Reading and Writing Genre with Purpose in K–8 Classrooms
Nell K. Duke
Samantha Caughlan
Mary M. Juzwik
Michigan State University
Nicole M. Martin
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

------> Reading and Writing
GENRE

with Purpose
in K–8 Classrooms
Dedication

To my mentors, especially Vicki Purcell-Gates and P. David Pearson, with unending gratitude—NKD

To Jerry and Kate Caughlan, my models for engagement with the world—SC

For Julia Maudemarie Ferkany—MMF

To all the teachers in my life, including most importantly my parents and my mentors, Nell Duke, Mary Juzwik, Sam Caughlan, Carol Sue Englert, Doug Hartman, and Pat Edwards—NMM
# Contents

> Acknowledgments ix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Reading and Writing in a World of Varied Texts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sharing and Making Meaning of Experience: Narrative Genres</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Learning How and Teaching Others: Procedural Genres</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Developing and Communicating Expertise: Informational Genres</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Exploring Meaning Through Performance: Dramatic Genres</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Effecting Change: Persuasive Genres</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Project Planning Sheets</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A1: Sharing and Making Meaning of Experience (Narrative Genres)</td>
<td>172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A2: Learning How and Teaching Others (Procedural Genres)</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A3: Developing and Communicating Expertise (Informational Genres)</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A4: Exploring Meaning Through Performance (Dramatic Genres)</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A5: Effecting Change (Persuasive Genres)</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Project Steps Planning Sheet</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Related Books for Teachers</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References 179

Index 191
Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we thank the educators and students whose work is featured in this book. Their intellectual rigor, creativity, engagement in their work, and willingness to take risks allow theory and research to come alive.

We thank as well the many administrators who have supported these educators in their work, even when, perhaps especially when, it was outside the box. A special thanks to Kathy Peasley of the Grand Ledge School District, whose leadership was invaluable to this book.

The original inspiration for this book came from a conversation during a meeting of the Principal Investigators of the Literacy Achievement Research Center. We thank the Center and the Michigan State University Research Excellence Funds that have supported it.

We are grateful to editor Wendy Murray for her work on the early stages of this book—for having faith in us and the possibilities of a new book on genre. We thank editor Margaret LaRaia for seeing us through the later stages of the book's development—for her vision and skillful balance of push and patience. Thanks are also due to Alan Huisman, who often helped us to say in four words what we had said clumsily in fourteen. And Kate Montgomery deserves thanks for ensuring that we were always well taken care of. We have been blessed to work with such a powerhouse team of editors.

This book has many and varied graphical elements. We are so appreciative of the talent and care that Lisa Fowler has put to the task of designing the book. We are also grateful to the production team, led by Lynne Costa, for seeing our manuscript through to publication.

We thank marketing, now and in advance, for helping us sell the book on our terms.

Finally, we thank our families. Nell thanks Julia and Cooper for their inspiration and Dave for his understanding. Sam thanks Steve for keeping us on an even keel through yet another rewrite. Mary thanks Maudemarie for offering wondrous opportunities to witness narrative language development in action and Matt for forgiving her worsening housekeeping. Nicole thanks Jeff for his enthusiasm, willingness to listen, and tolerance for late meals and nights.

Nell
Samantha
Mary
Nicole
Credits continued from page iv

Excerpts from Common Core State Standards: © Copyright 2010. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers. All rights reserved.


Figure 2.8: Cartoon from The Cartoon Bank. Used by permission.

Figures 2.9, 2.11, and 2.12: Cover, text, and art from Why Do We Celebrate Evacuation Day? by students of Michael J. Perkins School, South Boston, MA. Reprinted by permission of the school.

Figure 2.10: Cover of The Three Little Pigs by James Marshall. Copyright © 1989 by James Marshall. Reprinted by permission of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. All rights reserved.

Figure 3.10: Rubric for board games provided by ReadWriteThink.org, a Thinkfinity website developed by the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and in partnership with the Verizon Foundation.

Figure 3.12: Cover, text, and art from iOPENERS Pattern Fun! Grade K by Amy Houts. Copyright © 2008 by Pearson Education, Inc., or its affiliates. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Figure 4.6: Text and art from iOPENERS Soccer Around the World Grade 2 by Sandra Widener. Copyright © 2008 by Pearson Education, Inc., or its affiliates. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Figure 4.6: Photographs and “Soccer Timeline” used by permission of DK Images.

Figure 6.3: Excerpts from “Save the Orangutans” website www.saveorangutan.bravehost.com/news_ and_projects.html. Used by permission.

Figures 6.4, 6.5, and 6.6: Cover, text, and art from iOPENERS Let’s Exercise! Grade K by Amy Houts. Copyright © 2008 by Pearson Education, Inc., or its affiliates. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
I spend a whole marking period on each genre, but even then my students don't seem to get it.

I teach genre features, but then all my students' writing sounds the same. They're just following a formula. Sometimes what they write doesn't even make sense.

I spend the whole year teaching the seven comprehension strategies. It's not working. Students know the strategies—they can name them, they can explain them—but they don't use them.

