

CHAPTER
2

What Is Genre Study?

In order to become competent, literate members of society, students must be able to navigate multiple genres.

—HEATHER LATTIMER

Your students will encounter many genres and many texts during their lifetime and will need to be able to think about them analytically and critically. Genre study is a foundational inquiry that involves several steps and gives students the tools they need to navigate a variety of texts with deep understanding:

They need to know how to confidently read, write, and discuss narrative, informational, persuasive, and analytical texts. Because these forms of text are unique and require unique strategies for reading and writing, it is not safe to assume that students who are competent with one genre will automatically master another. Students need to learn about particular genres through implicit experience and explicit instruction. (Lattimer 2003, 3–4)

“Implicit experience” is provided by immersion in excellent books; “explicit instruction” produces the conclusions students draw as they analyze and experience many examples in the inquiry process with the scaffolds you provide. There are six broad steps in a genre study (see Figure 2.1).

Your first step is to collect a set of high-quality mentor texts that are clear examples of the genre you are helping students understand. As described in Chapter 1, and in more detail in Chapter 14, using picture books or shorter texts as mentor texts allows you to share many clear examples of the genre. Have the

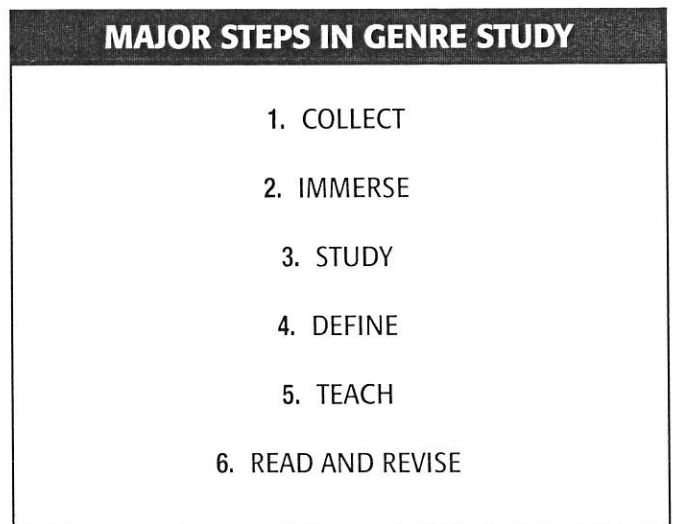


Figure 2.1 Major steps in genre study

students listen as you read the texts aloud (or have them read independently if they are reading longer texts at the upper grades), and discuss them. They can talk about what they noticed in each text, but when you have read and discussed about four or five, revisit them and study their common characteristics. Drawing out and listing what students have noticed *across* the texts will bring them closer to understanding the particular characteristics of a genre. Then, construct a working definition of the genre that can be revised as students study more examples. Make sure the definition includes the specific characteristics that differentiate this genre from others. Use the definition to guide discussions, all the while trying out your understandings with more examples. Over several days teach specific minilessons on these characteristics, grouping those that are related. Also help students notice the characteristics in small-group lessons or conferences related to their independent reading. Revise the lists and definition as needed and have students record them in the genre studies section of a reader's notebook (see Chapter 18) to use as a reference.

Genre Study and Comprehension

Much reading instruction helps students take words apart, develop strategies to acquire vocabulary, and process more complex sentences. These are important elements of instruction, but readers also need to learn that texts employ a predictable, consistent set of codes to organize and communicate information. Many children figure this concept out for themselves through avid reading or make the connection between formal instruction on genre and the texts they experience. Students may not grasp this understanding on their own. They make only superficial connections between texts and fail to notice the explicit patterns, structures, and features that can assist them both in processing texts more efficiently and in comprehending them better. Genre study through inquiry has the power to support deeper understanding of texts because your students can detect and use these codes and relate their thinking across texts. Genre study improves comprehension.

The Value of Genre Study for Readers

“Every piece of text comes to us as both a text—the piece it is—and a kind of text—an instance of genre” (Bomer, 1995, 117). When we encounter a text, we automatically (and usually unconsciously) assess the genre and proceed using the assumptions we have formed—the limits as well as the questions it raises. This is true even of very functional texts such as brochures or parking tickets. “Genre, an oft-overlooked cueing system in reading, constrains our predictions, lays down a track for our reading” (117). Genre study uses analytic thinking to connect texts, and it benefits readers in many ways (see Figure 2.2).

Through experience with texts, readers recognize common elements, as well as ways that texts in the same genre can vary. They use their knowledge of the predictable elements as a road map to anticipate the structures and elements of the text they are reading. For example, if you are reading a fantasy, you expect to read about a hero on a quest and a contest between good and evil. You are not surprised if magical things happen or if animals talk. If you are reading realistic fiction, on the other hand, you may still encounter a hero, but one who seems real and who must deal with real problems and situations in realistic ways. Both genres have a central story problem, sometimes more than one; you expect both to come to a satisfying or at least an edifying end.

