Purposeful Writing: Discovering Voice in Writing

Mastery is not something that strikes in an instant, like a thunderbolt, but a gathering power that moves steadily through time, like weather.

~ John W. Gardner

Overview
This presentation is based on assignments I give to my high school seniors in AP English Language & Composition and has been adapted from Dr. Cathy Fleischer and Sarah Andrew-Vaughan’s presentation, Genre Study Meets Writing Workshop at the 2006 NCTE Convention.

What is genre?
The term genre is a French word from the Latin genus meaning type or kind.

Genre is dynamic and changes with social needs. Take for example a letter, which can be subdivided into personal, business, application, e-mail, etc.

Genre is rhetorically based and depends upon the audience, purpose, and situation for which it is written.

Why is genre relevant?
Genre is a social process. It shows that the skills learned in the classroom have application beyond high school. If students are able to see the connection between school and the real world, then they are more willing to participate in the activity. Students need to be exposed to a wide variety of genres, especially those that are pervasive outside classroom walls.

Putting it all together
Understanding what constitutes voice underpins the entirety of AP English Language and Composition. Students become versed in rhetoric through explorations of self through memoir. This obvious connection between memoir and the college admission essay becomes clear to students – to write about what they know, their own lives.

To begin the process, I have students brainstorm various genres and record their observations on the Promethean Board and discuss the differing purposes and structures of each of those genres. Examples include but are not limited to poetry, brochures, how-to manuals, e-mail, photography, song lyrics etc.

Next, we immerse ourselves in understanding what constitutes voice: figurative language, imagery, diction, detail, syntax, and tone. Nancy Dean’s book, Voice Lessons, is a staple for every English
classroom. It is jam packed with exercises to help students discover voice in writing. Everyday, I use one of the exercises as a warm-up to get the class rolling.

Before immersing ourselves in advertising, I review sensory details and the difference between “showing” and “telling”. I have students look at Edward Hopper’s painting, *Nighthawks* (available through Google images) and note as many sensory details as possible. Then, I expose them to Joyce Carol Oates’ poem “Edward Hopper’s Nighthawks, 1942”. Working in pairs, students list all of the sensory details Oates employs in the poem to create a picture in her audience’s imagination.

Students are then asked to ponder the following questions: How many of you have ever purchased merchandise from a mail catalog or the Internet? When we aren’t in a store and able to browse shelves of products we can touch, what do we rely on to select the perfect products? (Answer: product descriptions.) In this genre study, we’ll immerse ourselves in reading product descriptions, inquire into how they are constructed, and try our hand at creating product descriptions.

I then provide students with various shoe advertisements (flyer, catalog, and internet) to analyze the sensory details and rhetorical devices. Working in pairs, they make observations about the similarities and differences between the three sources.

Next, I have my students remove one of their shoes that they are wearing. (I chose shoes because everyone in the class is wearing them and no one is without their prop.) Again working in pairs, I have them brainstorm and record as many sensory details as possible and then share with their partner. For homework, students are asked to select a product that they have some familiarity with and locate a minimum of three to five differing forms of media used to promote that product. They then craft a product description using sensory details to sell it to the intended audience.

Finally, I tell the class that as we learn about sensory details and the elements of voice we’ll consider how understanding product descriptions might help us with other genres, specifically the college admission essay. Through our immersion in product descriptions, students learn how to sell themselves to colleges and universities that are looking to buy a product that fits their specific needs.

**Food for Thought**

Surrounding young writers with rich reading experiences provides the opportunity to help them sense the power and permanence of the written word and see how writers use language and genre in purposeful ways (Purposeful Writing: Genre Study in the Secondary Writing Workshop)

The disconnect that many students feel for school-sponsored writing reinforces their sense that school-based writing is an academic exercise, one for which learning formulaic patterns for sentence and paragraph placement is what writing is all about.

It is critical to help our students understand that their voices matter if we want them to believe that writing has relevance in their lives.

Implicit is the understanding that our students learn to write best when they are actually engaged in meaningful writing experiences.
Abandoned Farmhouse
by Ted Kooser

He was a big man, says the size of his shoes
on a pile of broken dishes by the house;
a tall man too, says the length of the bed
in an upstairs room; and a good, God-fearing man,
says the Bible with a broken back
on the floor below the window, dusty with sun;
but not a man for farming, say the fields
cluttered with boulders and the leaky barn.

A woman lived with him, says the bedroom wall
papered with lilacs and the kitchen shelves
covered with oilcloth, and they had a child,
says the sandbox made from a tractor tire.
Money was scarce, say the jars of plum preserves
and canned tomatoes sealed in the cellar hole.
And the winters cold, say the rags in the window frames.
it was lonely here, says the narrow country road.

Something went wrong, says the empty house
in the weed-choked yard. Stones in the fields
say he was not a farmer; the still-sealed jars
in the cellar say she left in a nervous haste.
And the child? Its toys are strewn in the yard
like branches after a storm—a rubber cow,
a rusty tractor with a broken plow,
a doll in overalls. Something went wrong, they say.
Edward Hopper’s Nighthawks, 1942
by Joyce Carol Oates

The three men are fully clothed, long sleeves, even hats, though it’s indoors, and brightly lit, and there’s a woman. The woman is wearing a short-sleeved red dress cut to expose her arms, a curve of her creamy chest; she’s contemplating a cigarette in her right hand, thinking that her companion has finally left his wife but can she trust him? Her heavy-lidded eyes, pouty lipstickèd mouth, she has the redhead’s true pallor like skim milk, damned good-looking and she guesses she knows it but what exactly has it gotten her so far, and where? – he’ll start to feel guilty in a few days, she knows the signs, an actual smell, sweaty, rancid, like dirty socks; he’ll slip away to make telephone calls and she swears she isn’t going to go through that again, isn’t going to break down crying or begging nor is she going to scream at him, she’s finished with all that. And he’s silent beside her, not the kind to talk much but he’s thinking thank God he made the right move at last, he’s a little dazed like a man in a dream – is this a dream? – so much that’s wide, still, mute, horizontal, and the counterman in white, stooped as he is and unmoving, and the man on the other stool unmoving except to sip his coffee; but he’s feeling pretty good, it’s primarily relief, this time he’s sure as hell going to make it work, he owes it to her and to himself, Christ’s sake. And she’s thinking the light in this place is too bright, probably not very flattering, she hates it when her lipstick wears off and her makeup gets caked, she’d like to use a ladies’ room but here isn’t one here and Jesus how long before a gas station opens? – it’s the middle of the night and she has a feeling time is never going to budge. This time though she isn’t going to demean herself – he starts in about his wife, his kids, how he let them down, they trusted him and he let them down, she’ll slam out of the goddamned room and if he calls her Sugar or Baby in that voice, running his hands over her like he has the right, she’ll slap his face hard, You know I have that: Stop! And he’ll stop. He’d better. The angrier she gets the stiller she is, hasn’t said a word for the past ten minutes, not a strand of her hair stirs, and it smells a little like ashes or like the henna she uses to brighten it, but the smell is faint or anyway, crazy for her like he is, he doesn’t notice, or mind – burying his hot face in her neck, between her cool breasts, or her legs – wherever she’ll have him, and whenever, She’s still contemplating the cigarette burning in her hand, the counterman is still stooped gaping at her, and he doesn’t mind that, why not, as long as she doesn’t look back, in fact he’s thinking he’s the luckiest man in the world so why isn’t he happier?
Genre Theory and Writing Resources