Our informational reading scores on our state test are low every year. I've tried everything. I'm out of ideas.
These are the kinds of comments we hear from teachers about their reading and writing instruction. Teachers and students alike grow bored in a writing workshop that leaves what students write largely up to them without specifying a purpose, genre, or audience. Teachers who do teach genre in the writing workshop often report it either doesn't stick or sticks so well that students’ writing becomes flat, formulaic, and uninspired. Teachers complain that their reading workshop doesn't engage the very students who most need help, or that they teach reading strategies—sometimes the same strategies students were taught the grade before—but find students don't apply these strategies during most of the reading they do. These problems can be addressed by approaching genre differently—with purpose.

**Teaching Genre with Purpose**

Above all, *teaching genre with purpose* means creating compelling, real-world purposes for students to use genres and then providing instruction in genre features and strategies to serve those purposes. Teaching students to write persuasive genres with purpose does not mean asking them to “pretend” that their school is considering requiring uniforms and then to write an “essay” about whether the school should or should not and why. Rather, teachers find a real issue facing the school (e.g., school funding), the community (e.g., a controversial development project), or the world (e.g., habitat destruction) on which students could write in a real persuasive genre (e.g., an online news-site editorial) to convince a real audience (e.g., readers of that news-site editorial page). Teachers teach characteristics of effective editorials to help students be more convincing for this specific purpose and audience in the short term. But students learn these characteristics better in the long term as well because they are using them to convince real readers.

The root cause of many of the problems reflected in the comments at the beginning of this chapter is that too many U.S. classrooms lack a colorful, compelling context for reading and writing. A pressurized atmosphere surrounding standards and testing has led teachers to feel they don't have time to plant their reading and writing instruction in a rich bed of purpose. Too often, students read a text because they are assigned to do so, not because they want, or even understand, what that text has to offer. Students write in a genre because it is assigned, not because they want to accomplish what that genre is well suited to do. Yet theory, research, and professional wisdom—indeed a long history of work by scholars and educators such as John Dewey, James Britton, Dorothy Heathcote, James Moffett, and Harold Rosen—all suggest that students learn better and more deeply when their learning is contextualized and genuinely motivated. The experience of teaching is also improved when the context of our teaching is more interesting and our students are more engaged. Teaching genre with purpose reinvigorates teaching.

Teaching genre with purpose is about replacing weaker practices with better ones. You’ll still teach students to write how-to text and comprehend informational
text, but you’ll do so differently and more effectively. In this approach, you apply five basic principles to any genre you teach:

1. Design compelling, communicatively meaningful environments.
2. Provide exposure and experience.
3. Explicitly teach genre features.
4. Explicitly teach genre-specific or genre-sensitive strategies.
5. Offer ongoing coaching and feedback.

This book shows how these principles come to life in reading and writing projects (often using several genres simultaneously) in a diverse group of K–8 classrooms. Some we have led ourselves, others we have helped develop, still others teachers have created on their own. Some are elaborate, others require little time and effort. All of them place top priority on reading, writing, speaking, or listening to many genres for real purposes; with this goal in place, all else follows.

### How Teachers Teach Genre with Purpose: A Glimpse into Some of the Projects We Share in This Book

- **Hattie Dornbush and her kindergartners created testimonials to convince preschoolers that they would love kindergarten (Chapter 6).**
- **Kate Roberts led the K–2 boys enrolled in a summer school program in writing animal guides for the local zoo (Chapter 4).**
- **Dawn Kennaugh and her fourth graders put on two plays to entertain their school (Chapter 5).**
- **Sheila Bell and her fifth graders created procedural texts to teach younger students how to keep their messy desks clean (Chapter 3).**
- **Carmela Rademacher and her K–8 English language learners created quilts and museum exhibits to share their family histories with others (Chapter 2).**

### Why Teach Genre with Purpose?

There are many reasons to teach genre with purpose. We focus here on three.

#### Our Natural Predisposition to Learn and Use Genres

Human beings are innately capable of, even predisposed to, learning genres. An infant learns how to play peekaboo long before she can say a single word. A toddler pretending to be Mommy sounds like Mommy. The three-year-old who scribble-wrote the two texts in Figure 1.1 identified the first as a shopping list, the second as a story! The four texts in Figure 1.2—a birthday list, a letter, a map, and a story
Page—one were created by a child just before she entered first grade. Look at all she knows about genre! She knows that lists help us remember and group, that they are typically columns of short, topically related entries. She understands that a letter is a means of communication from one person to another and often begins with a greeting, such as “Dear Mom,” followed by personal sentiments and then a closing. (She has even created stationery.) She understands that a map helps people locate or navigate. She has integrated the text and graphics of her map (typical for maps) but keeps the text and graphics on her “story page” largely separate (typical for stories).
Embedded in the practices of their culture, children readily observe patterns or regularities in language (or any symbol system). Educators need to capitalize on this predisposition and on students’ own cultural know-how by exposing even young children to a broad array of genres and making genre a driving force in our teaching.

**Advances in Genre Research and Theory**

Research and theory from groundbreaking scholars such as M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan (1985), Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), and William Hanks (1996) have led us to many insights about genre.

*Genres serve purposes.*

Every text is meant to do something for someone—an advertisement to convince us to buy something, a nutrition label to tell us what a food product contains. Largely gone are the days when the term *genre* was associated with identifying the forms of text, particularly literary forms—for example, the cinquain compared with the sonnet compared with the elegy (Dubrow 1982; Freedman & Medway 1994). Today many scholars see genres primarily as defined by their purposes, not by their forms or characteristics—which follow from the purpose (Paré & Smart 1994). We readily identify both facsimiles in Figure 1.3 as coupons because they share the same purpose, yet they have very few features in common.

