CHAPTER 2

KNOWING WHERE YOU ARE: GENRE

THE TEXTUAL MARKING OF SITUATIONALITY AND ACTIVITY

The fundamental problem in developing a rhetoric of writing is characterizing the situationality of written texts because writing so easily travels through space and time. Writing's asset of transportability means the written text can leave behind the physical location and moment in time when it was produced. It also escapes the immediate social circumstances, relations, and activities to affect different locales and activities at a distance, but these new locations are not visible in the immediate physical environs in which the text is produced. These new situations and interactions have to be constructed imaginatively by the writer and signaled adequately enough in the text for the reader to reconstruct them.

Letters provide a strong case in point, for they overtly announce their spatiality, temporality, relation, and activity. They typically announce the writer and intended receiver, and they are frequently dated and marked with the place of origin. They are generally intended for immediate use upon receipt and then either discarded or filed away as a memory aid or record of the now past transaction. Furthermore in salutation and signature they often specify the particular relation between the corresponding parties (terms of honor in the greeting and commitments of loyalty in the signature, for example). These relationships may be further specified ("I write you in your capacity as executor of the estate of . . ."; "I appeal to you as a fellow parent . . .") and bonds reinforced ("I hope all is well with you") in the course of the letter. Even more the substance of the letter may narrate the occasion that prompts the letter, the situation the letter speaks to, and the particular action the letter aims to complete ("I write in application for the position advertised in . . ."; "it has been many months since we have seen each other, and my thoughts repeatedly turn to your welfare, especially now that we hear reports of devastation in your land"; "Mom, my bank account is tapped out, please send money.")

Because the letter contains so many markers of its sociality, allowing the reader mentally to locate him or herself in the social interaction, it early on became one of the primary genres of writing. Starting with the explicit sociality

of letters, many other written genres were able to find shape and meaning, until they became recognizable and recognized as distinctive forms—such as business reports, scientific journals, newspapers and magazines, and even financial instruments such as letters of credit, checks, and paper currency. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first rhetoric of writing concerned the writing of letters, the medieval *ars dictaminis* (Murphy, 1985). As a genre, or an increasingly distinctive set of genres, the letter asserts its place in the social world and helps formulate the sociality for many written documents (Bazerman, 1999b.)

Other early genres of writing relied on familiarity with well-known face-to-face oral performances, the memories of which were evoked by the written text. Special occasions, such as famous speeches, and everyday social events, such as the telling of tales, found their way onto the page, to be recreated by the reader. New texts could then be written drawing on the social understanding that accompanied such texts, both to prepare or script oral performance and to become new sorts of socio-literacy events, to be enacted during reading. Reading of play scripts, for example, is greatly enhanced if the reader has actually seen that play produced or even more, has rehearsed and performed the play—practices often invoked by teachers of dramatic literature. However, some texts such as some lyric poems or most philosophic treatises are written only to be read by the individual in isolation. Reading these texts requires entering into contemplative states of consciousness, oriented toward mental places abstracted from immediate physical circumstances to a world of ideas that seems to exist out of time.

Other uses for writing developed as part of well-structured activities, such as economic, legal, or governmental transactions. These provided strong contexts for the interpretation of texts and gave rise to regularized repetitive situations calling for similar utterances, producing familiar, recognizable genres that evoked relevant aspects of the entire activity system. For example, when you receive a monthly bill from the electric utility which is government regulated and taxed and you mail back a check with the bill stub, you rely on extensive institutional understanding of the government, the utility, the banking system, and your roles as a consumer, a householder, a citizen, and a financial agent. While much of this knowledge of these complex institutions remains in the background most of the time (especially now that this process is becoming automated through electronic billing directly to bank accounts), it is there to be invoked when relevant, such as when the utility sends you an unusually high bill or claims you have not been paying and threatens to cut off service.

These institutions with their regularized activities, themselves have been elaborated and extended through the genres of communication that have become

part of their constitution. Thus the activity of law depends on law libraries that contain legislation, commentaries, precedents, and legal journals. Each new case involves exchanges of letters, writs, subpoenas, briefs, opinions, and many other kinds of documents. Much of what it means to take legal action consists of reading and writing within specific domains of texts and text circulation. Government too is built on laws and court decisions, as well as bureaucratic regulations, reports, filings, and thousands of other documents—so much so that government has come to be characterized as being about "red tape"—that is, not the heroic commands from a charismatic leader but endless documents, at one time bound in bundles with red tape. Religion, personal counseling, insurance, truck driving and even farming are bound up with literate mediators that play crucial and regular roles within the activity. It has been said, in fact, that the key to successful farming is the keeping of records which allows one to reflect upon one's past practice and plan for the future.

During the European Renaissance printing and increased commerce created greater opportunities for sharing texts with more people across greater social and geographical boundaries. New forms of social, political, cultural, and economic organization proliferated and many new genres arose, speaking to particular needs and audiences, as well as creating markets for their own circulation. These genres were parts of the proliferation of the activities, relationships, and states of consciousness of modernity that the genres themselves in part made possible and brought into being.

