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What Influences Writing?

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To improve writing, it is gainful to understand how a writer's purpose, conformation to genre, and consideration of audience affect the finished product. From the genres of linguistics, poetry explication, and the mystery novel, we will analyze three articles and consider which motivating factor has the greatest influence. M. M. Bakhtin's "*Problema Rechevykh Zhanrov*" ("The Problem of Speech Genres") explains the nature of utterances and language's realization in their form (Bakhtin 60); the writing is primarily influenced by purpose. David Penner's "A Comparison Between Robert Frost's 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep' and Roo Borson's 'Waterfront,'" analyses the imagery, form, and tone of two poems to reveal similar themes about "society's close-mindedness" (Penner 1); the writing is primarily influenced by conformation to genre. The opening chapter of John Grisham's The King of Torts describes the events surrounding the brutal and seemingly random murder of a young, inner-city, black man; the writing is primarily influenced by consideration of audience. We believe that, of purpose, audience, and genre, there is no one factor that is most influential, but rather, the primary influence is different for each article.

In "The Problem of Speech Genres," Bakhtin's conformation to genre is minimal, as he follows few conventional strategies found in linguistic papers. The article seems less like an academic treatise and more like a repository for his streaming, excited

thoughts. Transgressing established genres, however, is not a problem for Bakhtin, as he believes that since genres are also utterances, “they should be studied in their actual social contexts of use... [G]enre users [should] manipulate genres for particular rhetorical purposes” (Berkenkotter and Huckin 476). Furthermore, since Bakhtin’s purpose is to draft a broad set of concepts for use in a larger project (Emerson and Holquist), he forgoes linguistic convention in favour of intellectual experimentation. A clear outline that allows reader to anticipate the direction of the text is sorely missing, there are few headings to separate ideas, and points are often repeated and placed seemingly arbitrarily throughout the paper. The article does, however, follow some recognizable patterns, such as the use of evaluative argumentation, refutations, and proposals for action. As Bakhtin believes in the malleability of genres, and as it is essentially an unfinished utterance, the article does not demonstrate established genre conventions.

Many conscious levels of audience influence this paper - written between 1952 and 1953, probably as a response to Stalin's *Marxism and Questions of Linguistics* (Brandist). Ideological restrictions (real and assumed) force Bakhtin’s writing to stay within Socialist parameters, or to be stealthy enough to slip under any censor’s radar.¹ Major addressees include linguist contemporaries and theoretical opponents, such as Saussurean Structuralists whose “line of enquiry [can] not lead to a correct determination of the general linguistic nature of the utterance” (61). With recent translation (another level of audience), Bakhtin’s article continues to find new audiences in the West. According to his own theory, Bakhtin also addresses himself and the “indefinite, unconcretized *other*” (95). Bakhtin claims that utterances are also affected by others’ anticipated responses and the speakers’ own subsequent responses - interlocutive or

otherwise (95). However, even though “both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed” (95), another motivating factor takes precedence over audience.

Bakhtin’s purpose is the main influence in “The Problem of Speech Genres.” To edify that “[l]anguage is realized in the form of concrete utterances,” overrides all other objectives. Thus, Bakhtin describes their nature in great detail: utterances are made up of “thematic content, style, and compositional structure” (Bakhtin, 60); forms of utterances, called speech genres, are divided into primary genres, which take form in “unmediated speech communion” (62), and secondary genres, which are a compilation of primary genres; utterances reflect the speaker’s style (66), have “addressivity” (95), and are bounded by a “change of speaking subjects” (71); the “drive belts” of language (65), utterances are “link[s] (preceding and subsequent [94]) in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances” (69); finally, “expressive intonation (and emotion) belong(s) to the utterance and not to the word” (86) or “sentence” (90). Besides being an outline for a book, this dissertation also allows Bakhtin to hear questions and objections from colleagues. Bakhtin also contests other linguists’ philosophies, such as Vossler’s view of the utterance as an individual speech act, and Saussure’s view that “*langue*” is a self-contained, closed system (100), since they do not consider the active role of the listener or recognize the “essentially social nature of language” (Morris 25).² In this article, Bakhtin desires to define the limits of his scholarship by mentioning areas that still need research, such as the “classification of language styles” (64). As the nature of “The Problem of Speech Genres” is a uniquely styled platform that outlines Bakhtin’s ideas and suggestions for further research, the primary motivating factor is purpose.

