

Genre analysis - letters to the editor essay

[Countries, United States](#)



Introduction

For the purposes of this genre analysis, I chose to examine the letter to the editor as a genre of writing. The concept of letters to the editor has always fascinated me; I have a tremendous amount of respect for those who follow news and editorial stories, and have a rebuttal or show of support for them. It is an interesting and fascinating way for people to express themselves and engage in a dialogue with those who provide them with their information and insight. It is for this purpose that I examine the style, art and purpose of letters to the editor.

In order to collect the data I needed for my genre analysis, I need look no further than my own local magazine stand. As letters to the editor are frequently found in newspapers and magazines, I found many letters to the editor in copies of The Boston Globe, Newsweek, The Chicago Tribune, and others. Finding letters to the editor in niche magazines remained very easy as well; a copy of the gaming magazine Games Informer yielded many letters to the editor for reference.

In terms of the genre itself, the purpose of the genre is to portray a point of view either agreeing with or opposing a news story or an editorial found in the newspaper or magazine in which it is printed. The genre is typified by a declaration of the stance of the writer in response to the editorial in question, as well as further comment on the subject at hand. In many political or debate-based stances, action is called for by the readers of the letter in support of the writer's stance. Sometimes, errors in the editorial will be pointed out and corrected. This genre is meant to be enjoyed by the

readers of the magazine or newspaper in question, and is available for anyone to participate in - anyone can write a letter to the editor with the reasonable chance for publication.

Analysis

For a typical letter to the editor, the author starts by referencing the date and subject of the editorial they are responding to, an example being Simon's " In " Gingrich Suggests a Reversal of Mideast Policy" (news article, Dec. 10)," as an opener for most letters to the editor. Often, a description of the author's age and demographic are then given, to relate the disposition of the author. The author then declares their agreement with (or opposition to) the editorial in question, and proceeds to explain the reasons why. Often, the author will " urge" or " encourage" the reader or the editor to check out other sources of information, such as books or websites, to become more enlightened on the subject at hand. The average letter to the editor can last anywhere from one paragraph to two columns' worth of page time.

There are few hard and fast rules, or 'moves, 'for a letter to the editor; some letters can be merely short, inflammatory statements or political commentary. For example, one Chicago Tribune letter likens a University of Chicago study about human empathy in rats to Illinois politicians (King, 2011). The entire letter is two sentences long; this demonstrates that the length or depth of content in a letter to the editor is left entirely up to the author. In essence, a letter to the editor, apart from mentioning the specific story that it is referring to in the beginning, can include any kind of response of any length.

Recreate the genre:

No 'English Only'

In your Dec. 11 editorial "Should English Be the Law?" you stated that it was necessary for English to become the official language of the United States of America. I found myself disagreeing wholeheartedly with your perspective that English Only legislature should be put into effect in local, state and federal governments. Not only is that sort of perspective very shortsighted, but I thought it incredibly insulting to the large groups of minorities living here, for whom English is not their first language (if they know it at all). The founding of this great country did not call for English to be the sole language of the people; in fact, the great American 'experiment' comes from the fact that we have so many people coming here from all different walks of life. Their cultures meld with ours, and in so doing we are a richer melting pot of cultures than we were before. An important part of these cultures is language; often, unique and complex cultural attributes cannot be conveyed but through the native language of that culture.

That being said, many of the arguments for English Only legislation seem, to me, to stem from fear of immigration, specifically that of Hispanic immigration. I sincerely urge the editor to reconsider his position on making English the official language of the United States, and consider the millions of minorities living in this country - specifically, how they are meant to live in their home country when it no longer recognizes their native language.

Reflection

As I created this example of a letter to the editor, several things went through my mind. For one, in order to create a typical letter to the editor, I needed an original article to write about. I then imagined an op-ed piece that explored the idea of making English the official language of America. As a result, I then typed up a rebuttal in an active and passionate response to it. I made sure to reference the date and title of the fictional article, to give my letter to the editor context. I made sure to summarize the content of the editorial, before clearly stating my opposition to the ideas contained within it. My reasoning was then spelled out in clear, but informal prose. I then finished off the letter to the editor with a call to action, urging the editor to reverse or reconsider their position.