*Genres are part of larger social conversations.*

Language, broadly defined, is inherently social. Genres develop and function to enable social interaction (Cole 1996). As such, they are *dialogic*—they arise from some past communications and are used to anticipate future responses (Bakhtin 1981). For example, teacher storytelling is a common genre in classroom talk. Stories teachers tell often respond to previous student comments and anticipate student responses. But they can also serve the broader purpose of socializing students to “the moral of the story.” And often that moral is tied to broader cultural values and beliefs (Juzwik 2009).

*Genres comprise all texts.*

Those who study genres closely now think of genres as not only literary texts but also texts we encounter at the grocery store, at the community center, in the science classroom, anywhere.

*Genres can be oral or visual.*

Speech genres (Bakhtin 1986) include such recurrent events as “show and tell,” the toast at a wedding, and the university lecture. Visual genres include graffiti symbols marking gang territory, find-the-hidden-whatever picture books (e.g., Where’s Waldo or the I Spy books), and sudoku puzzles. Today alphabetic print does not have a monopoly on genre.
Genres evolve within cultures.

Genres are continuously changing, and new genres are constantly emerging (Berkenkotter & Huckin 1995; Juzwik 2004; Martin, Christie & Rothery 1987). You may remember when cable news channels featured a talking head, with little or no text on the television screen. Viewers now expect news channels to present a running feed of breaking news stories along the bottom of the screen, include the time and weather in a set location, and display key points of the current news story to the left or right of the speaker. The print on cable news channels is even being parodied, as by The Colbert Report’s segment “The Word.” The genre has evolved right before our eyes.

Defining Genre

We define a genre as a recurring and recognizable communication with particular communicative purposes and particular features to accomplish those purposes.

Reading and writing are genre specific.

The traditional instructional premise is that teaching reading is, well, teaching reading. We may say it’s about teaching phonics, fluency, comprehension, but we don’t tease it out much beyond that. Similarly, teaching writing is viewed as teaching a process of composition that applies to any type of text. But research is now showing us that it is more accurate and true to these processes to slice and dice them more finely in our practice and in our curriculum. We need to think specifically about how to teach reading and writing procedural or how-to text, for example, and recognize that this is going to be different in many important ways from how we teach reading and writing of personal narratives. It’s not just “comprehension” or “composition” anymore. It’s comprehension of what for what and composition of what for what. We need to differentiate the teaching of reading and writing according to genre because:

- Readers and writers engage in different processes to different degrees when reading different kinds of text. (See Duke & Roberts 2010 for a review of the research.) To take a simple example, although we read most narrative text from beginning to end in order, we often read informational text selectively and nonlinearly, turning to the index first, for example, and then just to the one part of the text that addresses our question or meets our need. So when teaching students to read narrative text, we need to teach students to read linearly; when teaching students to read informational text, we need to teach students strategies to help them read nonlinearly.

- The same student can be much better at comprehending or composing one type of text than another. For example, many U.S. students show a stronger ability to comprehend various kinds of literary texts than informational texts, though this pattern is reversed in some other countries, and there is
parity in still others (Park 2008). And different factors predict students’ ability to read different genres—for example, world knowledge seems to be a stronger predictor of informational comprehension than of narrative comprehension (Best, Floyd & McNamara 2004). So we need to differentiate our instruction by genre. We may need to focus more energy or attention on particular genres for particular students and do different kinds of things to lay the groundwork for success in one genre versus another.

Different genres have different features. Researchers who study written language have identified many differences in the features of different genres. When these features are the subject of instruction, instruction needs to be genre specific. For example, although the pronunciation guide is an important feature for understanding informational genres (see Chapter 4), it rarely comes up in narrative genres. In contrast, there is a range of temporal transitions we want students to comprehend and use when writing narratives (e.g., no sooner had, suddenly, and the next day; see Chapter 2) that rarely come up in informational genres.

Some effective approaches to reading and writing are tailored to specific genres. For example, the “theme scheme” (see Chapter 2), which helps students identify the theme of a story, has been shown to improve narrative comprehension substantially. However, this approach is certainly not appropriate for improving comprehension of informational texts. Rather “collaborative strategic reading” (see Chapter 4) specifically improves comprehension of informational texts.

The Release of the Common Core State Standards

As this book goes to press, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have been adopted by forty-three states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The standards are “designed to be robust and relevant to the real world, reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers” (CCSS Initiative 2010b). They will inform or replace state standards, guide curricula, and drive test development for years to come. Genre is all over these standards.