Now citizens of all nations live in highly complicated literate worlds of many genres located within many activity and institutional systems that are national and global in scope—which is why ever higher levels of education are required to participate effectively in the institutions and practices of the contemporary world. As we experience the literate world, we come to recognize, almost as second nature, large numbers of genres and the situations that they carry with them. We do so almost unreflectively, responding imaginatively to the worlds they crystallize for us almost as soon as we see them. When we look at the newspaper (whether paper or digital) we immediately recognize stories of disasters or political conflict, as well as financial reports, movie reviews, and sports stories. We read these transparently as representations of each of the domains they report on. We become more consciously aware of genres when we meet new ones, and we need some orientation to what is going on. The first time we receive a particular kind of notice from the government we may understand the words, but we may not understand what offices and regulations are involved, what our responsibilities and obligations are, and what situation and interactions are being initiated. To understand the document we need to understand what is going on and what our part in these events are. Without

that understanding we lose our power to see what documentary systems we are being enlisted into and we lose the ability to assert our rights and needs. Being aware of genres and the associate systems helps us identify where we might write back, intervening to advance our own concerns and positions. Genres to help us think about the situation, the audience, what we might want to accomplish through the text, and what might be recognizable forms we may adopt.

CONVENTIONAL FORMS AND INHABITATIONS

Although we often recognize genres by overt features of form and content, genres are more than a series of conventions regulating form and content. As the previous account suggests, they embody understandings of situations, relationships, stances, moods, strategies, appropriate resources, goals and many other elements that define the activity and shape means of accomplishment. Genres are ways of doing things—and as such embody what is to be done and carry traces of the time and place in which such things are done, as well as the motives and actions carried out in those locales.

From the writer's perspective, locating writing within systems of communications, genres, and unfolding situations helps contend with the blank page problem—that is, what we put on the page has no definition until we give it some. Genre helps give purpose and form to what we write, as well as identifies expectations readers are likely to have. Genre may also help us know how our writing fits within historically evolving situations (see Chapter 3) and relates to previously written texts relevant to this activity system (see Chapter 4). Moreover, as the situation and dynamics take over our imagination, we can respond almost viscerally, in the way we respond to the presence of others. In writing a letter to the editor our words may spill out on the page with passion, in writing an apology our embarrassment may be palpable even though no other person is in front of us, and in writing a proposal for a new business we may become increasingly excited by the possibilities we are projecting. As we warm up to writing a letter to a friend, we remember particular experiences we shared, particular ongoing concerns, particular shared projects. As we start to enact the bonds of our friendship and develop an idea we know they will understand, we find the place our communication resides in and we start inhabiting it with what we are moved to transact there.

As we are caught up in the mentally projected situation, we start to create a presence that speaks to the situation. While filling out an application form for a fellowship, we begin to give shape to the self-presentational spot we are on, and craft an account of ourselves to fulfill the criteria the agency has set out, selecting

and highlighting particular personal resources we bring to the situation. The genre of application identifies for us a social space and a mandate that we take on if we decide to apply and want to maximize our chances for success. Our general knowledge about the application as a genre of self-presentation and the specific formal requirements of the application (guided by instructions about the kinds of information required with format and length constraints) elicit information from us and direct us to represent ourselves in a particular way. Insofar as we reflect rhetorically on this task, we recognize how we might fulfill this space in ways that will impress ourselves upon the reviewers and enter into their imagination as the kind of person with the kind of project they were looking for. We go beyond the basic requirements of the genre to inhabit it more robustly, distinguishing our application from the others in a way that will help the agency reviewers imagine we would be an excellent choice to receive their support or fill their position.

Each genre is embedded in a system of activity that we recognize and locate ourselves in, but each time we engage with a genre as writer or reader is also a particular moment in our lives, the lives of the respondents we meet over the text, and activity the systems we meet within. In this way the genre is attached to things that are both more extensive and more specific than we may understand the textual form in itself to be. Further, as we locate ourselves in the genred transaction that resides within the larger system, creating the space for a local moment, we are able to enter into the scene imaginatively, flexibly, creatively, and spontaneously, embodying ourselves in that imagined socially-recognizable space.

ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

The recognizable social spaces of genres have developed simultaneously with the activity systems they are part of and that they allow us to participate in. Activity systems are historically emerged networks of people and artifacts (such as buildings, machines, and products, as well as texts and files) that carry out typified kinds of work and other activities over extended periods, and that have developed ways of coordinating the work and attention of participants in ways that become familiar to all participants. That is, to operate successfully within each you have to become aware of their historically emerged way of doing what they do, and to coordinate your actions with those roles, procedures, regulations, and formats that direct activity within each. A game of baseball is an activity system and so is an amateur league which organizes interested players into teams, schedules a season of games, and maintains

records of competitive standings of teams and players. While some activity systems are smaller and some are larger, they each coordinate the distributed work of multiple participants by defining roles and forms of action. Some of the activity systems have immediately visible manifestations—you can see baseball players playing at different positions, handling and throwing the ball or attempting to hit it with a bat—in sequences and patterns explicable by a set of familiar rules and strategies, carrying out goals that are definable within the system. But some of the activity systems or their parts are less immediately visible, so that when watching a game you may not be much aware of the league, except perhaps for some paperwork that needs to be filed by the team coach. Yet the two teams would not be likely to show up on the same field at the same time unless a league official had made a schedule.

