

# FLOW

Foreign  
Language  
Opportunities  
*in* Writing

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## **GENRE APPROACH TO TEACHING FORMAL LETTER WRITING**

### **Abstract**

Writing in a foreign language is both complex and fascinating, whether viewed from the perspective of a teacher or a student. My teacher-interest in the writing skill stems from the fact that in my experience it is the most difficult skill to develop successfully. As a non-native user of English and a foreign-language student, on the other hand, I often feel that especially when writing in order to accomplish a specific goal, we have insufficient tools to write successfully. Transmitting information is easier than getting things done. Consequently, in this paper I concentrate on the genre which tends to be most disliked by both teachers and students – formal letters, with the specific focus on letters of complaint. It is this type of letters that each of us may need to write in real life. This type of a letter is interesting as the writer has to combine a number of skills. In order to write successfully it is not enough to master the use of grammar and lexis, a writer has to be aware of the cultural and social context in which the text will function. I believe the genre approach to teaching writing allows students to develop all sub-skills necessary to become proficient writers. In this paper attention will be first given to Common features of formal letters, then to a brief explanation of what genre approach is. The second half of the paper covers some of the of the major problems learners may encounter when writing formal letters (motivation, cultural and linguistic issues). The “problem” section is followed by a number of practical solutions.

### **1. Introduction**

Writing in a foreign language is both complex and fascinating, whether viewed from the perspective of a teacher or a student. My teacher-interest in the writing skill stems from the fact that in my experience it is the most difficult skill to develop successfully. As a non-native user of English and a foreign-language student, on the other hand, I often feel that especially when writing in order to accomplish a specific goal, we have insufficient tools to write successfully. Transmitting information is easier than getting things done. Consequently, in

this paper I concentrate on the genre which tends to be most disliked by both teachers and students – formal letters, with the specific focus on letters of complaint. It is this type of letters that each of us may need to write in real life. This type of a letter is interesting as the writer has to combine a number of skills. In order to write successfully it is not enough to master the use of grammar and lexis, a writer has to be aware of the cultural and social context in which the text will function. I believe the genre approach to teaching writing allows students to develop all sub-skills necessary to become proficient writers.

Writing is not only the graphic representation of sounds through letters, it is combining letters into words, words into sentences, sentences into a text. In order for a piece of writing to be good, it has to be both cohesive (grammatical, structured) and coherent (logical). “Cohesion is (...) a surface feature of texts, independent on the reader [whereas] Coherence (...) results from the interaction between the reader and the text” (Thornbury, 2005: 36). The second feature points to the importance of the reader – to write successfully students need to know the expectations of their audience.

To become good writers students need to possess four kinds of knowledge: of content (concepts), of context (in which the text will be read), of language system, and of the writing process (Hedge, 1988). In the case of writing a formal letter there are a number of common features which can serve students as guidelines.

## **2. Common features of formal letters**

By looking at the examples of three authentic formal letters of complaint we can notice several common features.

The first common feature is the organisation of the letter. In each we can notice the following sections: sender’s address, receiver’s address, date, salutation, body, sign off, sender’s name. Each section has its formal features, e.g. the sender’s address is written in the top right-hand corner of the letter, whereas the receiver’s is written on the left, below the sender’s address. The salutation and sign off depend on whether the name of the receiver is known to us or not. In the body, the first paragraph contains the reason for writing, the middle paragraphs contain justification and description of the situation, and the last paragraph expresses a demand for action.

The second common feature is the style in which the letters have been written. All use formal register. There are no contractions, no colloquialisms, no direct questions, nor informal punctuation, such as exclamation marks. Several

set phrases can be observed, such as *I am writing to complain about*. Sentences are complex and the use of passive voice is frequent.

It is quite apparent that formal letters are highly formulaic, and therefore one would think they should be fairly easy to produce for ESL students. Yet as everyone who has ever written a letter knows, writing a successful letter does not rely solely on following a common model.