Regarding reading, the document states, “To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly challenging literary and informational texts (CCSS Initiative 2010a, 10).” Specific text types and genres (text type is sometimes used as a broader term than genre, sometimes the two are used synonymously) are named for grades K–5 and for grades 6–12 reading:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of Text Types for K–5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students in K–5 apply the Reading standards to the following range of text types, with texts selected from a broad range of cultures and periods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literature</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stories</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes children’s adventure stories, folktales, legends, fables, fantasy, realistic fiction, and myth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range of Text Types for 6–12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students in grades 6–12 apply the Reading standards to the following range of text types, with texts selected from a broad range of cultures and periods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literature</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stories</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the area of writing, three of the ten college-and-career-readiness anchor standards focus specifically on genre:

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. (CCSS Initiative 2010a, p. 18)
A note adds: “These broad types of writing include many subgenres.” Two other writing anchor standards explicitly mention purpose and audience (which, as we explained earlier, is at the heart of modern views of genre). Referring to the entire set of anchor standards for writing, the Common Core State Standards contend that students must

learn to appreciate that a key purpose of writing is to communicate clearly to an external, sometimes unfamiliar audience, and . . . begin to adapt the form and content of their writing to accomplish a particular task and purpose. (2010a, p. 18)

This book is all about teaching students to do just that.

**Seven Ways Teaching Genre with Purpose Will Change Your Teaching**

1. **You’ll move away from stock assignments that don’t work.**

A genre-with-purpose perspective reveals critical problems with many assignments routinely used in schools. In Chapter 2 we take on the “summer vacation” assignment; in Chapter 3, the infamous “how to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich” activity. Here, let’s address “fifty-states reports.” As this assignment often goes, each student in the class is assigned to write a “report” on one of the fifty states. Sometimes students get to choose their state; sometimes they draw a name out of a hat or the like. The student then “researches” the state—from a number of perfectly good, already-published books on that state—and writes a report on the state to turn in to the teacher for a grade. In some cases, the report is also placed in the classroom library—along with the same books that informed the report in the first place—or taken home to share with parents whose interest in North Dakota is probably questionable at best.

Seen through a genre lens, this assignment is rife with problems. First, although it is meant to prompt students to write informational text, it is not based on the purpose of informational text, which is to convey information about the natural and social world (normally from one presumed to be more knowledgeable on the subject) to someone who wants or needs that information (Duke 2000; Purcell-Gates, Duke & Martineau 2007). The teacher has already read many years’ worth of reports on North Dakota, and there are already several good books on North Dakota sitting right there in the classroom, so there is little real need for the text the student is writing. Second, the label *report* is confusing at best. We would not call a trade book on North Dakota we found in our local library or bookstore a “report” on North Dakota. Calling the product a *report* signals that this situation and the text are different from those in the world at large (reports outside school are something quite different).
When you teach genre with purpose, you assign better projects than “fifty-states reports” (the projects described in Chapters 3 and 4 are compelling examples). Teaching genre with purpose, you create a situation in which your students have a purpose—beyond satisfying you—for conveying information on a specific topic to an audience for whom they genuinely want to explain or clarify the topic, and compared to whom they are more expert, using a genre—such as an informational magazine article—that exists in the real world, not just the classroom.

You’ll move beyond the constraints of “genre study.”

Some teachers, recognizing the importance of genre, have students spend a month studying a specific genre—myths or how-to texts, for example. Perhaps you are one of them. But if you are reading this book, something about this kind of teaching isn’t sitting right with you. Your instincts are right on. There are a number of dangers in approaching genre in this way:

- **Studying a genre a month, you tend to focus too much on form and features, not enough on purpose.** Just as we learn a foreign language best by using it, studying specific features as they help us communicate more effectively, we learn genres best when using them, studying specific features as they help us achieve our purposes. Genres have developed as a means to accomplish specific purposes and are best learned when they are being used to accomplish those purposes rather than simply being held up for “study.”

- **Studying a genre a month may not motivate and engage students.** Studying a particular genre feels, to many students, very “school-y.” Some students are sure to announce they “don’t like” whatever genre the class happens to be studying at the time. If, instead, students are working on projects that happen to use one or more of the genres for some larger appropriate purpose—as in the examples in this book—you’ll see greater levels of motivation and engagement.

- **Studying a genre a month may lead you to focus on too large a category.** It can be useful to group genres into larger categories defined by general purposes, such as to inform, to persuade, and so on (and many textbooks do). In this way of thinking, a newspaper article, a medical website, and a social studies textbook are all “informative texts,” and a newspaper editorial, a commercial website, and a book for teachers that recommends integrating controversy when teaching social studies are “persuasive texts.” However, defining genre this broadly erases important differences among various texts and their contexts. On the one hand, these subsets of texts do share the same general purpose (to inform or to persuade), but on the other hand, there may be important differences among their specific purposes (e.g., to inform a medical decision—the medical website—versus to inform students’ knowledge of their country—the social studies textbook), features, and contexts. The chapters in this book are named for these broader categories but the projects described in each chapter use more specific genres.
within the broader category, depending on the project’s purpose. This is very much linked to the genre-with-purpose perspective. In real life, we rarely say, “Hmm, I think I want to narrate this month,” or “I feel compelled to write a persuasive text.” But we might well be inspired to write an editorial about a particularly frustrating stand taken by a local politician.

**A single point in the year may not be time enough to learn deeply about the genre.** Teachers often complain that students enter their classroom without having previously learned to write informative or persuasive texts, but the students’ former teachers testify they’ve taught the persuasive essay or informative report. So maybe once a year is not enough. And once-a-year scheduling does not allow teachers and students to develop their knowledge of a genre during the year. Students may be better off, for example, learning how to write how-to genres at several points in the year as they grow and develop as writers. Or they may—especially in the early grades—learn more about myths by reading a myth related to each science concept they study (pourquoi tales, a type of myth, are stories developed to explain natural phenomena) rather than by reading many myths at one time disconnected from a larger curricular context.