There are even less visible aspects, carried only by print, words, and records, kept in orderly ways in relation to the less symbolic elements of the activity system. At professional baseball games, fans hold scorecards, and reporters sit up in the press box. The manager in the dugout may have a notebook of statistics to support decisions. Similarly, in hospitals you may see doctors and nurses treating patients, but there are also offices where accounting and insurance records are kept and processed. There is a library with the scientific and technical literature. There are patient records kept at a station in each ward and a clipboard of vital signs at the foot of each bed. Each of the doctors in a personal office has an individual collection of literature and records—and access to more extensive electronic collections—as well as reading that serves to relax and inspirit them in their emotionally and physically draining work.

Some activity systems are so predominantly conceptual and textual that you can understand very little of them by looking at them. Walking through a university building, all you may see are people sitting alone in offices or together in classrooms, looking at books and computer screens or talking with each other. That tells you very little about the activity systems they are engaged in. To understand what is going on in a classroom, you need to understand what discipline it is part of and how the class fits into the course sequences outlined in the university and departmental requirements. Even more immediately, to understand the activity of a particular class you need to know the texts assigned, the schedule of lectures and discussions, reading and writing assignments, and exams. Once you have placed that day's class within all these systems, you might have some hope of understanding why and how that day's class unfolds in the forms it does.

Similarly, if you were to go into the professor's office and ask what he or she is doing staring at a computer screen, if the document is a memo for a faculty committee you may hear about complex bureaucratic procedures, the

entire system of university administration and faculty governance, the political struggles between faculty groups, or the current issues that are exercising people. Or if the professor is working on a paper you may hear about the particular scholarly issue at stake and the professor's current research, the specifics of the conferences and journals the work is being prepared for, or the empirical and interpretive practices, argumentative forms, and organization of the literature typical of the professor's discipline. Or if the professor is a in a cynical mood you will hear about the publication requirements for tenure and promotion.

TEXTS WITHIN ACTIVITY SYSTEMS

When you are writing or reading a text, it helps to know where that text fits in which activity system. Such knowledge helps you identify the likely reader or writer, the typical motives and actions at play, the constraints and resources, the stances and expectations. That knowledge may come from your ongoing embedded engagement or it may come from a more conscious analysis of the situation. For example, a student given a question to write on may be so caught up in the on-going discussion of the classroom and readings, she may spontaneously know what she wants to write and the form it needs to take to contribute to the class discussion. The embodied involvement the ongoing activity may have so shaped the writer's consciousness, that what she writes is germane and appropriate as a matter of course—though I have seen many students caught short by the differences between the dynamic of classroom discussion and the demands of a major written assignment. If the assignment asks for something more or different than what spontaneously flows from prior discussion, the student needs to think about both the prior discussion as setting the stage for the assignment and how the assignment changes the stage—by demanding a different kind of statement, by requiring new resources to be brought in, by changing the audience, or simply by shifting from oral to written mode. Even more, if she is confused by an assignment that seems not to flow directly from what has previously happened, it would help her to think about how the question relates to the instructor's goals for the course and expectations for the assignment, how it fits within the total syllabus of the term and the course evaluation system, how it draws on or shifts terms from the prior readings and discussions, and who else might read it from what stance. It also would help her to think about her own participation in the course and what thoughts and interests she has developed that the paper might advance.

For example, in an introductory political theory course, after several major theories have been read, lectured about, and interpreted, the instructor starts

asking comparative questions in discussion to help students see how different theories give support to different kinds of governmental activity. The instructor then assigns a paper for students to choose one governmental agency and see how two different theories might suggest different ways of carrying out that function and how they would in turn evaluate the current operations of the relevant government agency. The student might recognize that she is interested in understanding how certain government programs she values can be justified, but she might recognize that so far this term she has only been critical of theories presented. She may then recognize in this paper an opportunity to reconsider the theories examined in the course to find the positive initiatives buried in each—with reference to one program she favors. In short, in seeing the class as an activity system the student can get a completer picture of where her own writing fits in, what kind of piece in what kind of puzzle her own impulses might motivate her to create.

In a different kind of example, someone seeking reimbursement for large medical expenses from a major illness is more likely to be successful if he understands something about the organization of activities and document flows in his health insurance company. He will be helped in making effective decisions about which documents to file at what point using what keywords and how to coordinate with the doctor and hospitals if he understands which office receives his reimbursement forms; how that office relates to the records received from the medical providers; what decisions are made automatically by rules and are perhaps even computerized; how category codes of diagnoses, procedures and expenses might affect the reimbursement decisions; who makes decisions on more complex cases requiring individualized judgments and what information is used at what juncture in the process; how the application winds up in this individualized procedure; and so on, through the many complexities of the insurance company and its relation to health and governmental agencies. The points of intervention then become clearer along with the kinds of information, arguments, and actions that are likely to be effective at each juncture. Of course, ordinary patients usually have very little of such information, and that is why they may need advocates, just as we need advocates (another term for lawyer) to deal with the legal system.