### **3. What is the genre approach to writing?**

There are three main approaches to teaching writing: product, process and genre. The first one concentrates on the model and following set rules, the second one revolves around the writer and experimenting with language. The third one balances the attention paid to the writer and the reader, emphasising the importance of the context in which a text is created. I believe it is the genre approach that proves most beneficial for learners, allowing them not only to develop sub-skills, but also to understand the social context of texts. Such a holistic approach seems to be an ideal way of developing writing as a skill.

The most widely spread definition of genre is the one suggested by Swales (in Tribble, 1996: 46): “a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes”. This means that genre is a set of different conventionalised uses of language which are associated with a purpose of a writer. Similarly, Bakhtin (1996) defines genre as a structured type of utterance characteristic for a specific linguistic purpose. In this understanding formal letters form a specific genre.

Paltridge (2004) claims that the approach advocates teaching these genres which students need to master in order to be successful in different settings. Although a set list of most useful genres to all students cannot be compiled, teachers can predict that being able to produce formal letters is more useful for students than the ability to write movie reviews.

What is very distinctive about the genre approach is that it emphasises that “writing varies with the social context in which it is produced” (Badger, 2000: 155). To teach language efficiently the teacher needs to take into consideration language context in order to facilitate students’ to respond with appropriate genres. “People don’t just write, they write something to achieve some purpose: writing is a way of getting things done” (Hyland, 2003: 5). By concentrating on the purpose of the text, the reader and their schemata/expectations, learners are not reproducing a piece of writing according to set rules, they are producing a text which is embedded in the target language culture, adhering to different genre construction.

The first step in introducing students to a new genre is done by showing them several authentic texts belonging to the same genre. It is important that the texts are authentic as it is through their analysis that students get the insight into the culture of their target language, observing what is acceptable and what is expected, slowly growing to understand the recipient and their expectations. Only after this initial process can the students' attention be drawn to particular language forms. After sufficient amount of practice students can embark on production of their own text (Dudley-Evans, 1997, in Badger, 2000).

#### **4. Problems**

Learners struggle with the development of their writing skill mostly because of the lack of motivation, cultural differences, and linguistic problems.

##### **4.1. Motivation**

I have noticed that most of my students (who are EFL learners) do not want to write as they do not see any reason for it. Most of them believe writing to be a skill which is practised only to reinforce new lexical items, grammar; they think it is useful only for the purpose of examinations. They feel writing is a task imposed on them, and many treat writing as grammar exercises – adhering to rules and writing according to a model. Also the fact that writing is a skill which students learn in their first language at school often does not do any favours to developing the writing skill in EFL/ESL, as it is seen as a typical school activity, not related to real life. The problem increases when students are presented with an artificial model of a given type of writing and they are asked to imitate this text. As much as students might enjoy writing stories, where they need to be creative, writing formal letters is seen as an ultimate drudgery – not only is it seen as writing for writing's sake (as students often feel there is no real purpose for writing them), but also their formulaic nature, devoid of any creativity, makes writing not an enjoyable process.

##### **4.2. Cultural differences**

Genres and the means of creating them vary from culture to culture. In Portugal, for example, people do not organize their ideas into paragraphs. An interesting approach to the relationship between culture and the skill of writing has been

proposed by Kaplan (1966), who observed that “the thought patterns which speakers and readers of English appear to expect as an integral part of their communication is a sequence that is dominantly linear in its development” (Kaplan, 1966: p. 4), which means that a typical English paragraph follows either deductive or inductive reasoning, i.e. it either opens with a topic sentence and then presents ideas which support it or it begins with specific ideas and a more general conclusion follows. Having examined over 600 student essays written by native users of various languages, Kaplan generalized his observation in the form of ‘thought patterns’ typical for three different language groups: Semitic, Oriental and Romance. He claims that in Semitic the paragraph is built of a series of parallel constructions, the Oriental style tends to be indirect and the Romance languages are characterized by digressions. These different patterns may cause considerable difficulty to EFL/ESL learners, who can be predicted to have a tendency to transfer them into their writing in English.

Another culturally-bound problem is the degree to which a text is appropriate in a given context and situation. As Jolly (1984) noticed, learners of English tend to write over-aggressive letters of complaint which would not produce the desired response.