**Focusing on a single genre at a time may prevent students from understanding that genres often act within systems or genre sets** (Bazerman 2004; DeVitt 1991; Prior 2009). People rarely use isolated genres in everyday life but typically conduct activities within, or through, or with the mediation of systems or sets of genres. For example, in campaigning for a change in our property tax assessment to lower our property taxes, we might read a chart of current assessed and taxable values of all properties on our block on the assessor’s website. We then use data from the chart as evidence as we craft a persuasive letter to the city assessor stating why our assessed value is too high relative to those of other properties. Finally, while talking with a friend we might tell the story of what a headache it was to change the taxable value of our home. Each of these specific genres is marshaled for the larger purpose of lowering our property taxes or sharing that experience. Each has particular features that serve the purpose of each particular communication. In real life, we combine genres to suit our purposes, moving from one to another as needed. We want students to see how genres can work together to accomplish larger purposes. Studying a genre a month too often has a myopic focus that crowds out other genres and their relationships to one another.

Genre is still front and center in this book but is learned not through genre study or genre-of-the-month but through projects, large and small, that employ one or more genres for real purposes.

### 3 You’ll motivate and engage students.

When you teach genre with purpose, many—sometimes all—students become wrapped up in that purpose. They can’t wait to send off the first printing of their text to purchasers around the community and country (Chapter 2), sell their book at the local home store (Chapter 3), offer zoogoers their animal guide (Chapter 4),
perform a comedy for parents and fellow students (Chapter 5), or persuade the preschoolers that kindergarten is safe and fun (Chapter 6).

It’s amazing how students’ motivation and engagement vary from one classroom to another, even when teachers are addressing essentially the same content. Ms. Edwards’ second graders were studying a unit on “pond life.” As many teachers before her have done, she took her students to a popular nature center regularly visited by many other school groups. Although having many strengths, this center had relatively few materials available for students. At Ms. Edwards’ suggestion, a nature center guide wrote the students a letter (quoted in Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall & Tower 2006/2007, 344):

Dear Boys and Girls,

I hope you enjoyed your visit to our pond. I enjoyed answering your many good questions about what lives in ponds. After you left, I thought about all of the other children who visit us and who also have many of the same questions. I thought it might be a good idea to have a brochure for them with answers to some of their questions. I am writing to ask if you would prepare a brochure like this. It could be called something like “Questions and Answers About Pond Life.” You could include some of your questions that you had before you visited us. If you write this, I will have many copies printed that we can put in the main office. That way, people can pick one up when they come or as they are leaving. I hope you can do this for us.

Sincerely,
Mr. Hernandez1

Students eagerly agreed to oblige. They did considerable research, both hands-on and in books, about life in ponds like that at the nature center. Then, using brochures from museums and other sites as models, they wrote a pond-life brochure, which was reproduced and made available for other students who visited the nature center.

Ms. Edwards designed a context in which students read and wrote informational genres for reasons authentic to this genre, and the students in this classroom looked different from those in many other classrooms studying pond life. They were more on task, surrounded themselves with more reading and writing materials, looked more interested in what they were doing, and appeared to be working harder. Students seem highly motivated in these kinds of reading and writing projects (Guthrie, McRae & Klauda 2007).

You’ll empower students with reasons to read and write better.

In previous research, Victoria Purcell-Gates and her colleagues (2007) found that second and third graders whose teachers conducted more activities like the one described above—with reading and writing purposes and texts similar to the

1. Ms. Edwards and Mr. Hernandez are pseudonyms.
purposes and texts for which those genres are read and written in the world outside school—better understood what they read and were better writers. Part of this probably stems from the context in which the learning took place—language is best learned as it is being used. But students also had a reason to write and read better. Students work harder to understand a text that they are going to explain to younger students, not simply assigned to read for themselves. Students are more concerned about the mechanics of their writing when they know it will be read by consumers or people in positions of power in a community rather than by just their teacher and classmates (who may already have entrenched notions that a student is a “bad speller” or the like). Lessons on strategies and genre features that traditionally end up as inert knowledge can be applied, deeply, when students have a compelling reason and context in which to do so.

5 You’ll move students away from cookie-cutter texts.

When teaching genre with purpose, you won’t ask students to follow lockstep formulas, such as specific text structures. You’ll rarely ask students to write a traditional five-paragraph theme; when you do, you’ll frame it as a genre to use strategically in high-stakes testing situations. Instead, you’ll encourage writers to borrow or “remix” features in unexpected and inventive ways, just as great professional writers do. You’ll encourage textual innovation because you recognize that genres are not mere formulas to be followed but rather resources to be drawn on, adapted, and sometimes reinvented for particular purposes and audiences.

Figure 3.5 (page 57) is a how-to text written by a group of fifth graders. Notice the many traditional features of how-to text, such as a section on materials needed and a set of numbered steps, but also observe the innovations these students developed in response to their audience (younger students in the school with messy desks), such as a “before-and-after” look at a desk (page 5 of Figure 3.5). Or consider the example in Chapter 2 of a narrative text in which student Julia Skinner writes, “Ah, the mall. A landmark that will forever stand in the hearts and wallets of Boulder County citizens.” Into a guide for tourists, Julia has injected the celebratory tone public officials take during ribbon-cutting ceremonies. This kind of textual innovation is not a genre violation but an innovation worth celebrating—a hallmark of good writing.