Some activity systems are more tightly or bureaucratically bound than others, involving technical considerations of precise timing and form, while others have greater opportunity for flexible intervention at multiple points in somewhat novel form to accommodate local situations, mobilizing individual motives and resources. For example, journalistic publicity for a charitable organization may be sought in numerous ways. Offering a friendly reporter an interview and photo opportunity for a human-interest story around the

Christmas holidays, letters to the editor, announcements of national prizes, a lecture by a national celebrity—all could also generate positive publicity on the pages of the newspaper.

RECOGNIZING GENRES

As these examples suggest, communications tend to flow within activity systems in typical pathways, at typical moments, in typical forms, to enact typical intentions, carrying out familiar acts. Newspapers carry certain kinds of stories, in relation to events and the calendar, and people who hope to gain presence in the newspapers need to have their concerns reportable in one of the forms that newspapers publish. Students may get to share their developing understanding or views with their instructors, but only in certain formats—exams, papers, class discussions, perhaps individual discussion during office hours, or chance meetings at the campus coffee-bar if the professor is particularly accessible.

These typical actions carrying out stabilized familiar intentions in recognizable textual forms are those things we call genres. Genres are simultaneously categories of textual forms, forms of social interaction, and forms of cognitive recognition and shaping of motive and thought. That is, when a text suddenly appears before our eyes, comes to our desk, or arrives in our mailbox, we start categorizing it on the basis of certain textual features. It appears on a certain kind of paper—cheap newsprint folded into about twenty double-size, double-sided pages or a single sheet of plain white 81/2 X 11 office paper. It may have a generic heading—"memo" or "proposal"—or the name of a familiar newspaper. From this we start to form expectations of what it will contain, the kind of people it is from, what kind of relationship the writer has to us, what kind of stance the writer will take, how the parts should be arranged, where we should look for specific material, and most importantly why we would or would not be interested in it and what we would do with it. In short, we start to frame personal meaningfulness for our personal purposes and interactions.

We also form expectations and hypotheses about the document based on when and where it comes to us and our knowledge about the senders and our relationship to us. It is delivered to the doorstep of our home in the morning. It comes in the mail with a return address of a bank with which we have no current business. It arrives in our office inbox signed by the name of the CEO of our company. Large areas of our social knowledge are activated to work in tandem with what we find in the text to help us identify what the text is about and what kind of attention we might give it. Thus we enter into a mental conception of a social space for interaction within which we start to build relevant meanings,

evaluations, and stances. In recognizing the genre, we locate an orientation toward the text and the details we will find inscribed within it.

If there are gross violations of the expected interaction—if the CEO starts telling intimate confessions about his personal life, if the bank with which we do not do business sends us a statement of our account, if the newspaper has advanced physics equations on its front page—we may well wonder about what is going on. We wonder whether our boss's psychological life is in disarray, or we are a target of a financial fraud. On the other hand, we may find the answer in the way writers are deploying multiple and complex understandings of discourse to accomplish novel purposes in the documents. The CEO who regularly sends out messages to build support for his leadership may, when facing a scandal, attempt to maintain support by invoking genres of confession and contrition by baring his heart in the public space of the memo. The bank may be advertising through fictionalized projected statements of wealth if you were to take advantage of their services. The newspaper in attempting to report a major breakthrough may want to quote physical equations not so you can make calculations, but so you may look in wonder that such a strange phenomenon may be explained by such a simple equation. Multiple generic expectations are being combined in creative ways to evoke special meanings for each specific situation.

PERSONAL AND PUBLIC HISTORIES WITH GENRES

We learn about what to expect from genres through public and personal histories of experience with them. Similar looking documents have circulated in similar systems, available to many participants over a period of time, so that a range of people can come to recognize and orient toward these documents with similar understandings of what the documents are doing. Thus the writers can create similar texts with a reasonable expectation that those understandings will be evoked by the documents, particularly if the text is given all the physical appearances that make it recognizable as an exemplar of the genre. At the same time, our own repertoire of generic understandings is also a function of our personal experiences with these publicly available genres. Before beginning to work as a paralegal, we may have very limited sense of the documents that typically circulate in the legal system, but within a fairly rapid time by observing, and asking questions we can start to get a sense of the kinds of documents we need to work with. Additionally, prior experiences may make us familiar with a special repertoire we may recognize in a more refined way than our co-workers. If, for example, before working for a law firm we previously worked in

an insurance company, we might be specially skilled in understanding internal insurance company documents when they surface in the course of litigation.

Some genres are well known to almost all members of a culture and are identifiable by name—for examples in contemporary U.S. cultures most people are aware of personal thank you letters, autobiographical narratives, and newspaper editorials. Each of these genres is frequently taught in the middle grades of schooling, thereby assuring wide familiarity. But in those areas where we have special experience we may have a very refined set of generic recognitions, some of which we may articulate with names shared with other experts, but some may be entirely private recognitions. For example, auto insurance examiners may know that within the standard damage reports, reports of some kinds of typical damage from typical accidents don't need very much elaboration beyond a few stock phrases and reference to standard book values. However, if a custom car is involved there may be needed more extensive, novel narrative of damage and needed repair. Such special contingencies and situations might suggest to an experienced examiner various kinds of information and narratives that would meet the needs of the insurance company and address potential litigation. Some of these additional reports may be laid out in requirements, but some of them may simply be known through experience of many cases and reading many examples. Some variants may be entirely idiosyncratic and lack names as when an examiner over the years has learned that when he writes up certain kinds of cases in a certain way he runs into difficulties, but if he writes them up in slightly different way, they are never questioned. Similarly, in reading reports, he may sense that some of them give him a slightly funny feeling that tell him he needs to check out a particular aspect of the case, but these have no general public name and general recognizability.

