

Review of *Writing Genres*

Spencer Schaffner
University of
Washington

 [print version](#)

Devitt, Amy J. *Writing Genres*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004. 242 pgs.

Amy Devitt's *Writing Genres* explains and adds to twenty years of work in rhetorical genre theory, drawing upon a diverse archive of genres and balancing between theoretical and pedagogical relevance. For Devitt, rhetorical genre theory is important because it explains how and why texts are important in our lives while providing a satisfying rationale for teaching first-year writing at the college level.

Since 1989, Devitt has published steadily in the field of genre theory, including articles on workplace genres, literary genres, and a recent co-authored textbook, *Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres*, allowing Devitt to address some of the more puzzling questions in the field: How controlling a grip, if any, does genre have on writers? How and why do genres change over time? What can rhetorical genre theory offer to the study of literature? And what practical application might genre theory have for the teaching of writing? Chapter by chapter, Devitt explores these questions, and her own strong, well-formulated position comes through in the text. For Devitt, understanding how genre functions means uncovering sources of creativity, choice, individual action, and accomplishment. Genre knowledge is, for her, potentially liberating.

In summarizing where genre theory is to date, Devitt begins, as most others do, with Carolyn Miller's 1984 article "Genre as Social Action." In that piece, Miller re-conceives genre not as a way to classify texts, tragedies, sonnets, sentimental novels; tax forms, memos, resumes, but as complicated actions involving situations, participants, repetition, and texts of all kinds. Miller's 1984 piece defined genre as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (qtd. in Devitt 14). In the twenty years since that definition, numerous scholars (including Miller herself) have retooled a theory of genre, reconsidering the early focus on situation. Devitt surveys much of this work. Notably, *Writing Genres* explains how activity theory has been imported into genre theory by David Russell, complicating the early assumption that "situation [is] singularly defining of genre" (3). Russell's work enhances a cornerstone of rhetorical genre theory: that all aspects of an activity system, participants, situation, contexts, and texts, are reciprocally and mutually created. No one aspect fully determines any other. Devitt writes, "Genre is a reciprocal dynamic within which individuals' actions construct and are constructed by recurring context of situations, context of culture, and context of genre" (31). Activity theory, aimed at understanding complex systems of texts and actions, has proved useful because it can "avoid a

dualism that can come from separating context and text" (18). For Devitt, all aspects of an activity system, take the courtroom, for example, rich in contexts, participant roles, and multiple forms of generic language use (55), are interdependent, mutually creating, and both culturally and historically informed. In rhetorical theories of genre it has become axiomatic to see genre and users in a state of mutual determination: genres inform how we act and how we act informs genres.

What Devitt adds to current theories of genre is stress on how culture and other genres influence an activity system. Devitt uses three contexts to understand genre: situation, genre set, and culture.[1] "All three contexts interact, and at the nexus of that interaction lies genre" (29). With this expansion from the single context of situation to three contexts comes increased scope for genre awareness and a broader set of responsibilities for the researcher. Crucial to Devitt's definition of genre, and perhaps the boldest insistence of the book, is that genres are not overly deterministic. For Devitt, genres do not limit choice, they allow for choice. They do not circumscribe creativity, they define it. Genres do not make texts, people do. Genres influence actions, but in the end, people make the actions that comprise genres. Genres interact with other genres in sets, and users employ genre repertoires in ways that create communities. Genre also "reflects, constructs, and reinforces the values, epistemology, and power relationships of the groups from which it is developed and for which it functions" (64). This last feature of genre is what Devitt gives as the main reason students in first-year writing courses need to learn to read at the level of genre: in understanding genre, one understands the larger cultural (and disciplinary) values and beliefs of a given situation. Writing with an awareness of genre can mean writing with a critical consciousness.

Writing Genres begins theoretically and then shifts to examine Devitt's archive of genres. Chapter three, for instance, is a lucid overview of Devitt's study of the genres of tax accounting. In a 1986 study, she examined genres in circulation in the Big Eight accounting firms of Kansas City. The firms did not have to physically consolidate (although this happened in subsequent years) for their genres to be consolidated, and while the genres the accountants used were steeped in industry values, Devitt argues that the accountants made choices to construct their shared communities. "That there are generic conventions to which readers expect conformity is not negative, that those conventions identify members and nonmembers is not negative. Like other standards, genre is used by society to accomplish its ends. A benevolent society may use those standards, including genre, benevolently; a fascist society may use those standards fascistically" (87). Here, one sees the neutral value Devitt places on genre: genres are what users make of them.

Devitt's chapter on how genres change is the most ambitious in the book. Using JoAnne Yates' scholarship on workplace writing, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson's study of the genres of presidential address, accounts of the rise of the modes,[2] and then her own 1989 book about the influence of genre on language change in Scots-English, Devitt embarks on a broad examination of how and why genres change over time. Drawing from these disparate examples, Devitt

concludes that stability and flexibility define genres and, by relation, dictate the nature of genre change. Highly flexible genres of the workplace have lent themselves to extensive adaptation and cooption, while the inelastic genres of the modes proved unable to adapt over time. The evolution of presidential genres of address illustrates Devitt's other key point: individuals can and do change genres. Again, for Devitt, genres do not entirely dictate what we do as language makers, as genres are the actions and products of people.