6 You’ll balance the genres you teach and ask your students to use.

Teaching genre with purpose, you’ll become sensitive to which genres you are (or are not) privileging in your curriculum.
Genres That Aren’t Getting Enough Attention

You might notice that your curriculum doesn’t include genres important in students’ worlds outside school—such as hypermedia informational text or game manuals—or in the adult world (e.g., proposals, plays). Or you might notice that texts you were categorizing as one genre really don’t fit the purposes typical of that genre.

Genres That Are Getting Too Much Attention

You may also find that some genres are getting too much attention—genres that exist only in school, such as essays, textbooks, worksheets, and spelling sentences. Or you might notice that some of the texts you have students write are hard to place in any genre—responses, meant only for you, to prompts such as “What would you do if you had a million dollars?” or “What is your favorite day of the week?”

What about the high-stakes-test essay? Shouldn’t I teach the compare/contrast essay when I know it is going to be on the state test in my grade?

If you are integrating writing into your curriculum using a genre framework, you can also teach the genre of the test essay and how to approach it: Analyze the prompt, quickly plan a response, signal by using topic sentences and transitions, use evidence and elaboration in the ways valued by the test-makers (Gere, Christenbury & Sassi’s Writing on Demand [2005] and Janet Angelillo’s Writing to the Prompt [2005] are both good guides). Teach your students to ace the test, but then go back to writing for more compelling purposes.

Genres That Are Especially Appealing

A genre lens might help you pick up on student preferences. For example, you might notice the popularity of self-help books, such as A Smart Girl’s Guide to Money: How to Make It, Save It, and Spend It (Holyoke 2006) or How to Do Homework Without Throwing Up (Romain 1997). Or you might notice that students love the opportunity to write procedural texts (students, so often the receivers of directions, love to be in the position of giving them).

You’ll help students use genres for their own purposes.

When children start school, getting “school” right and pleasing the teacher are highly motivating. As children mature, their interests and purposes turn ever more outside the classroom, and motivation becomes a bigger issue. School as a social and cultural space aligns in some ways with the purposes and practices of the outside world; in other ways it does not. For some students, school’s purposes no longer feel like their purposes. In current educational literature this is most often raised as an issue in teaching historically marginalized students (e.g., Delpit 1995;
Hicks 2001; Mahiri 1998), boys (e.g., Smith & Wilhelm 2002), and cyberteens (e.g., Arafeh & Levin 2003; Stone 2007). Fortunately, school’s purposes and students’ purposes can be aligned. Students’ desire to be a part of many worlds beyond school can be harnessed in developing their skills in academic and adult uses of reading and writing once this stops being defined as reading school textbooks and writing the five-paragraph essay—genres almost never seen outside schoolrooms. Students are engaged when they are writing stories that appeal to their peers, sharing information on topics on which they are experts, writing editorials about issues they care about, writing instructions for their favorite games, or organizing and participating in a poetry slam. Taking on the role of creative writer, dramatist, scientist, computer programmer, journalist, historian, or citizen gives students a glimpse of an adult world they are motivated to join. The purposes of the various genres and the features that enable them to be achieved become valued tools.

A classroom in which the purposes for activities, assignments, and projects are the students’ as well as the teacher’s and the school’s is a powerful place. Examples include: in science, keeping track of the actions required to keep a particular kind of plant alive; in social studies, interviewing grandparents to produce a record of what the fifties were really like; in language arts, directing one-act plays to perform in the lower grades; in health, researching the best snacks to put in the school vending machines—all these projects involve learning and mastering communicative genres that are important both in school and in real disciplinary and social settings outside school.

Here’s an example of one project in which students read and/or wrote at least ten different genres (listed in bold type) for their own purposes.

One day teacher Jeff Svehla read aloud Herb Shoveller’s true story, Ryan and Jimmy, and the Well in Africa That Brought Them Together (2005) (see Figure 1.4) to his fourth and fifth graders in El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz Academy. The students were mesmerized. They immediately started talking about ways they had helped others and discussed how other students had practiced advocacy. They read and discussed biographies of famous Americans who had worked to improve others’ lives. When Chantal worried that they didn’t have the power to make the kind of change Jimmy had made, Jeff asked what kinds of immediate differences the class could make. Michael suggested they could help their school and mentioned the “good deeds” they had already done that year. So the class decided to conduct surveys to learn how they might improve life at their school. Then they made two lists: Things We Can Change Right Now and Things to Think About Later. An area in need of improvement was, perhaps ironically, the reading and writing skills of students in the school. During a subsequent discussion about ways to accomplish this goal, Jeff introduced a project he’d read about online called One School, One Book, in which an entire school reads one particular book as a way of building community and an interest in books.