There is no limit to the number of genres, nor can we say the term refers to document types of any generality, size, or level of public recognizability. The process of genre recognition occurs any time any person at any level of awareness makes some differentiation or particularization of texts on the basis of kind. Of course, it would be foolish in writing a document to a wide audience to rely on all the readers being familiar with an esoteric or personally idiosyncratic genre. On the other hand, if personal knowledge of that genre helps you frame a solution to a rhetorical problem that can be understood or interpreted in a more general way, then that unusual genre knowledge has served you well. A rock composer may use detailed knowledge of Bach's three-part inventions to provide harmonic richness to a song, which is hearable to most listeners simply as a love song with a bit of a classical sound. On the other hand, certain listeners of the same song may recognize the ironic invocation of folk gospel protest songs signaled by hortatory metaphoric lyrics, but set against the self-absorption

of teenage love ballads of the nineteen fifties backed by syrupy fake-classical orchestrations. One of the traditional roles of literary and artistic criticism has been, indeed, to unpack the complex play of types evoked by artistic works that achieve novel and complex effects.

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE WITH GENRES?

Through experience we learn about types of utterances that occur within certain types of circumstances, so that we become attuned to recognize them. Through experience we learn much about how those utterances go, how we might understand them, what makes them succeed and fail, and what their consequences might be. The first time we may need to write a letter of recommendation for a co-worker seeking a new job, we may be uncertain about the best things to write and how to present them. But as we come to read and write many such letters, we gain an extensive repertoire of strategies and elaborations to draw on, depending on her personal characteristics and accomplishments, the nature of the job she is applying for, and the particular situation and process of hiring, We also know what has captured our attention when reading such letters and what we have found implausible or irrelevant. We know what kinds of letters have helped people get jobs and which are ignored. This detailed strategic knowledge can be at any level of the rhetorical and linguistic realization—from what typeface looks authoritative and what phrases provide a sense of spontaneous authenticity, to what kind of details establish the depth of knowledge of the applicant. We not only know the genre, we know what we can say through the genre, and how the genre can be made to work.

Even more with experience working with the genre we become familiar with the variation of situations in which it can be used and the ways the genre can serve to transform or evolve any particular situation. If we know something about the organizations our friend is seeking work at, we can modify the letter to fit the particular hiring processes of the company, the corporate culture, their current needs, and what they look for in job candidates; we can particularize the presentation to fit the situation.

GENRES AS A FRAME FOR READING AND WRITING

Genres frame and locate the moment of writing, but do not obscure it within generalities. The genre identifies, we might say, a room and an event,

and implies some orientations, typical understandings, tools, and possible trajectories, but it does not tell us exactly how the event is going to unfold. That is up to the actual people working through their own particular interests and modes of existence in their own particular ways as they make the event real and particular. The act of writing then realizes the potentials of action in the generically shaped moment, a way of fulfilling intentions and goals that can be achieved within the genre.

If the generic space is crisply defined and compulsory at the moment, and we have visited such a space often, we enter the genre's habitat like a well-trained and well-prepared actor enters into a familiar role, with one's entire body and emotions, yet with a reflective distance because we know exactly what the role is and how to enact it. We can look at the drama unfolding even as we are totally within it. We may have written shopping lists a thousand times and have well developed procedures for searching the larder and projecting the week's food needs and menus of upcoming parties—nonetheless, we are still thoroughly within the activity of producing that shopping list, surveying the stale food in the refrigerator, uncertain about whether the milk is enough to get us through to next shopping without running out or going sour, and anxious about the dinner party that evening.

If the generic space is complex and unfamiliar, on the other hand, too much may be at play to see clearly where all our understandings, thoughts, and impulses are leading us; nonetheless, even fragmented understanding of the generic demands and possibilities of the emerging situation can help to direct and focus our confusions—it is a habitat that we can begin to recognize. As we recognize that the endangered community day care needs to gather the support of several key members of the City Council, and that each might be reached in a different way—one by narratives and personal testimony about the difference the center has made for local women, another by a detailed economic report of how the center has extended the work force of local small businesses, another by the personal evaluation of a long-time respected advisor, another by a description of the educational character of the children's activities—we start to get a better sense of what we are doing, and where we need to go to reach our long term goals. We may not be sure we understand exactly what is happening and how well our words are meeting the situation, but we can start to gather thoughts and channel energies into specific rhetorical tasks.

In either case, whether familiar and simple or unfamiliar and complex, this habitat becomes a space in which we start to have spontaneous thoughts in reaction to the particulars of the situation brought together in the interactive space. With the shopping list, as we remember we will have a vegetarian guest tonight, we realize we will need to improvise a dish using a tofu substitute for

the meat, and as we see more eggs in the refrigerator than expected, we may start to list other ingredients for the omelets that have just entered into the menu. Similarly, as we discover that the niece of a council member lives in the area served by the day care and sends her child there, we may think of inviting the niece to testify, but realizing that might seem too heavy-handed, we decide to ask women in situations similar to the niece to testify, perhaps even women the niece knows.

