

Teaching Genre WITH Purpose

Students should read and write in school for the same purposes for which people read and write outside school.

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Consider the last issue of *Educational Leadership* that you read. Now consider a story a friend told you in a recent e-mail. Some people think these two acts of reading require the same skills. But increasingly, we understand that readers use different processes to read different kinds, or genres, of text.

For example, when you picked up the journal, you probably consulted the table of contents; made use of headings; skimmed some sections; and read others carefully, even rereading them at times. With the story from a friend, you most likely did none of these things. Rather, you engaged in different processes, such as envisioning the setting and people involved in the story and seeking to understand how your friend feels about

the events that occurred. To a significant degree, your reading processes vary by genre. Reading is genre-specific (Duke & Roberts, 2010).

Standards and assessments seem to be increasingly concerned with genre. The common core state standards, for example, are organized, in part, by types of text, such as literature and informational text. Within these, the standards cite a range of text types (see fig. 1).

A word about writing: Although we tend to separate reading and writing in school, putting them in different places in the curriculum, reading in the world outside school is intricately wound up in writing. For example, after reading the article in *EL*, perhaps you revised a lesson plan or shot off a memo to the faculty in your school suggesting a new policy. After reading your friend's

story, you probably sent an e-mail in response. Reading and writing work together in sets to help us achieve things in our lives, so we address both here.

Different Genres, Different Processes

In U.S. schools, we too often teach reading and writing without attention to genre. We teach “the” writing process, even though the processes used in writing are considerably different for different kinds of text. (Consider a research paper, for example, as compared with a story about something that happened over the weekend.) We teach comprehension strategies generically, as though they apply in the same way to every type of text. Yet “predicting” means something quite different in a story (what will *happen* next?) than it means in an



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approach.¹ Instead of feeling stigmatized, the students seem excited, even proud, of attending. They are reading and writing informational text because they want or need to know something—not because the teacher told them to and not to earn a sticker. They are reading and writing for real-world purposes.

People used to think of genre as determined by the features of a text, but now we define genre primarily by the *purpose* of the text. According to Carolyn Miller (1984), genres arise to serve particular functions in particular situations, and the features of genres have arisen to help serve their function. For example, consider a recipe, whose purpose is to guide readers in preparing food in a given way. One of its features is a list of ingredients, which appears at the beginning of the recipe so that readers can see from the outset whether they have the ingredients on hand or need to put any missing ones on a shopping list.

We believe that students learn to read and write genres best when they use the genres and their features for the same reasons the genres and features arose in the first place, and there is some research support for this belief (for example, Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007).

Consider the following:

- In *narrative genres*, the primary purpose is to share and interpret experiences. Students might read history texts and visit historical landmarks as they

informational text (what will I *learn* next?). Some strategies are unique to specific types of text (see fig. 2).

Three Principles for All Genres

The three principles that follow can help teachers teach in a way that's sensitive to genre.

Principle 1: Engage students with reading and writing for real-world reasons.

In the hottest stretch of summer, a group of young boys pore over

informational texts that are considerably beyond their reading levels. The boys stretch to read these texts because they're on a mission: The local city zoo has asked them to develop guides for exhibits. The boys take seriously the responsibility to learn about the animals housed there and to share their learning with others.

This scene is unusual for many reasons. Rather than providing another six weeks of the same kind of literacy instruction that proved ineffective for these boys during the school year, this summer school has taken a fresh

research a historical-narrative book that they will collaboratively write, share with other schools, and sell through the Internet.

■ In *dramatic genres*, the primary purpose is to have characters come alive through conflicts and interactions. Students might carefully read and reread scripts for two short plays, highlighting certain lines, making notes in the margins, and making lists of props and costumes. This close reading will

prepare them to perform these plays for other classes in their school.

■ In *persuasive genres*, the primary purpose is to influence the target audience's ideas or behavior. Students might research caffeine's effects on the body and then write persuasive letters aimed at changing adults' coffee-drinking habits and submit these to a local newspaper.

■ In *informational genres*, the primary purpose is to convey information about

the natural or social world to people who want or need that information. Students could participate in the Books of Hope project (www.e-luminate.org) and write informational texts for students in Uganda who have access to few published texts.