Students were immediately excited about the idea and read excerpts from an informational website about the project in small groups. They sent an email asking questions about the project. They planned the two essential tasks that had to be completed before they could bring the project to their school. First, they had to find
a book that supported the mission of their school—building awareness about and pride in the accomplishment of our nation's citizens, especially African Americans. Over the next several weeks, Jeff and his students read a number of biographies and pieces of historical fiction focused on African Americans, developed rubrics for judging the books, wrote reviews to share with the class, and passionately discussed the merits of the various texts until they reached a consensus: Carmen Agra Deedy's *14 Cows for America* (2009) (see Figure 1.5). As they worked, Jeff embedded district- and state-required instruction lessons about the text structure and features of historical fiction, for example. Second, the class wrote a proposal to the administration. Jeff taught a series of lessons on how to use writing to convince, and students took these lessons to heart as, in small groups, they developed sections of the proposal (a clear and compelling statement of the problem, for example). For several days, they planned and practiced their oral presentation to the administration. Then Jeff printed out copies of the written proposal and set up an appointment for the class to present their ideas to the principal and curriculum director. The last piece needed to bring the One School, One Book project to his school was in place.

A project like this prompts students to read, write, speak, and listen to genres for purposes that go well beyond “doing school,” satisfying the teacher, or performing well on a test. In this context, students learn so much more about genre than they do in more traditional curricula and thus improve their reading and writing skills. And they learn what genres can do for them and for the world around them. Seeing the social power of texts they have designed is nothing short of transformative.

**Five Principles for Teaching Genre with Purpose**

Drawing from the theory and practice of teaching genre, we have identified five guiding principles. Each principle is explained briefly below. They are revisited and elaborated on in Chapters 2 through 6, which describe how teachers have enacted these principles in real lessons and projects within their classrooms.

**| PRINCIPLE | Design compelling, communicatively meaningful environments. |
---|---|
Genres come from and are defined by specific rhetorical situations (Miller 1984). We teach genre best when we create those situations in our classrooms. Communicatively meaningful environments include audiences students really want to connect with and tasks that involve issues or topics they care about. When writing in compelling, communicatively meaningful environments, students:
- work harder
- read and write better
learn more about the genre
- are more inclined to apply what they are learning
- see more clearly the power of that genre, and literacy in general

**PRINCIPLE 2** Provide exposure and experience.

Reading and writing are largely genre specific. Being exposed to one genre for all the time in the world will not ensure that students are able to read or write a different genre well. They must be exposed to and have experience reading and writing each of the genres we want them to learn (Kamberelis 1999). Exposure and experience can be provided through:
- the classroom library
- classroom walls and other surfaces
- websites
- classroom experiences
- outside-of-school-time/space experiences

Model texts are powerful tools in developing speaking and writing (Dean 2008; Hillocks 2006). A study of the narrative writing of fifth graders shows that the higher quality the model, the greater the effect (Dressel 1990). Similarly, modeling comprehension processes through think-alouds appears to be a powerful tool for developing comprehension (Kucan & Beck 1997). Each chapter recommends specific texts to use with students and describes how teachers have used these texts to model specific reading and/or writing processes and strategies.

**PRINCIPLE 3** Explicitly teach genre features.

It often helps to teach genre features explicitly. For example, it is beneficial to teach lower-elementary students about specific story elements (Baumann & Bergeron 1993; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams & Baker 2001) and upper-elementary students about the features of informational text that help you find information (e.g., index, headings; Symons, MacLatchy-Gaudet, Stone & Reynolds 2001). More broadly, teaching genre features explicitly can also help develop students’ ability to think about text as text—what some call authors’ craft or metatextuality. When students are metatextual, they can think not just about the content of the text but about how the author or speaker is conveying his message: “The author really grabs your attention with that lead,” or “The picture helps show what a big problem it is,” or “The author should have told what that means.” We have heard these kinds of craft-based or metatextual comments even from young children. At the same time, it is easy to overrely on identifying and reproducing text features as an approach to genres, so we also discuss potential pitfalls.
Explicitly teach genre-specific or genre-sensitive strategies.

The reading comprehension and writing instruction in many classrooms is too general. Comprehension and writing strategies are often taught as though they apply equally to all texts or all strategies work equally well for most texts, but this is not the case. For example, although we do make predictions while reading both narrative and informational text, the process is quite different. With narrative text we typically predict what is going to happen next; with informational text we most likely predict what the author is going to teach or tell us about next. Similarly, for an expert writer, writing a personal narrative about a recent experience will most likely be fundamentally different from writing about a specific scientific topic. Yet we teach students “the” writing process, and often do not share the ways in which this process and the strategies used within it might differ by genre.

Offer ongoing coaching and feedback.

Time and again research demonstrates that more effective teachers spend more time coaching students, often in small groups—more time as the “guide on the side,” less time as the “sage on the stage” (e.g., Fleischer & Andrew-Vaughan 2009; Langer 2001; Taylor, Pearson, Clark & Walpole 2000). The remaining chapters in this book show how teachers provide ongoing coaching and feedback, even within the constraints of their busy classrooms and school days.

Making Teaching Genre with Purpose Work in Your Context

You may be worried about how you can make this kind of teaching work within the constraints of your particular situation. The concrete classroom examples, tools, and tips provided throughout the book will help a lot. But we’ll address a few issues to allay your initial concerns.

With so many programs and district mandates, I feel pressed for time as it is. How can I fit in this kind of teaching?