If Devitt's chapter on genre change is ambitious, her chapter on genre and literature is gutsy. While genre theorists have produced extensive work on such workplace and everyday genres as the resume, caseworker intake notes, the syllabus, and even the greeting card, scholarship has generally sidestepped literary texts. Particularly given the textual variety that characterizes works of literature, the intangible and changing nature of literature's rhetorical situation (if such a thing can even be imagined), and the multiple audiences and contexts literature involves over time, the apparatus of genre theory has trouble making sense of literature. Devitt discusses this omission, identifying literary applications of rhetorical genre theory that are needed in the field. "If scholars working in rhetorical genre theory choose not to adapt their genre theory to literary genres . . . [genre theory] may continue to emphasize function, community, similarity, and singularity in ways that exclude its application to many literary genres" (190).

The stakes of Devitt's book are ultimately strongest in her argument for integrating a nuanced and critical understanding of genre into first-year composition. Of late, first-year writing courses have been subject to many well-reasoned attacks (see Crowley, 1998), so Devitt's use of genre to intervene and try to preserve first-year writing will be of interest to many writing teachers and writing program administrators. Teaching the kind of genre awareness Devitt's book enacts in its own chapters, she proposes, "may enable writers to learn newly encountered genres when they are immersed in a context for which they need those genres but to learn the needed genres with greater rhetorical understanding and with more conscious acceptance of or resistance to the genres' ideologies" (192). Teaching genre awareness, then, is about students learning to make informed decisions in each new situation they encounter. Resistant responses could result from such genre awareness, as could informed acts of participation in scenes of disciplinary writing. This argument makes first-year writing necessarily prefatory to other scenes of college writing.

Like any ambitious text that takes risks, this is not a book without weaknesses. While I found Devitt's repeated pairings of genre and choice, genre and freedom, and genre and creativity to be an important correction to deterministic views of genre, I worry at times that this is an over-correction. Devitt's reliance on J.M. Balkin's work on ideology (158-162) strikes me as an unwarranted departure from Foucauldian notions of ideology that have been consistently used in prior work in the field, most notably in the collection *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre* (2002). For me, departing from that focus on power and the nature of dominative ideological discourse formations means short-circuiting further inquiry

into how genre systems, by their very nature of being largely taken-for-granted, can be dangerous propagators of the status quo. I worry that Devitt may be too eager to advance her non-deterministic view of genre at the expense of remembering how certain genres work to circulate dominative and often unquestioned assumptions and rules for acting, thinking, and being. In the activity system of the classroom, for instance, teachers circulate genres of the syllabus, course website, and assignment, and then call into circulation genres of the student paper, blog, or final exam. This familiar genre set may enable the free, creative classroom moments Devitt alludes to, but the same genres may also perpetuate the most basic systems of control regulating teachers and students: panoptic tools of discipline and surveillance that remain under-questioned and reproduced in part because of genre. Finally, as a teacher of first-year writing myself, I fail to see why Devitt's program of teaching genre awareness needs to happen in the first-year writing course. Why not place genre awareness training in courses located in the disciplines using tangible examples? Why not in high school? In efforts to justify first-year writing, a genre-awareness pedagogy may play a role, but given the many political and economic issues involved in the debate over whether to preserve or abolish this required course, saving first-year writing from the coordinated and informed attacks against it will take more, I think, than curricular reform.

With that said, this book is a powerful review of the literature and clear articulation of the theory on genre. It includes an ambitious series of engagements with genre in multiple contexts and settings. And by linking genre to both literature and first-year writing, Devitt openly invites otherwise un-united scholars of texts to come together to discuss this powerful set of theories about a discourse formation, genre, that is always structuring and structured by our lives.

Notes

1. The context of the situation would be a predicament or scene that creates a certain urgency for actors to speak or make texts. The context of the genre set would be the collection of genres in use in any situation, as "rarely does a group accomplish all of its purposes with a single genre" (54). The context of culture would be the social location of both the situation and the participants, a complex context changing over time and place and never equal for all participants. ([Back](#))
2. Writing instruction based on mastering formulaic genres for narration, description, classification, and evaluation. ([Back](#))

Works Cited

Coe, R. M., L. Lingard, and T. E. Teslenko. *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2002.

Crowley, Sharon. *Composition in the University: Historical and*

Polemical Essays. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998.

Devitt, Amy J. "Generalizing about Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept." *College Composition and Communication* 44 (1993): 573-586.

- - - . "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre." *College English* 62.2 (2000): 696-718.

- - - . *Writing Genres*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

Devitt, Amy J., M. J. Reiff, and A. S. Bawarshi. *Scenes of Writing: Strategies for Composing with Genres*. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2004.

Foucault, Michel. (1969) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

- - - . *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

Freedman, Aviva, and Peter Medway. *Genre and the New Rhetoric*. London: Taylor and Francis, 1994.

Citation Format:

Schaffner, Spencer. Rev. of *Writing Genres* by Amy J. Devitt. *Enculturation* 5.2 (2004): http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_2/schaffner.html

Contact Information:

Spencer Schaffner, University of Washington
Email: spiegel@u.washington.edu
Home Page: <http://metaspencer.com>