### **4.3. Linguistic problems**

In order to write, it is not enough to have the ideas and a plan. Learners need to have the tools to express their desired meaning. The firm rules governing the use of the required language in formal letters often cause frustration among students, as it is not enough to just write and convey meaning – the surface features are important too. Thus, the requirement of cohesion may also cause problems. Students who are used to communicating verbally, more than by writing, find writing limiting and dull, mostly because of the gaps in their knowledge of written discourse. Writing is not as spontaneous as speech is – it needs planning and preparing, it also does not have the devices we use in speech when observing our interlocutors’ reaction. As Byrne (1997: 4) notices, “in writing we have to compensate for the absence of these features: we have to keep the channel of communication open through our own efforts to ensure, both through our choice of sentence structure and by the way our sentences are linked together and sequenced, that the text we produce can be interpreted on its own”. Students very often lack the language resources to create a text which is both coherent and cohesive, which de-motivates them from attempting to write.

## 5. Solutions

In my experience the first step to making the development of the writing skill more attainable for students is to present them with a reason to write. As teachers we often underestimate the power of inner belief of usefulness. Especially in examination classes I have observed that students perceive writing as a task more than a skill – the only purpose for which they write is to pass an exam, and not to communicate. In developing writing skill it is very important that the students know what they can achieve through learning to write in a specific genre, and how useful it is to them in real life. I believe formal letters are particularly useful for students.

I always try to emphasise that the way in which we write may decide whether or not we get employed, get a scholarship, the information we need, the help we require, the compensation we request. It is very important that the students see that writing gets things done. One way in which I motivate students to write a cover letter is by showing them an authentic advertisement for a job and telling them that the person who gets a reply from the employer will get the highest grade. I create a new email address so that the students send their letters there. This activity introduces a fun, competitive spirit into the classroom and students treat writing very seriously. A similar approach can be used with other types of letters.

Once the students are made aware of the usefulness of a particular genre, it is crucial that they know the context in which their writing will take place. I always try to present background information. To introduce the subject of letters of complaint I show the students a short movie or photographs presenting a situation which happened, for example, in a restaurant. Students seem to especially enjoy those which include me - it helps them to treat the situation in a more personalised way. Burbidge (1996) suggests showing students the teacher's own mail – as it is rather unusual to share your own mail, the students attention is at its fullest. I use a similar technique when bring into class letters written by my friends.

Yet, writing is not just about writing, it is mostly about the reader. One needs to be aware of who the reader is going to be and what kind of expectations s/he holds. It is often difficult (in both real life and artificial situations, such as writing in class) to look at one's own writing as a reader sees it. In order to help students consider their audience, White and Arndt (1991) suggest providing students with several texts (newspaper articles, advertisements) and asking what audience the text is aimed at. This may well work for formal letters as well.

The problem of cultural differences can be overcome by providing students with authentic texts of a particular genre. This helps the students to see what is

accepted/expected of a particular genre, and how these texts are embedded in the target culture. With more advanced students I sometimes compare letters written by American and British writers, which provides broader perspective on cultural differences.

After the students have been introduced to the usefulness of a particular genre, the context in which it appears and the social function it has, they can embark on brainstorming the ideas, planning, drafting and editing. The process of writing is not an easy one, and students need to be guided through individual stages. This can be done in class through controlled practice. Course books such as *First Certificate Expert* (Bell 2003) guide the students through the different stages, indicating what they should do at each one. Students are first asked to answer some questions concerning the audience, purpose, and desired effect of a letter. Then they are asked to plan their letter paragraph by paragraph. Next, they are to think about the language they are going to use – what is appropriate and what is not – here an exercise on formal style is provided. The students are then directed to write a letter, and later on to edit and improve it. Practice in the process of writing is an important part of developing the writing skill and it does not take much time for the students to get used to the routine of this gradual approach. In my experience students at first rebel against this slow process and want to concentrate on the final product as soon as possible. If students are not convinced which way of writing is better, I ask them to write a text in both ways and then to compare.