Many of the teachers featured in this book teach in schools with mandated curricula. They fit teaching genre with purpose in between other official requirements, looking for parts of their school day in which they have more freedom. Moreover, mandated curriculum can serve as a valuable resource. For example, Niki McGuire used the district’s mandated science unit on body systems to give her students the content knowledge required to write their books (see Chapter 4). By asking students to mine mandated materials for background information, you can meet requirements without sacrificing this teaching.
approach. It’s also a good idea to plan a short, smaller-scale project first, document students’ responses, and use this information to justify a larger, longer project. Backward mapping state standards and curricular goals may be especially important: Documenting that these standards and goals have been thoroughly met through alternative approaches can help you build a case for the value of this approach within the overall curriculum. As Regie Routman (2008) tells us, “Plan with the end in mind. Embed skills as a means to a worthwhile end” (53).

I’m overwhelmed at the prospect of planning projects like these. How can I manage the workload?

Many of the teachers whose projects we describe in this book initially felt overwhelmed. They mentioned that keeping track of the many details, trying things outside their comfort zone, and learning about genre were difficult, but they also said that the high levels of motivation and academic growth they saw in their students made it worth it. One teacher reminded us that like all her previous experiences learning new teaching techniques, the first project was challenging, but having walked through it, she felt much more knowledgeable and had several ideas about how to optimize her teaching during the second project. Here are several helpful ideas about managing genre-with-purpose instruction:

- Use the planning sheets in this book.
- Work with a colleague.
- Get your feet wet by starting with a small, short-term project.
- Begin by selecting your target audience and genre focus. Use these two central decisions to envision the final products and drive the rest of your planning.
- Cluster your planning activities. Work on establishing the outlet (e.g., asking the hardware store to sell students’ books, securing the fifth-grade teachers’ permission to present in their classrooms) and scheduling a tentative “distribution” date. Then gather examples of the final products and study them to get a sense of what students will need to learn and do. Sketch out a rough sequence of activities and use it as a continual revised blueprint for planning formal lessons. Finally, gather the resources that will be needed.
- Take it day by day, and feel free to go back and reteach something that didn’t go well or that needed additional attention.
- Listen to the students. They may offer new ideas about how to accomplish your instructional goal. Some students may even offer the same idea that you were hoping to advance anyway. The rest of the class will probably be more motivated by ideas from their peers, and you won’t have to do all the planning yourself.
- Save your lesson plans and in-process notes, so recreating the project (or a similar one) will be easier next year.
The teachers in my school are very committed to a traditional writing workshop. Most of them believe that students should be able to write whatever they want. I don’t think any of them are going to like the idea that all the students will be writing about the same topic for one specific purpose and audience.

We too are committed to process writing; however, research clearly supports structuring that process for students, especially struggling writers (Applebee 1986; Graham & Perin 2007; Hillocks 2006; Roberts & Wibbens 2010). We are less enthusiastic about the write-whatever-and-however-you-want-to approach seen in many classrooms, what Hillocks (1986) calls the “natural process” approach. Happily, it is possible to allow choice while still having students write for specific purposes and audiences. For example, in the zoo-animal guide project, students chose the animal they wrote about.

In a relevant study (Duke 2008), Nell and colleagues randomly assigned five pairs of similar first-grade teachers either to continue their traditional write-anything-you-want writing workshop or to implement project-based writing of informational text for specific purposes and audiences (much as described in Chapter 4)—not every day, but three days a week for four months. They collected prompted informational writing from the students at the end of this time and scored the writing without knowing whether it was from an experimental or a control classroom. Students in the project-based writing classrooms had better informational writing overall in terms of vocabulary, organization, text features, and voice, though their scores on writing mechanics were lower than the control group’s scores (the projects did not involve lessons in mechanics but the regular writing workshops’ often did). These results suggest there are many benefits to moving away from the write-anything-you-want-to-write model, at least some of the time.

How to Read the Rest of This Book

The next five chapters each focus on a compelling communicative purpose and a category of genres that meet this purpose:

Chapter 2: Sharing and Making Meaning of Experience: Narrative Genres
Chapter 3: Learning How and Teaching Others: Procedural Genres
Chapter 4: Developing and Communicating Expertise: Informational Genres
Chapter 5: Exploring Meaning Through Performance: Dramatic Genres
Chapter 6: Effecting Change: Persuasive Genres
Each chapter revisits our five principles, bringing them to life in real classrooms and projects. Each chapter describes several projects in which students read, write, speak, and/or listen in order to achieve these purposes. As in the One School, One Book project described earlier in this chapter—and as in life—these projects often involve a number of genres. The notion that different genres can be used together with powerful results is a theme of this book. That said, we foreground one overarching category of genres in each chapter, discussing a number of specific genres within that broader category. We end this book with an invitation. After reading this book, we hope that you’re inspired to create projects that incorporate multiple genres in substantial ways and we invite you to share those projects with us.

You Too Can Teach Genre with Purpose

The teachers whose work is featured in this book would be the first to tell you that they are not superhuman. They don't have endless time or boundless energy. They have many, many demands on their time outside school, as so many of us do, and they are subject to demanding state standards, as so many teachers are. But in the face of all this, they have made teaching genre with purpose work for them. Their students have had the opportunity to experience reading and writing instruction that exemplifies our five core principles and leads, we believe, to greater growth in knowledge, skill, and engagement. We describe these opportunities and recommend practices aligned with the five principles in hopes that you find a model of how to make your teaching of genre more effective, joyful, and purposeful.
Thank you for sampling this resource.

For more information or to purchase, please visit Heinemann by clicking the link below:


Use of this material is solely for individual, noncommercial use and is for informational purposes only.