Genre, Text, Grammar: Technologies for Teaching and Assessing Writing

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Author:	Peter Knapp and Megan Watkins (2005)	
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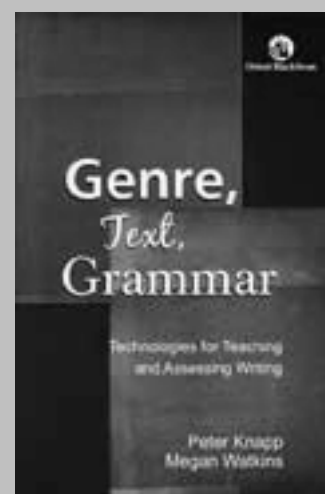
Genre, Text, Grammar: Technologies for Teaching and Assessing Writing, by Peter Knapp and Megan Watkins, is a resource and instruction book firmly grounded within a genre-based pedagogy and systemic functional linguistics methodology. This book was written to help educators become familiar not only with a genre-based approach to writing, but also the five areas often associated with high-stakes assessment: describing, explaining, instructing, arguing, and narrating. It is a comprehensive guide for preparing English Language Learners (ELLs) to succeed as writers and to compete with mainstream classrooms and high-stakes writing assessments. In this book, we are reminded that learning to write is "a complex series of processes that require a range of explicit teaching methodologies…" (p. 14). Therefore, as readers, we must be aware that perspectives on language as social process allow us to situate each of the five areas within functional and social requirements. Subsequently, genre as pedagogy allows us to teach writing with purpose; the pedagogy explained in this text clearly illustrates a methodology that is coherent and practical, making it easy to read and synthesize in a classroom environment.

The first three chapters of this book are clearly organized. They begin by introducing a model of a genre-based approach to writing. We are told that the "genre, text, grammar" model is one "concerned with 'what's going on' in writing" (p. 17). Therefore, if we are to focus teaching based on this underlying principle, we will find that once the codes and cues of the writing process relating to specific genres are recognized and synthesized, the writing process can become less confusing. In this book, a focus on rules, while important in writing instruction, takes a secondary role. The focus, instead, becomes context, genre, text, and grammar. Each of these elements, when used harmoniously, helps prepare students to become powerful writers and effective users of English.

Chapter two has a strong focus on grammar. Rather than our being presented grammar from a traditional perspective, in which grammar must be 'correct', we are presented instead with a variety of grammars in context to their specific uses within a genre. Subsequently, students or teachers will find it easy to reference the grammars mentioned in the chapters that follow–specifically within chapters focused on genre–and understand that grammar should be used as a 'force of expression' within a genre rather than just prescriptively. Therefore, the inclusion of a grammatical refresher course, including grammatical forms, definitions, and examples is a very useful element.

The pedagogic principles in this text give the reader a clear vision of the history of genre-based and functional linguistic education. These principles are presented within the context of theorists like Vygotsky, Halliday, and Painter, and within the implementation of the curriculum cycle within a genre-based pedagogy. Many teachers focus instruction based on the schematic stages of writing and place little emphasis on implementing a systemic functional methodology in teaching grammatical aspects of a text. Subsequently, instructors are "bogged down" by using joint and independent construction within a text to illustrate the functional grammar related to a genre, in addition to placing too much emphasis on the curriculum cycle. This book moves past this and takes a more reductionist approach to teaching and defines the pedagogic principles according to five categories: (1) the movement from concrete into abstract; (2) iterative practice; (3) sustained and concentrated treatment of knowledge and skills; (4) explicit and systematic instruction; and (5) diagnostic assessment.

The next chapters introduce the genres of describing, explaining, instructing, arguing, and narrating, as well as the sub-texts associated with them, including informative text, literary text, and recounts. It is also important to note that this format is repeated in each of the subsequent chapters, making the book easy to follow. It also emphasizes descriptive text to help show the writer and teacher connections in narratives–possibly the most widely assessed genre in the k-12 and EFL contexts. What is wonderful, and immediately applicable, is the initial description of the grammatical features associated with each genre. This helps teachers in preparing for not only lessons, but also unit

overviews, a task that can be daunting. By providing teachers with the grammatical features at the beginning of each chapter, the authors illustrate the use of grammar as social function within texts. Examples are provided in context to the genre presented, allowing for authentic application and illustration to students, without having to create samples from scratch. Each grammatical example is then repositioned in its entirety, specifically relating to a text within the area of focus–in the case of chapter four, a description.

Not only are the grammatical features of each genre presented in a clear and easily understood way, the descriptions of the structures are as well. Throughout each area of text as social function, there can be many sub-genres; each one will have its own movements and connections from beginning to end. In the case of the structure of explanations, we see the progression from the descriptive phase to the explanatory sequence, and, as writers become more advanced, to the evaluation/interpretation phase. Not only do we see a broad explanation of each set of transitions, with authentic examples taken from student work, but we also see how the genre moves can change according to whether the text is being written for an general, literary, or scientific/technical audience. One of the wonderful elements of this text is the authentic use of student work, which clearly illustrates the theory and methodology associated with a genre-approach. As a teacher, I have found that using authentic student texts as examples is valuable. Students are able to do linguistic analyses–in other words, peer review–allowing for a more authentic experience. Rather than evaluating a text created by a teacher, students are able to see how other language learners and English users compose texts according to a genre-based approach. The skill the authors show in their ability to illustrate their own pedagogic principles related to a genre-approach to writing is evident in every example they provide. However, without a background in applied linguistics, genre-pedagogy or systemic functional linguistics, using this book as a teaching tool could present difficulties to content area teachers. However, the benefits of using these tools with English language learners far outweigh the potential pitfalls.

As a writer, this book is one I reference first. If a reference is good enough for my writing, it will be a beneficial tool for my students' writing. Finally, if a book is powerful enough to influence not only the writing practices of a writer, but also guide the curriculum development of a teacher, then it is certainly a book worth sharing

Reviewed by
 Andy H. Clark
Adams-Cheshire Regional School District, Cheshire, Massachusetts
clarka@acrsd.net