they consider their audience, context, and purpose. I also suggest how professional writers can use rhetorical genres to add value to their workplace.

Literature Review

People usually think of genres as ways to categorize entertaining stories, whether those stories be told by novels or movies. This approach views genres as guidelines and checklists for elements that will identify what type of story is being told. When trying to apply this approach to workplace writing, it is easy to think that what makes a document a certain type of document is its structure, style, and form.

Although structure, style, and form are all important factors of workplace genre, the rhetorical genre theory asserts that genres are more than their stylistic elements and serve for more useful purposes than simple document classification. The rhetorical genre theory dictates that genres have a communicative function, mediating and formative power, dynamism, communal value, and intermediary power. Therefore, the rhetorical genre theory defines genre as a social action that emerges from recurring rhetorical situations and can define a community's communication.

COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTION

Genres are ultimately used to communicate with others in a social situation (Artemeva 2008; Cirocki 2010; Frow 2007; Lewis 2016; Miller 1984; Schryer and Spoel 2005; Yeung 2007). The rhetorical genre theory recognizes that the purpose of writing exists in one's ability to communicate with others (Cirocki 2010; Miller 1984), so the rhetorical genre theory rests on defining genre as a social action.

Genre as Social Action

In her revolutionary 1984 article, *Genre As Social Action*, Carolyn Miller states that, "genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish." She goes on in her article to define genre as a "typified rhetorical action based in recurrent situations" (p. 151). This means that genres emerge as rhetorical situations repeat themselves.

Many other scholars recognize the importance and implications of this definition of genre. In his argument that genre is an effective tool to teach ESL learners grammar, Cirocki notes, "Language written within a genre produces a social activity" (2010, p. 19). Other scholars build their arguments based on rhetorical genre theory and the idea that communication and discourse are primarily actions and not representations (Artemeva 2008; Frow 2007; Luzon 2005). Because genres emerge from recurrent rhetorical situations, they are social, communicative actions used to address a situation.

Recurrent Rhetorical Situations and Typified Social Action

Rhetorical situations consist of a document's audience, purpose, and context (Miller 1984; Schryer and Spoel 2005; Lewis 2016). When rhetorical situations recur, the social documents written or designed to address the situation share the same audience, purpose, and context. From this rhetorical situation, genre is born (Miller 1984). Since genres exist through similarities of rhetorical actions across time, genres can be identified only through recurrence (Artemeva 2008).

Miller argues that "rhetorical situation is not a material and objective but a social construct" (1984, p. 157). This lends itself to the idea that genre is in fact a social action. Writers take

action to meet the needs of the audience and their own purpose, so rhetorical genres act to meet both the recurrent needs of the audience and the writer's recurrent purpose (Frow 2007; Lewis 2016; Miller and Fahnestock 2013). Because of this, the recurrent rhetorical action produces typified social action that is necessarily socially constructed. Miller says, "successful communication would require that the participants share common types" (1984, p. 157). These "types" refer to participants in the rhetorical situation. For example in business writing, a type would be an employee writing a document for their fellow coworkers. These types help to further define the rhetorical situation, so typified social action can also be understood as socially and rhetorically constructed communication (Berkenkotter 2001; Luzon 2005; Miller 1984).

Social Motives

The final aspect that guides genre as a social and communicative action is the author's motives. Motives for communication are inherently social (Lewis 2016; Miller 1984). For example, writers are motivated to produce writing because they want to share their ideas with others.This social motivation leads to the social action of writing within a genre to address the recurring rhetorical situation (Frow 2007; Lewis 2016; Miller 1984; Yeung 2007).

DUALITY OF GENRE

Genres also have a twofold purpose. In their work on genre from a sociocognitive perspective, Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin (1993) articulate this purpose as genre's "duality." They say, "As we draw on genre rules to engage in professional activities, we constitute genres and simultaneously reproduce these structures" (p. 478). When we constitute genres, we are using them as mediating tools and also reproducing and forming other genres (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993; Frow 2007; Luzon 2005; Schryer and Spoel 2001; Yeung 2007).