■ In *procedural genres*, the primary purpose is to teach people how to do something they don't know how to do. Students might research and write a book on how to reuse common

FIGURE 1. Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Tables on Range of Text Types

Focal Grades	Genre	CCSS Description
K–5	Stories	Includes children's adventure stories, folktales, legends, fables, fantasy, realistic fiction, and myth
6–12		Includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels
K–5	Dramas	Includes staged dialogue and brief familiar scenes
6–12		Includes one-act and multi-act plays, both in written form and on film
K–5	Poetry	Includes nursery rhymes and the subgenres of the narrative poem, limerick, and free-verse poem
6–12		Includes the subgenres of narrative poems, lyrical poems, free-verse poems, sonnets, odes, ballads, and epics
K–5	Literary nonfiction and historical, scientific, and technical texts	Includes biographies and autobiographies; books about history, social studies, science, and the arts; technical texts, including directions, forms, and information displayed in graphs, charts, or maps; and digital sources on a range of topics
6–12		Includes the subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memoirs, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (including digital sources) written for a broad audience

Source: Adapted from *Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects* (p. 31, "Range of Text Types for K–5" and p. 57, "Range of Text Types for 6–12"), 2010. Retrieved from www.corestandards.org/the-standards



household items and then sell the book at a local home goods store, using the proceeds to start a recycling program at their school (Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2011).

To engage students in reading and writing for real-world reasons, ask yourself these questions:

- Do I engage students in reading or writing a type of text that people read and write *outside* school, as opposed to school-only texts, such as worksheets, textbooks, and five-paragraph essays?

- Do students read or write this text for the same purposes for which people read and write this genre outside school—not just because I told them to, I’m grading it, or I want them to practice?

(See Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2006/2007 for tools to use when observing classrooms with similar questions in mind.)

It might seem as though certain types of texts—for example, complex fiction and biographies—wouldn’t lend themselves to genre-with-purpose projects. However, we have seen teachers use fiction texts within purpose-driven genre projects. For example, one middle school teacher read a range of such texts with students in preparation for writing fiction narratives that were to be donated to a local pediatrician’s office. Another group of students read

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a range of fiction narrative texts and then wrote persuasive letters advocating for a particular text to be selected for a one-book, one-school initiative. A third teacher engaged middle school students in reading published biographies as they researched and wrote biographies about respected people of color in the community to be included in a book distributed to local schools.

Principle 2: Teach genre features and their functions.

Providing students with experience using genres and their features for real-world purposes is certainly an important step. But it’s also helpful to teach specific features. For example, research suggests that teaching young children specific story elements, such as character, setting, and problem, can be valuable (Baumann & Bergeron, 1993; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001).

Teaching genre features requires deeper understanding of genre than many of us developed in preservice or

inservice teacher education. Taking time to study and reflect on the features of genres you want your students to read and write can go a long way. You may recognize, for example, that *dramatic texts*—a set of genres referenced in the common core state standards 47 times!—often have protagonists (one or more characters with whom the reader identifies), as well as antagonists (those in opposition to the protagonists). They have beginning conflicts, climaxes, resolutions, dialogue as the majority of the text, cast lists, and stage directions in italics.

Procedural or how-to texts have different features (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). For example, they often make the final goal explicit in a goal statement or title (such as “How to Make a Story Quilt”) and include a list of materials needed in order of use. They organize the explanation in successive steps, using imperative verbs (for example *draw*, *cut*, *take*); and they often include graphics that demonstrate the various stages or show the final product. These texts may address

the reader directly (for example, “You will need . . .”), and they don’t generally use third-person pronouns, such as *he* or *she*. They frequently include headings and subheadings as well as measurement units, such as millimeters or feet. They usually end with an evaluation, a summary of anticipated results, or a scientific explanation. (For more information about genre features, see Duke, Caughlan, Juzwik, & Martin, 2011; Schleppegrell, 2004.)

Given the large number of features of any given genre, we certainly don’t recommend explicitly teaching every feature to every student. Some students may need more instruction in certain features than other students do. For example, you might notice that some students have difficulty following steps in a procedural text; they jump around or skip ahead to the “fun” steps. You might clarify for just that small group of students how authors use letters or numbers to indicate the proper sequence of steps.