Thus as the situation emerges in the genred habitats, we come to populate it with the specifics of life that are far from rule determined or faceless. Even the simplest and most recurrent spaces can become complex and novel.

RECOGNIZABLE ASPECTS OF GENRE

Often people associate genres with specific textual features or conventions that signal presence of the genre or with particular textual patterns or constraints that come into play once you are in a genre. The genre of sonnet is constitutive of a formal kind of poem, regulated in formal features of number of lines, verse and rhyme patterns, meter, and (somewhat more flexibly) subject and stance. Patent applications are legally regulated in the content and by tradition and practice in some of their formal appearances. On the other hand, textbooks of different subjects, levels, and pedagogic philosophies and strategies may vary in formal appearances, but what is characteristic of them all is that the books are designed to fit into classroom practices.

Certainly some genres are highly regulated with many compulsory features. On income tax returns the taxpayer is highly compelled in what he or she must fill in on each line—name, total gross income, and so on. Even the specific answer is held accountable by many procedures and related documents so that the taxpayer cannot make up any number to place in the gross income space. A letter complaining about a product and seeking refund also must do a number of standard things to accomplish its ends: identify the product, the place and time of purchase, the defect, the warranty conditions, the address and identity of the writer, the specific required adjustment. Further, the letter of complaint is more likely of success if it follows a standard format of business letters. Yet a personal letter to a friend who works for a small company may accomplish the task without once breaking into formality, though it still requires all the necessary information. The friend will recognize the business letter that lies beneath and within the friendly note. On the other hand, a business letter that has all the formal markings and overt signs may fail because it is directed toward the wrong officer in the company. The company may in fact have intentionally

made it confusing to figure out who an unhappy customer should send the letter to as a way to evade responsibility.

Similarly, the opening phrase "Once upon a time, long ago . . ." signals many literary understandings about the text drawing on our familiarity with the genre of fairy tale. Yet such signaling hardly encompasses all we come to understand about a genre. Although a story may start out the path of a fairy tale, it may immediately overlay that with science fiction, as in the opening of the movie *Star Wars*— "Once upon a time, long ago, in a galaxy far away . . ." Many kinds of understandings are subsequently invoked as the movie creates its own place out of many worlds of literary narrative.

Given this range of features that may signal a genre and the range of aspects that might be then considered typical or constitutive of the genre, the best way to come to understand a genre is descriptive rather than by any prescriptive definition of necessary features. What features to describe as most characteristic of the genre cannot be determined outside of human use and practice. Rather we as analysts might best begin with what seems to form the similarity and what other people seem to orient toward in talking about similarity. We might consider what would surprise the genre users within the genre and how they would recognize the difference between neighboring similar genres. We should note what aspects of the genre clue the users into its nature, and what kind of assumptions or attitude they take for granted as part of the genre. We might then note what kinds of thoughts users mobilize when they recognize the genre, and what kinds of interactions they sense they are entering into with what kind of partners in what kind of institutional setting, in what situation and moment. That is, we need to take seriously the idea that genre is a psycho-social recognition category and not fixed in the form of the text. We should rather attempt to characterize what triggers the recognition and what users then recognize.

GENRES AS A POTENTIAL SPACE OF READING AND ITS TROUBLES

It is one thing to recognize a potential place of discursive activity within some ongoing interaction and activity system and even to start to construct an utterance that would start to carry forward the activity. It is quite another as writers to have our desired co-participants meet us in that place, to attend to the discourse at all, let alone with shared understanding. To put it bluntly, we cannot always get our desired readers to read what we have written, nor with the desired level of attention, nor with the spirit and attitude we hope for. They

may not want to come into the room we create, or at least through the door we hoped, and they may not remain long enough to understand in detail what we want to show them. On the other hand, they may stay around too long, poking into corners and under rugs we don't care to have them looking into.

We may write a poem and nobody will come visit it. Articles for publication have to be inviting enough and of the right sort for the editors and reviewers of the journal to grant space to reach the readers of the journal or magazine or newspaper. Even if our text gets published, it does not mean that readers will find the title and subject sufficiently inviting to do more than rush by the door, or step in for a quick look and then wander away. So the realization of the genre needs to come alive and deliver something of value to the readers who drop by with some expectations. It needs to be an attractive example of the genre—but what makes attractiveness may be very particular to the genre and to the specific case. In reports of stocks, signs of timeliness and accuracy and depth of judgment may convince investors to spend their time reading further. Readers of celebrity fan stories, however, may be looking for endearing personal details.

On the other hand, sometimes people are obligated within their activity system to attend to a text. Tax inspectors are bound by their conditions of employment to look over tax forms, and every U.S. income tax form now undergoes a preliminary computer inspection. So although we don't desire a close reading of those texts, we know there will be at least a certain level of reading, matching numbers on various filings. In fact one rhetorical aim we may have in filling out our forms is to fill out the form so as to not invite a deeper reading that might be triggered by some claims that would make the filing "interesting" or "suspect." That is we want a certain level of reading and no more. There are many situations, surprisingly, where we desire to satisfy a certain level of reading without inviting any deeper or different sets of reading. We might want our comments on a political candidate to be read as a common-sense evaluation of their character and accomplishments, without invoking the sense that we may be speaking from an ideological or partisan position. We may want to write a letter to a friend attempting to heal a bond without invoking the differences that caused the problem; we want the letter to be read as a gesture of pure friendship rather than as a continuing justification of our actions. We may want the reader of our historical essay to understand the narrative we construct out of the archival material, but not to question our archival methods; we may even make some statements indicating our standard professional technique so as to block that kind of suspicious reading. We want to control the multiplicity of reading such generic recognitions might invoke.