Mediating Tools

Genres, as understood with rhetorical genre theory, are tools for mediating social activities (Frow 2007; Luzon 2005; Schryer and Spoel 2005). Genres mediate between ideas and content and then context and situation (Frow 2007; Schryer and Spoel 2005). In 2007, John Frow recognized that "genre is a mediating structure between texts and the situations in which they operate" which means that genres give ideas and content a structure that makes sense for the rhetorical situation they enter (p. 1630). When we use genres, we are mediating between purpose and context, so genres mediate their own rhetorical situation. Therefore, we constitute a genre when we write within that genre.

Formative Power

Although genres have a mediating capacity, they simultaneously have a formative power (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993; Frow 2007; Luzon 2005; Yeung 2007). Fundamentally, this means that as we use a genre, we make more documentation of that genre (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993) and then we use that new addition to help evolve the genre (Yeung 2007). As rhetorical situations evolve, so do the genres; however, as genres evolve, so do the rhetorical situations. Therefore, rhetorical genres have a formative power that results from their ability to assign content meaning for a certain rhetorical situation (Frow 2007; Yeung 2007). So while genres do mediate, they also formulate and regenerate, creating two purposes that genres can accomplish.

DYNAMISM

In her generic approach to defining the report for decision making, Carolyn Rude (1995) says, "A genre is not simply a template" (p. 177). Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) described this characteristic of genre as dynamism. They asserted that since rhetorical situations--and

consequently, genres--can change over time, genres adapt to their users' needs (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993). Genres are necessarily dynamic; and therefore, they cannot rely on structure or substance (Lewis 2016; Schryer and Spoel 2005; Yeung 2007). Because of this, genres allow for flexibility and freedom.

GENERIC LIMITS

Although genres are fluid and dynamic, they do have boundaries and limits. These boundaries unsurprisingly come from the genre's rhetorical situation. Genres have form and content considerations as well as contextual boundaries that are defined by their rhetorical audience.

Form and Content

Although genres are defined by their rhetorical situations, they can be identified by their form and content. Genres have parameters for their style, substance, organization, and form (Cirocki 2010; Kasperova 2016). Miller says, "form shapes the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction about how to perceive and interpret" (1984, pp. 159). Because of this, form and content are crucial to a genre's ability to create reliable meaning (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993; Miller 1984).

Genres are conventionally structured, so in order to write within a genre, one must know the conventions (Cirocki 2010; Kasperova 2016). Beyond this, one must know what content and style is appropriate to include in a generic situation (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993). It is the rhetorical situation which defines a genre's stylistic, substantial, and organizational parameters, so writers within a rhetorical genre must stick to those parameters.

Contexts of Use

Since a genre's form stems from the rhetorical situation, genre should start with context (Rude 1995). Contexts of use are the most important boundary of a rhetorical genre (Frow 2007; Kasperova 2016; Miller 1984; Rude 1995). Context allows genre to have meaning and is the first element that bounds the genre (Frow 2007; Miller 1984). Genres embody assumptions about the intended use of the document, so what is appropriate for the intended use determines the appropriate genre for that situation (Rude 1995).

COMMUNAL VALUE OF GENRE

Since genres are bound by their contexts of use and function within recurring rhetorical situations, genres affect and are affected by the communities where they function. Genres become a symbolic structure and tool for a community, meaning genres signal content for their community (Berkenkotter 2001; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993; Lewis 2016; Schryer and Spoel 2005; Yeung 2007). Genre simplifies complex material for its rhetorical network because it signals the form and content of communication (Kelly and Maddalena 2016). Consequently, genres help construct social structures and help shape communal activity because they become the socially expected form of communication for that recurring audience (Luzon 2005; Lewis 2016; Kelly and Maddalena 2016). Because of this, genres simultaneously embody and shape the values, strategies, and ideology of a community (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993; Rude 1995).

The genres of a community reveal its values, norms, expectations, and epistemology (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993; Schryer and Spoel 2005). Yeung (2007) found that, when asked to write within a genre, people used their knowledge of how to deal with situations in their

community. Genres become an instinctive reaction to communicating within a community, and this instinctive reaction shows the expectations and values of that community.

Genres also shape the communication in a community. Not only do they establish the norms and expectations of the rhetorical audience, they also assign importance and meaning to information because they are predetermined symbolic structures that have meaning within their community (Kelly and Maddalena 2016; Rude 1995; Schryer and Spoel 2005).