Knowing these features helps you begin to comprehend a text even before starting to read. You have expectations and a kind of in-the-head graphic representation of what the text will be like—how information will be presented and organized. Anyone can memorize a list of characteristics for a genre; highly proficient readers hold these characteristics deeply in their consciousness and access them every time they read.

Through genre study, you help your students anchor their understandings in excellent examples of texts that matter to them because they have talked about them with others and built the understandings for themselves. They have also learned a process they will be able to apply to new types of texts. Genre study brings reading and writing together so that students can “read like writers” and in the process learn to think and talk analytically about texts. Finally, genre study through inquiry helps readers

incorporate the academic language they need to talk about books with one another. In the process, they create a community of readers who have a shared language for thinking, talking, and writing about books.

THE VALUE OF GENRE STUDY FOR READERS

- Helps readers know what to expect when beginning to read a text.
- Heightens readers' ability to notice features and structures used by the writer as they process a text.
- Helps readers anticipate the structures and elements of the text.
- Develops the habit of "reading like a writer."
- Develops readers' ability to comprehend particular genres well.
- Helps readers understand what is common among texts in a genre and what can vary.
- Helps readers understand what particular genres have in common.
- Develops readers who can effectively process and comprehend a wide range of texts.
- Develops readers who have favorite genres and are articulate about them.
- Helps readers anchor understandings of genre in excellent examples of texts (mentor texts).
- Helps readers anchor understandings of genre in texts that are memorable and matter to them.
- Helps students use what they learn as readers to write and what they learn as writers to enhance their reading.
- Develops a shared language (academic language) that students can use to talk with one another about books.
- Supports the development of a community of readers and writers.

Figure 2.2 The value of genre study for readers

The Value of Genre Study for Writers

Genre study also helps students develop as writers (see Figure 2.3). They read to learn how to write. They learn about writing from writers who become their mentors. They can more easily apply this knowledge to their own writing, to include producing texts in particular genres. Genre study helps students learn not only a genre's

THE VALUE OF GENRE STUDY FOR WRITERS

- Helps writers notice what effective writers do to create texts in a genre.
- Helps writers learn how texts are created (the decisions writers make).
- Helps writers create the structures and elements of the genre they are writing.
- Develops the habit of "writing like a reader."
- Grounds teaching in real-world texts (rather than abstract lessons).
- Helps writers learn what illustrators do (the decisions they make).
- Helps writers develop a strong vision for the writing they will do.
- Develops a "habit of the mind" so that students actively notice the writer's decisions while they read.
- Grounds writing in excellent examples of well-written texts.
- Grounds writing in texts that matter or are memorable.
- Helps students use what they learn as writers to support reading and use what they learn as readers to help them write.
- Supports the development of a community of readers and writers who have a shared language to talk about the texts they read and write.

Figure 2.3 The value of genre study for writers

characteristics but also how to think deeply about *how* texts are created. They discuss the decisions authors and illustrators make to communicate what they want to say or show to readers.

When you have built up a large number of shared texts, you have created a rich resource for teaching writing. The texts are a bank of possibilities for writing and illustrating texts. Your teaching is grounded in excellent examples of real-world texts rather than abstract concepts—in texts that matter because students have shared them with their friends. Genre study helps writers develop a strong vision of the writing that they will do (Bomer 1995; Ray 2006). They get the “big picture” because they know so much about what their writing will be like.

Genre study helps students develop a “habit of the mind”—reading like a writer (Ray 2006). It brings writing and reading together. Students immersed in genre study can more easily choose the genre for their writing. They can take a piece in one genre and rework it into another. They understand the kinds of decisions writers make. They develop academic language for talking about texts—not only those they read but also those they write. This shared language supports a community of writers who can think and talk together about their thinking.

Genre and the Importance of Teacher Knowledge

The effectiveness of genre study in your classroom depends on your own growing knowledge of the characteristics of each genre (see Figure 2.4). When you have a strong knowledge of genre, you can scaffold and lead students to deeper understanding. But you don’t need to know everything about a genre all at once. Using an inquiry approach means you learn alongside your students. You implicitly provide demonstrations of inquiry, and you participate in the process of constructing explicit understandings that guide reading and writing in a variety of genres.

Through genre study you deepen your appreciation of the complexity of texts. You also expand your knowledge of the features and structures that are characteristic of each genre. As you learn with your students, your own enjoyment of texts will grow and that enjoyment is contagious. Studying texts also helps you develop greater sensitivity to the deep understandings that you want your students to use as they talk and write. You also show your students how to use excellent texts as mentors for their writing. Through genre study, they learn to see authors as real people who write, revise, rewrite, and make decisions about their writing.

THE IMPORTANCE OF GENRE KNOWLEDGE FOR TEACHERS

- Deepens your appreciation for the complexity of texts.
- Allows you to use the features and structures of genres to guide the inquiry process.
- Increases your enjoyment of texts in various genres, which you communicate to students.
- Expands your awareness of the comprehension demands of texts.
- Promotes a deep understanding that will help you detect what students need to understand over time.
- Expands your ability to see features of mentor texts that will support students’ writing.
- Expands your skill in helping students use texts as mentors.
- Increases your enjoyment of reading and talking about books.