In Penner's "A Comparison Between Robert Frost's 'Neither Out Far Nor In Deep' and Roo Borson's 'Waterfront,'" we can mention the effects of audience. Because the paper was written for an online course, common, in-class influences on writing were not a factor, such as the student's gleaning of the professor's format and style preferences. However, even for online courses, "school-sponsored writing is unique in terms of the shared knowledge between the student-writers and their target audience" (Segupta qtd. in Wong 31). This explains why Penner chooses not to define confusing terms in his essay, such as "iambic trimeter quatrain" and "enjambment" (Penner 2,3). Brevity, however, results in fewer discoveries for the writer; writing out ideas nurtures and clarifies thought. Penner compromises by appealing to his and the professor's mutual interest: both expect a concise account of abundant and applicable knowledge. Penner wants to use his paper as a reference; the professor wants easy-to-read evidence that the student suitably grasps the material. Even though the mark Penner receives depends solely on his target audience's appreciation, other motivating factors play greater roles in determining the text.

There are two types of purposes in this paper we can analyze without conjecture: those surrounding the paper, what Arthur Walzer calls "unique to the individual author" (118), and those within the paper, written for the "conventional public" (118).³ Penner's surrounding purposes included the desire to gain an appreciation for poetry, improve his analysis and writing skills, participate in the act of creation, have his work analysed by a professional, and learn about famous poets, poetry explication, Modern Languages Association format, and conventions of poetic discourse. Penner's purpose within the essay, opposite to Bakhtin, is to conform to the genre.⁴ With this in mind, he directs all

his points towards supporting his thesis. Penner reveals how poems with different imagery, forms and tones can have similar themes. He does this by citing the poets' "images charged with connotation" (3), and by contrasting Frost's fixed stanzas and "playful rhythm" (2) with Borson's "syntactical free verse" (3) and "hot irritation... spiked with pessimism" (3). He supports his analysis by using the language of the discourse community, setting up a balanced structure, and by quoting the poems, the poets, similarly themed poems written by the same poets, and the poetry anthology editor. In a rudimentary attempt at style, Penner peppers the essay with marine vocabulary, such as "On the surface" (1), and "the use of enjambment... floats the poem along" (3). Penner concludes his essay with a review of the similarities and differences in the poems, and how they both result in similar themes. It is clear that both types of purposes influence his text; however, the multitude of techniques necessary to successfully explicate and compare these poems cause Penner to conform most of his writing to genre specifications.

"Because genres are intimately linked to a discipline's methodology, they package information in ways that conform to a discipline's norms..." (Berkenkotter and Huckin 476). Poetry explication norms that appear in Penner's article include analysis of each poem's diction, stanza and line structure, meter, rhythm and imagery. Penner's subsequent description of how these parts contribute to the whole of the poems is also normative. What Penner specifically and necessarily does not do is "tie the poem to a chair with rope / and torture a confession out of it ("Introduction to Poetry" lines 13-14)⁵. Penner also follows academic essay conventions by using a traditional structure and by conforming to the Modern Languages Association format to cite references.

Conclusively, as Penner has a set purpose, his paper falls into a genre even before the first word is written. The ensuing words – no matter what they are – do not change the genre, but reflect how well the writer conforms to the generic conventions. As Penner attempts to conform each word properly (unlike Bakhtin), genre emerges as the most influential motivating factor.

In Grisham's chapter one of The King of Torts, the strict linear progression - a mystery genre hallmark - noticeably influences the narrative. Based on a process of revelation, the building text draws readers in and allows them to feel the characters' suspense. Ensuing chapters conventionally provide relief by answering all of the questions in the premise. To give the reader a base, the first part of the opening chapter is strictly factual (1-3); the second part provides psychological perspectives based on those facts (3-8). Smaller mysteries, such as the identity of the accused, are placed within larger mysteries, such as how the accused is linked to the man in the elevator. These hooks compel the reader forward. Also, by choosing a lacklustre, middle-class defence lawyer for a protagonist, and pitting him against unsavoury inner-city types, Grisham follows "the dialogic nature of many literary texts in the sense that [he] incorporate[s]... conflicting voices that represent different social classes" (Bakhtin qtd. in Abrams, 183). The genre conventions that Grisham chooses to follow structure his writing, but as they do not dictate the text to the extent of Penner's article, it is useful to consider how creating plot objectives, and writing to an audience become influential.