Because communities form and are formed by their genres, it is crucial for newcomers to acclimate to existing genres in order to effectively communicate within a community (Schryer and Spoel 2005). This extends to the workplace; Berkenkotter (2001) says, "professions are organized by genre systems and their work is carried out through genre systems," and later says that genre studies help one to adapt to new situations professionally (p. 327).

INTERMEDIARY GENRE

Rhetorical genre theory also addresses how genres interact with other genres (Berkenkotter 2001, Miller and Fahnestock 2013; Schryer and Spoel 2005; Tachino 2005). Rude (1995) accurately says that "different genres reflect different methods of inquiry...outcomes differ because goals and problems vary between genres." However, Schryer and Spoel (2005) assert that some genres exist in relationship to other genres, and Tachino believes that "any genre can be used as an intermediary between other genres" (2005, p. 457). Therefore, although genres address different rhetorical situations, there are intermediary genres that can work to address different genres.

Analysis

When professional writers understand genres from a rhetorical perspective, they are able to communicate more effectively for their rhetorical situation. Rhetorical genres help writers choose how to form their content, communicate quickly to their audiences, and demonstrate their versatility in writing situations.

GENRE AND FORM SELECTION

As professional writers choose how to appropriately communicate in their workplace, they must be able to determine what form of communication their content should take. For example, a writer who wants to write content for an automotive dealership might need to know if the information about a car should be presented in a memo, marketing flyer, or window sticker. The form the communication takes would be considered its genre.

The rhetorical genre theory asserts that genre should be understood as a social response to a recurring rhetorical situation. Therefore, genre selection should be based upon the rhetorical situation that is comprised of the audience, context, and purpose (Miller 1984).

If we understand genres rhetorically, the rhetorical situation will help professional writers choose what genre to select for any given workplace situation. Once the writer considers audience, context, and purpose, the form and style the content should take will become apparent.

Audience Consideration

When choosing a genre, the first aspect of the rhetorical situation a writer should consider is the audience. Since writing in genre is a social task, the people involved are the most important factor in communication.

Different audiences have different needs. For example, a professional writer's coworker has very different needs than a company stakeholder. The writer has to recognize what needs the audience has and use those needs to assess what genre to write in.

Audience needs are only the first thing that differentiates audiences when choosing a genre. Different audiences also have different expectations for content. A professional writer's coworker in sales might expect to receive the facts about a new product in a memo while a customer might expect to see the same facts in a marketing flyer. Less obviously, rhetorical genres can differ in style due to audience expectations. Both a coworker in sales and a manager might expect to see the content about a new product in a memo, but the salesperson would expect this memo to be an informal bulleted list of features while the manager would expect a more formal presentation including the reasons behind introducing the product.

Once the writer understands the audience's needs and expectations, the appropriate genre will also become more clear.

Context Consideration

The context is the next part of the situation the professional writer should consider when choosing a genre rhetorically.

In general, writers must consider the context in which their communication will be used. When choosing a genre, this consideration is no different. Will the information be used in a social context, in an academic context, or in an official context? The answer shows what genre to use, regardless of the content. Information about a computer application might be organized into a manual, virtual tutorial, or instructional video based on the context in which the app will be used.

The form is bound by the context. When choosing a rhetorical genre, the genre is also bound by the context.

Aside from traditional contextual considerations, rhetorical genres are affected by their community. Since genres are shaped by their communities, they are also bound by the context of that community (Berkenkotter and Huckin 1993). If a writer wants to add to the body of knowledge of a particular community such as their workplace, they must consider the context of that community and its expectations, jargon, and values. When writers are able to analyze and consider the context of their communication, they are able to create content that is meaningful to that context.

Purpose Consideration

The final aspect of the rhetorical situation a writer should consider is the purpose. This refers to the purpose that the writer has for sharing the information. Content written with the purpose to inform takes a very different shape than content with the purpose to persuade. Based upon the genre, the audience will understand more clearly what the writer is trying to communicate. For example, most people recognize that proposals are written to suggest a change while fact sheets are written to share quick information.

Rhetorical Situation and Genre Selection

Since genres shape communication, selecting a genre leads to the form content takes. Understood rhetorically, genres emerge from recurring audiences, contexts, and purposes, so once a writer considers the audience's needs and expectations, the context and community, and the purpose for communicating, the genre a writer should use becomes evident. Rhetorical

genres also help the writer differentiate between situations and guide how the writer should approach each new task.