Also, we recommend focusing on what the feature does for the reader. Instead of asking, “Did you use the index?” ask, “How did you find the information you were looking for in this book?” Instead of asking, “Did you include pictures to go with each step?” ask, “Did you include pictures that show the reader how to do each step?” Such questions can deepen learning.

Principle 3:

Teach genre-specific strategies.

Students need to be taught how to read different genres differently. Let’s look at approaches that work particularly well with narrative reading, informational reading, and persuasive reading.

Narrative reading. Joanna Williams and colleagues (1994, 2001) have developed a teaching approach—the *theme scheme*—for helping students

FIGURE 2. Examples of Genre-Specific Strategies	
Genres	Examples of Strategies
Narrative genres	Visualize the setting, characters, and events; evaluate the significance of reading.
Dramatic genres	Infer character appearance and personality; imagine the staging of a scene.
Persuasive genres	Identify the audience; weigh the quality of evidence.
Informational genres	Skim and scan; predict (what the author will tell you next).
Procedural genres	Gather or ensure you have the materials or ingredients needed; read steps in order, from beginning to end; pause frequently.

infer the theme or moral of a story, even when it’s implicit. Teachers can use this with both fiction and nonfiction narratives. It involves the following four-part framework:

- **Introduce the theme.** Consider what your students already know about the theme and what new ideas you should introduce.
- **Read the story.** As you read, stop frequently to pose questions and discuss the events with students.
- **Conduct a postreading discussion.** Focus students’ attention on the theme by asking, Was what happened good or bad—and why? (Williams, Hall, Lauer, & Lord, 2001).
- **Conclude the lesson.** Invite students to find the theme in a new text; have students generate examples of the theme from their life experiences; and stimulate reflection on the theme through an enrichment activity, such as drawing or dance.

Informational reading. Janette Klingner, Sharon Vaughn, and colleagues developed *collaborative strategic*

reading to help students read informational texts. Research supports the effectiveness of this strategy (Klingner, Vaughn, Arguelles, Hughes, & Leftwich, 2004; Klingner, Vaughn, Dimino, Schumm, & Bryant, 2001).

In collaborative strategic reading, teachers teach students to

- **Preview text.** Before students begin reading, the teacher asks them to think about what they already know and predict what they will learn.
- **Click and clunk.** As they read, students monitor their comprehension, spot-checking their understanding, using the word *click*, which means they got it, or *clunk*, which means that something wasn’t clear. They then use strategies such as rereading to fix the “clunks.”
- **Get the gist.** As they read, students find the key concepts, events, and people in the text, answering the question, What is the most important *who* or *what*?
- **Wrap up.** When they’ve finished reading, students reflect on their

learning and construct questions about the key concepts, events, and people in the text (Klingner, Vaughn, & Schumm, 1998).

Teachers introduce the model during whole-group instruction, explaining and modeling each strategy. Students take turns applying the four

Students organize their notes and use Cornell notes or graphic organizers to compare differing points of view (De La Paz, 2005).

Purpose at the Core

The *genre-with-purpose* approach goes beyond *genre study*, or learning genre fea-

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strategies as a class and then in small, teacher-facilitated groups in front of the class. Finally, students work in small, student-led groups. They take turns being the expert for each strategy, helping team members apply the strategy, while the teacher circulates to support each group as needed.


Persuasive reading. Susan De La Paz (2005) had middle school students prepare to write arguments by having them read, discuss, and take notes on readings portraying different points of view on historic events. Students who learned to read for point of view wrote longer and more convincing arguments than those in a control group who didn’t have this preparation.

Students deepen their understanding of point of view by learning how to

- *Identify each author or speaker and describe his or her argument.* Students define the speaker’s purpose, consider his or her reasons, and look for evidence of bias.

- *Compare details and look for conflicting views.* Students look for inconsistencies within a work, consider differences in how different authors describe people and events, consider what’s missing in each argument, and make inferences across sources.

- *Make careful notes on each source.*

tures for their own sake. Instead, it embeds genre instruction in a rich bed of purpose-driven activity that—in our experience—students and teachers alike find more engaging and instructive. We encourage you to put genre with purpose at the core of your curriculum. 

¹Kathryn Roberts developed the curriculum for the summer school program.

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