Nearly always approaching writing in the gradual way proves to be the best for most students. Even with profound understanding of a genre, its context and function, the best ideas and a great plan a student cannot produce a good letter (or any piece of writing) without sufficient knowledge of the written discourse. Every course book and every book for teachers on how to teach writing provides a selection of exercises on different linguistic devices. Personally, I tend to practise elements of written discourse with students through games and competitions, as much in context as possible. The idea is to provide students with a variety of activities maintaining the students' interest.

## **6. Conclusion**

As often argued, the genre approach to teaching writing can be extremely beneficial. It gives students confidence based on the experience of authentic texts combined with the working knowledge of the structure of formal letters and the linguistic means to reach their goals.



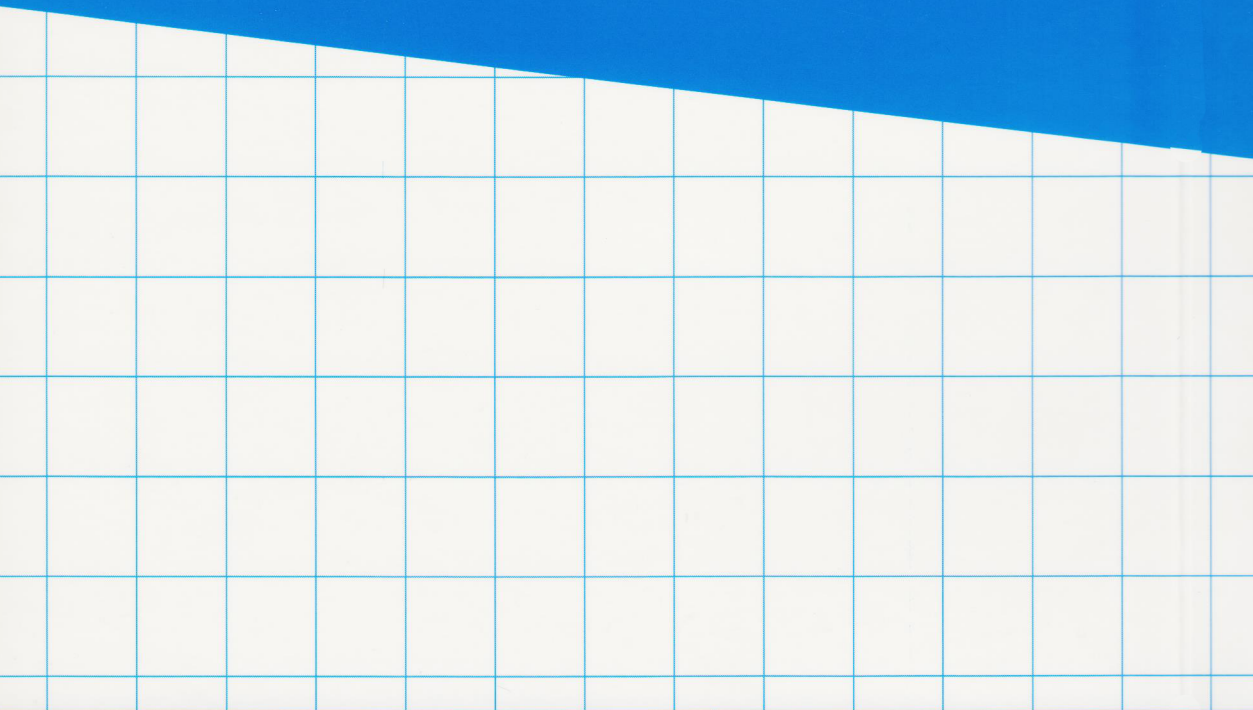
I believe that learners need to be acquainted with the target culture, target language, and the strategies of writing equally, in order to become proficient writers. The awareness of the norms functioning in different cultures/countries makes students more sensitive to the importance of writing in real-life situations. Obviously, in order to meet the challenge of cultural text specificity, a certain level of language proficiency needs to be reached. The functional knowledge of formulaic expressions as well as formal language is likely to increase the probability of reaching the desired effectiveness of the text. Although in the modern technological world we can notice a constant decrease of the importance of the written word, leading to possible questioning of the need for teaching writing at all, the skill of culturally-specific persuasive writing remains valid for reaching specific goals in the target language community.

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