In some other circumstances, however, we might want to move the reader beyond an ordinary reading to another level. Students writing a paper for an

instructor usually want to write the essay to fit the generic expectations of the assignment to avoid a failing grade. However, some students may wish to do more than meet the generic requirements of the assignment to be judged acceptable or even receive an A—they seek to share their thinking and to engage the teacher in dialogue as a fellow intellectual or a personal mentor.

How others will take up our comments is ultimately beyond our control—there are limits to how much we can compel others to attend to our words and what kinds of interpretations they may pursue. Yet it is worth considering how to encourage readers to take up an invitation and how to keep them from seeing the text as an opportunity for quarrels and other unwanted interactions. This issue is explored more fully in Chapter 7 of the accompanying volume on the Interaction Order.

SO WHERE ARE WE? HAVE WE LEFT THE
MATERIAL WORLD BEHIND?

Having created a recognizable social discursive space for interaction within an activity system, and having made it inviting enough for others to join in the party—where does this party take place in relation to the daily, embodied world in which we live surrounded by other people, weather, animals, rocks, and buildings? Although we may meet people in the mental spaces created by genres, both writers and readers live in material social worlds of here and now (although the here and now of each may be quite distinct). If these texts influence people, we might reasonably assume they influence how people walk around and greet people in the material world—or do they live, as Auden claims of poetry, in the "valley where nothing happens"?

Some genres are directly operative within activity systems that move bodies and objects around. Shipment orders, bills of lading, and signable receipts put people and goods in trucks and hold the people accountable for delivering the goods to other people at certain times. Paperwork in numerous genres makes possible our system of transfer and movement of goods. In a corporation, each of the departments—production, sales, marketing, management, and legal—adds its own layers of paperwork to facilitate making goods and profits and holding personnel accountable to planned and monitored activities.

As police officers are often heard to complain, the apprehension, trial, conviction, incarceration, and even execution of criminals is surrounded by unending genres of paperwork. Despite the claims that this paperwork keeps the police and other law enforcers from doing their work, it is precisely this paperwork that ensures law enforcement is the work, rather than an unrestrained

and unaccountable exercise of state violence. These law enforcement genres certainly move bodies around, but in so doing have the potential of transforming those movements into a rule of law and bureaucratic efficiency—although not always consistently achieved. The inscriptions created within these genres then influence the status and life possibilities of each individual inscribed within that activity system—incarcerated felon or upstanding citizen.

People who work in such systems have some, though perhaps grumbling, knowledge of the values of the genres in their field. Some of the grumbling, in fact, may come from the participants knowing only too well how such documents make their actions and choices accountable. Making an account is the essence of making oneself accountable. In any event, people could not knowledgably and intelligently complete the various genres they are required to complete without some understanding of how these documents circulate and with what effect. A regular form of training in police and similar organizations is to raise neophytes' understanding of the consequences of the documents they create, so that they take them seriously and provide the kinds of information necessary for the operations of the rest of the activity system. The more nurses and doctors understand the kinds of things that can happen if they do not accurately update the patient's chart, the more they are likely to write what is likely to be needed.

Through such activity systems, not only are the material and bodily movements regulated, they are given meanings. Controlled violence becomes law and order. Buildings are built that in turn control the movement of people through halls and elevators and provide locales for interaction. But these buildings also become part of an educational or a corporate plan or an urban design. They are even given ideological meaning and consequences as classrooms are built on an open design or prisons built with panoptical effectiveness.

Educational research on the effectiveness of various arrangements of the classroom and penology research on the controllability and/or rehabilitative effectiveness of prison designs in turn may influence architectural documents which will then influence the future environments that people will live in. Studies in the sociology and psychology of education may influence arrangement of seating and the presence of various learning artifacts. Even more, ideas and research may transform people's self-understanding of what they are doing in situations, thereby influencing their behavior. Teachers may talk to students differently, gather them in different groupings, assign them different activities, provide different kinds of feedback and support on the basis of the research and theory that makes its way to teacher education programs, curricular designers, textbook makers, and individual teachers.

The genres of psychiatric theory, research, and taxonomies of disorders influence how clinicians interact with people who seek help and what categories they provide for patients' self-understanding. These texts influence what therapies are offered, what the precise course of treatment looks like, and the behavioral and emotional criteria by which clients and treatments will be evaluated. They also influence whom insurance companies will reimburse for what kinds of treatment. Through such means, the abstract work of psychological theory becomes embodied in peoples' lives.

Even the seemingly unworldly activity systems of literature can be traced back to middle-class people sitting in easy chairs during leisure hours, contemplating their lives, seeking extensions of their experience vicariously, or escaping daily woes by exercising fantasies. This is not even to speak of the entire industry and economics of literary publication, print, book sales, and cultural marketing that keep many people and objects on the move.