Purposes common to mystery writing, such as the need to quickly establish reader interest, characterization and a suspenseful plot, play an important role in the first chapter. To generate interest, Grisham compels the reader to envision a murder, a gun-

waving fugitive, and his handcuffed return to the crime scene - all in the first two pages. By taking advantage of the readers' preconceived images of setting, such as the alleyway by the liquor store (a scene not unlike the one in Spike Lee's Do the Right Thing [1989]), Grisham can expand on other elements more essential to the plot, such as characterization. Grisham spends much time building up the protagonist, giving him emotions, opinions and ambitions; he is an easily empathised with character, ripe for change. Readers' interest in Tequila Watson also strengthens when their natural inclinations to discount him are complicated when they imagine him pathetically "glanc[ing] around" the courtroom to see if "maybe someone was there for him" (Grisham 4; ch. 1).⁶ To build mystery, Grisham portrays the young suspect as the only character in the chapter without a speaking part. By closing the chapter with a mysterious individual surreptitiously watching the protagonist, the writer achieves a suspenseful plotline. The need to satisfy his purposes influences what Grisham writes about, but stops at causing him to consider the effect of every single word on the reader.

What the audience expects influences Grisham's writing the most. He clearly targets the light reader, as is evident from the fast style ("...the usual drug-related police record. No family to speak of. No address" [2; ch. 1]). Conforming to expectations, Grisham presents lucid narrative that does not cause the reader to unpack dense, intellectual ideas, or cope with complex characters and moral situations: "The shots that fired the bullets that entered Pumpkin's head were heard by no less than eight people" (1; ch. 1). Although most of Grisham's target audience is not connected to the legal profession, he includes a fair amount of juristic terminology. To bridge possible misunderstanding, he intelligibly incorporates the jargon with common prose: members

of the “court-appointed counsel” from the “Public Felony Branch” were usually “milling around in cheap suits and battered loafers” (5-6; ch. 1). Audience happiness as the number one influence, however, is not without its consequences: by portraying antithetical, but easily accepted, American “socio-cultural process[es]” in the interest of entertainment (Brandist), such as a white lawyer handling a case of black on black crime, a mother partly blaming her son’s murder on account of their broken home, and a young professional with a respectable income nevertheless feeling “ashamed” for what he has not achieved, Grisham perpetuates regressive stereotypes. In this sense, the effects of prioritizing audience satisfaction extend beyond the writer. More than by conforming to the many genres available to him, and more than by using the numerous tools necessary for story development, giving the audience what they want - in text, intrigue and typecast – results in Grisham’s most significant motivating factor.

Synchronously occurring influences blend together to create a text - which one emerges as the strongest motivating factor depends upon the article in question. For Bakhtin’s dissertation, it is purpose, for Penner’s academic essay, it is conformation to genre, and for Grisham’s chapter one in his mystery novel, it is consideration of audience. By synthesizing the results of our analysis, we can say that, in general, conformity to genre influences the structure of the paper, purpose influences the ideas within that structure, and consideration of audience affects how those ideas are written. We must further explore this type of *uber*-analysis. Our thesis also remains limited, in that we do not compare any works from the same genre. If the primary motivating factors in every dissertation, academic paper and entertainment piece prove to be similar, we would necessarily have to modify our thesis to say that a text’s main influence is genre.

Likewise, we must compare articles with similar purposes and similar considerations of audience. From our research, however, one thing is clear: by understanding the different factors that control the creation of text, writers can limit their influence. As Linda Flower says, “Good writers... guide their own creative processes” (qtd. in Coe 7).

Notes

¹ It is not implausible to consider phrases like “a speaker does not expect passive understanding that... only duplicates his idea in someone else’s mind” to be adverse to Stalin’s policing of the limits of divergent points of view (Bakhtin, Speech Genres 69).

² A similar purpose is evident in Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel”: “Our speech is filled to overflowing with other people’s words” (337).

³ Because we have a unique insight of Penner’s intentions, when we analyze his purposes within the text, we must keep in mind W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s concept of the “intentional fallacy” (Abrams, 126).

⁴ As in any vocation, one must learn the rules before knowing how they can be broke without repercussion.

⁵ This poem refers to Poet Laureate Billy Collins’ experience with high school students attempting to analyze poetry for the first time.

⁶ “Grisham often portrays unsavoury characters in a sympathetic light” in order to create “ambivalence in the reader” (Saunders).

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