GENRE AND MODERN PROFESSIONAL WRITERS

The concepts of instant gratification and versatility are important in today's workplace. Professional writers can use rhetorical genre theory to not only choose how to organize and form their content, but also to add value to their communication and occupation. Two ways rhetorical genres can add value to the workplace are through audience recognition and writing versatility.

Audiences Can Use Content Instantly

The best communication delivers content the audience wants immediately. Rhetorical genres allow a way for audiences to immediately recognize what is being communicated and to find the information they need as quickly and effectively as possible.

Since rhetorical genres encapsulate recurring situations, the audience becomes used to what they expect from a certain genre. This means that they can identify a piece of writing by its genre and thus recognize what the writer is trying to communicate. For example, consumers recognize that a resort brochure is a marketing piece meant to sell them a vacation. When writers write within an established rhetorical genre, the audience can recognize instantly what is being communicated to them.

But rhetorical genres are used for more than document categorization. They also have communal value. Because of their communal power, a rhetorical genre can emerge for a very specific audience, context, and purpose. This is particularly useful for companies' internal

communication. For example, a company consistently formats a newsletter about important changes into a monthly email for its employees. The employees will soon be able to identify what the email is about and understand what is being communicated to them. This same email might look odd to external audiences, but it makes sense within its community.

Genres not only help the audience identify and understand content, but they also help audiences find the information they need quickly. Once they recognize the genre, audience members will have expectations for that genre's format as well as its content. They will thus be able to recognize and locate the information that is most beneficial to them. If the newsletter from the last example is broken into updates by department, an employee should quickly be able to locate the content that is useful for their department. Genres can help users find information because the communication fits a recurring situation that is now recognized and accepted by the audience.

If a writer decides to write outside of a genre, they jeopardize the audience's comprehension. In the case of the monthly newsletter, the company should not drastically reformat the email because their employees might not recognize it as something valuable to their everyday duties. Furthermore, the new format might hinder the employee's ability to find the information that is meaningful to them, and they might get frustrated and no longer read the newsletter. Rhetorical genres give writers credibility with their audiences as well as provide audiences with reliable information.

Since the goal of writing rhetorically is to give the audience the information they need as quickly and effectively as possible, rhetorical genres are crucial to communication success. They allow the user to recognize what is being communicated to them and find the information they need quickly, and they meet user expectations so that they will continue to use the document.

Writers Can Demonstrate Versatility

Rhetorical genres also enable professional writers to demonstrate their versatility. Because rhetorical genres help writers choose the form of their content, they help the writers organize different types of writing and write for many different situations, enabling writers to show that they can write for different contexts and audiences in various forms.

Genres are mediating tools, so they help professional writers mediate between content and the rhetorical situation (Frow 2007). Because they mediate, genres empower the professional writer to communicate the same content and ideas to different audiences and contexts.

Since genres allow professional writers to write effective communication that is meaningful for any audience, professional writers should be able to write in any genre once they understand the rhetorical situation. Genres are flexible, and as long as they understand the rhetorical situation, writers can also be flexible. So when professional writers demonstrate that they can create meaningful content for any audience and context, they show their employers and coworkers that they are versatile and adaptable to ever-changing communication situations.

Conclusion

The rhetorical genre theory provides a strong framework for professional writers. Understood rhetorically, genre is more than a tool for identifying types of communication; genres are communicative, mediative, dynamic, communal tools that the professional writer should use in his or her everyday work. Genres emerge as social responses to recurring rhetorical situations and help to define a community's communication. As such, professional writers should use

rhetorical genres to appropriately respond to a recurring situation within their community, regardless of whether that community is within their company or is comprised of their users.

Modern professional writers can use rhetorical genres to shape their communication and select the form their content should take. Writers can do this when they consider the rhetorical situation: the audience, context, and purpose. This strategy aligns with rhetorical purpose and genre theory and allows writers to narrow their scope and select the appropriate genre while still differentiating between situations.

Finally, professional writers can add value to their workplace by using rhetorical genres. Genres help writers create meaningful communication audiences instantly recognize and locate, and genres allow writers a unique way to demonstrate their ability to effectively communicate in many different forms.

The modern professional writing field is always adapting to fit the business world. With rhetorical genres, professional writers can equip themselves to address any situation that might arise in their ever-changing workplace.

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