Since the letter to the editor is such a loose format, I felt free to express my opinions without feeling myself to be restricted to set rules. After all, as previously mentioned, some letters to the editor are merely a one-sentence response to an article; that response may even only be tangential to the content of the editorial. The genre itself is merely meant to be a springboard for debate, no matter how uninformed or informed; apart from its statement of purpose and identification of context, there are few set rules for content that are typical of every letter to the editor.

Over the course of this semester, this class has taught me a great many things about the varying facets of research, writing and reading, which are important to know in my future as an English speaker and writer. As an ESL student, these tasks can often be very difficult for me; I often found myself

very confused when I began my work learning English as a second language. However, this course has allowed me to pick up quite a few useful skills, which I think will come in handy as I continue my education. After this course, I feel as though the importance of recognizing genre is a vital facet to understanding the English language and how it is used; however, I feel as though more work could go into the explanation/execution of synthesis papers, as well as their application in a practical setting.

Of this course, the thing I am glad to learn the most about is the use and application of genre in practical English writing. In my genre analyses of summaries, blurbs and letters to the editor, I have learned a great deal about the myriad ways in which the English language is used. In the case of blurbs, specific words are used in certain ways to provide a short advertisement for products; this is an absolutely vital skill to understand, as products pervade and fill Western culture (as with most other cultures). Knowing exactly what effect a blurb has on my opinion or perception of a product is important, and this course has helped me understand that.

Furthermore, this most recent examination of the genre of letters to the editor shows me how involved English speakers and writers can be in their media, engaging in dialogue with the people who provide them with news and information. By comprehending the 'moves' and specific language often used by blurbs and letters to the editor, I can see how to use the English language to effectively communicate.

While this aspect of the course (and most others) have proven extremely helpful, there is one section of the course I am still somewhat unsure on -

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synthesis papers. I believe I have the basic concept of them down - picking a topic, and assembling/summarizing the relevant literature on that topic - I think the nuances are somewhat escaping me. I know that, in my own assignment, I failed to come up with a thesis statement or an argument, something which I was completely unaware I had to do at the time. For me, a synthesis paper simply meant collecting what was known about a subject. Instead, there are elements of an argumentative paper to the assignment as well - that had confused me. Though I feel I am clearer on that point now, that aspect of the paper was lost on me in my first draft.

Furthermore, I feel greater attention could be paid on the practical application of a synthesis paper to everyday life. While I am sure that they are important in scientific pursuits and things like that, it does not seem to have the cultural significance or common nature of a letter to the editor, or a blurb. Those two things are seen by everyone in nearly all contexts; most people will read the back of a DVD cover, or the op-ed section of a newspaper. However, not as many people will read or comprehend a synthesis paper, it seems. I know that they are important in some fields, but I feel it should be made clearer exactly how a synthesis paper will be used to further our understanding of the English language.

With these good and bad things sorted out, my overall experiences throughout the course of the semester could be viewed as extremely positive. I feel as though I learned a lot - not only about the English language as a whole, but how and why it is used the way it is. The smaller assignments were extremely helpful, like the revision portfolio. That assignment

permitted me to go back and see, with the help of the professor, what I was doing wrong and what could have been improved. I then had the opportunity to make it better and see if I knew how; when I was given better grades after the revision, my confidence in my English skills was reinforced.

Confidence is likely the biggest aspect I will take from this course. Not only am I confident that I can use the English language to great effect, I know what language to use in which contexts to gain the greatest effect. While I would still like to know what role synthesis papers play in the majority of English-speaking culture, I still recognize just how important it is to know what genre you are writing for. Each genre has their own rules and regulations, as well as their own significance to the culture.

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