Genres are also held accountable in their own ways to embodied life, social activity, and other realms outside their boundaries. To carry out their work properly and without excessive failure producers of genred texts need to attend to the kinds of realities they inscribe and the kinds of realities that might catch them up short. Within a rule of law, police must have just cause and evidence for their actions, which they must be able to produce in courts and other sites of accountability. If they cannot produce the blood samples and ballistic tests that match the criminal to the crime, their work adds up to little and they may even lose public support. Excessive numbers of patient mortalities may lead regulators and the public to call into question hospital records that indicate no dire problem. A collapsed bridge calls into account all the reports, plans, contracts, and inspection reports that went into its construction and maintenance.

Newspapers are regularly evaluated by the readers and critics on the procedures by which they gather their stories and their care in substantiation. Professional journalists develop their standards of ethics by which they hold themselves accountable precisely so as to raise the public estimation of their work. Newspapers as well are held accountable by competition from other papers and news media, by interest groups and politicians trying to tell their side of the story, by courts and laws, and ultimately by historians. None of these processes creates an absolute accountability, but rather each provides a specific kind of challenge that will draw on different evidence, arguments, and questioning strategies. The newspapers must be able to adequately answer such challenges from all these directions by the way they gather news (so as to consider the positions of opposite sides, so as to avoid malicious slander, so

as to dig out facts faster than the competition and not to have been blatantly mistaken, so as in the long run to appear as a reasonable source for history, etc.).

Knowledge producing disciplines, similarly, each have procedures for holding its members accountable to evidence and experiences that are drawn on. In anticipation of being called into account, researchers will gather and inscribe evidence according to the accepted methods and standards of the field. Skeptical readers or readers of different experience, findings, and conviction may well demand an accounting or be able to provide persuasive contrary evidence. However, these forms of developing accountable evidence vary with the disciplines—gaining a sample of current dialect use through interview with a person deemed a local speaker and transcribing the recording according to current linguistic conventions has a very different relation to the material world than drilling a geologic core and running the components through a variety of chemical analytic tests. Each must then defend itself against different sorts of skeptical questions.

DISPLAYING THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF TEXTS' CREATION AND USE

Some texts overtly remind readers of the physical location of their purported creation, ("As I sit here in my prison cell considering the political conditions that . . ."; "This study was set in motion by certain practical problems regularly confronted by all teachers. . . ."; "I write this letter much agitated upon hearing of your impending risky venture . . ."), of the text's imagined circulation ("As this plea reaches out to people in all lands . . ."; "In the several days this letter takes to reach you . . ."), or of conditions of reception and use of this text ("Heed these words wisely as you set off in your adventures in car maintenance.") Texts often use an imaginative reconstruction of these sites of material writing, publication, and reading as tropes in their own arguments. Some genres even specify that conditions of production or use be represented within the texts to serve specific rhetorical functions, as the experimental report requires an account of the initiating scientific problem; of the method carried out in the laboratory; and of the actual laboratory happenings—all of which established the conditions and material for the writing of the report. Similarly, institutional reports often require accounts of the initiating problem and the procedures by which the report was produced. On the other end, some genres explicitly index the conditions of reading and use. For example, repair manuals for physical devices direct you toward locations and procedures to be immediately found on the object: "Note on the left front panel, just beneath the display labeled

'distortion' is a circular dial. As you turn this dial clockwise, when the indicator line passes the vertical position, you will notice a slight, brief click. This click enables you to locate the base position."

Even without these explicit indicators, however, each text has specific conditions of production, circulation, and use. Our perception of these conditions influences our understanding of the character and force of the text. In writing the text we usually are only too aware of the conditions we write under—our limited resources, our wandering attention, our slightly chilly room, our boss breathing down our neck. But at the same time those conditions are transformed by the ideological and social nature of the genre. We may be sitting at our desk, but that desk is enlisted into a hierarchical and competitive world of corporate activity, into an evaluative world of an academic course we are taking, or into the communal work of encouraging friends who are starting an environmental organization.

Our texts are shaped by the social ideological worlds they are produced for, and those same worlds are likely to define the distribution and circulation of the texts. The corporate document is cycled up the organization, to be transformed by managers who combine it with information from other documents, to be used in particular meetings as a warrant for further actions. The classroom essay is placed on the professor's desk to be marked and returned. The access of other people to that classroom assignment will be limited unless the professor spells out particular procedures of group work or publication as part of the educational experience of the class. The shopping list accompanies us to the supermarket and then winds up in the wastebasket.

The conditions of use are equally generically shaped by the documents that help shape them. The corporate memo is to be read by a subordinate to identify the procedures for carrying out an assignment. Another researcher reads our research reports as part of a literature search while contemplating a new research project, or assigns it to a graduate seminar for them to learn the literature of the field. Within each of these concrete settings, the documents we write add particular meanings, representations, and actions to carry the activities along. Through filling virtual spaces of interaction by our written genres we create meanings that influence others. Our texts become social facts in their worlds, creating acts out of language. Rhetoric is the art of understanding how that creation of meaning works, so we a can make meanings that work better for human action.