Figure 2.4 The importance of genre knowledge for teachers

Studying genre through inquiry can only enhance the enjoyment of the texts you and your students study together. As students discover more in the texts they read and share these discoveries in their conversation, the process comes alive. Students begin to search actively for examples to support their findings; they even present good arguments. Texts become more meaningful for everyone.

Genre Study in Action

Let's look at an example of genre study in a third grade classroom, as Mrs. Lee, who is introducing her students to historical fiction, applies the six steps of the inquiry process.

1. **Collect.** Mrs. Lee begins by selecting a few high quality historical fiction picture books to read aloud over several weeks to immerse her students in the genre. She selects books that reflect a variety of time periods, historical events, and themes so that students can think beyond the topic to the characteristics common to all the texts. The texts Mrs. Lee selects are:

True Heart (Moss)

Gleam and Glow (Bunting)

Pennies in a Jar (Chaconas)

When Jessie Came Across the Sea (Hest)

Freedom Summer (Wiles)

Ma Dear's Aprons (McKissack)

Ride Like the Wind: A Tale of the Pony Express (Fuchs)



Figure 2.5 Mrs. Lee immersing students in historical fiction texts

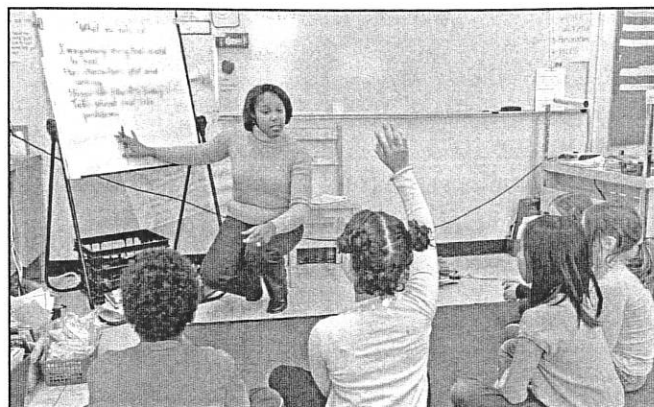


Figure 2.6 Mrs. Lee reviewing the noticings to create a working definition

2. **Immerse.** Mrs. Lee immerses the students in these mentor texts while they simultaneously choose their own books to read independently. Mrs. Lee doesn't have them look for characteristics of the genre right away. It's important for them to listen to (or read), think about, and discuss the content of the various texts with one another. Mrs. Lee reads a book and the students talk about the content and the themes or messages they encounter. Her students have a great deal of experience discussing what they notice about texts. She helps them notice that the setting often influences the actions of the characters in historical fiction.
3. **Study.** Next, Mrs. Lee has her students step back and closely study the characteristics the books have in common. What is evident in all of the books they have discussed? The students begin to think about the characteristics that define historical fiction. They talk about whether the things they notice occur *all* of the time or only *some* of the time. Students notice that the stories take place long ago, some of the characters use old-fashioned language, they tell what life was like, and that some tell about real people or events. "Tells about life in the past," and "imagined story set in the real world" are the only statements they agree meet the "all the time" criterion. The class creates a chart of noticings about historical fiction that they can add to as they read more examples (see Figure 2.7). This chart describes the

Historical Fiction

What we noticed:

- Imaginary story that could be real
- Has characters, plot and setting
- Shows life like it was in the past
- Tells about problems people had in the past

Figure 2.7 Historical fiction: what we noticed all of the time

characteristics that they notice *all* of the time. Another chart they create (Figure 2.8) describes the characteristics they notice *often*.

4. **Define.** The teacher and students then use the list of noticings to create a working definition of historical fiction (see Figure 2.9), a definition that may be revised over time as they continue to study the genre.
5. **Teach.** Mrs. Lee uses the list of noticings and the working definition to teach specific mini-lessons on the important features of the genre. For example:
 - Readers notice when a story tells about life as it might have been lived in the past so they can identify it as historical fiction.
 - Readers notice the setting in historical fiction to help them understand history.
 - Readers think about what life was like for the story characters and the challenges they faced in order to understand the problems and issues of the time.

Historical Fiction

Often:

- Is based on real people and events from the past
- Uses old-fashioned language

Figure 2.8 Historical fiction: what we noticed often

Historical Fiction

Historical fiction is a made-up story that takes place in the past and shows the way life may have been lived in the past.

Figure 2.9 Working definition of historical fiction

6. **Read and Revise.** Mrs. Lee places several baskets of historical fiction books in the classroom library for students' independent reading (see Figure 2.10). Included are books on a variety of historical periods and issues, harder-to-read books, shorter books, longer books, and more. There is also a basket of historical fiction books related to the civil rights movement, which the students are learning about in social studies. For the next few days, at the beginning of readers' workshop, Mrs. Lee provides quick book talks—short oral reviews—about the historical fiction texts she's added to the classroom library. She asks students to choose historical fiction when they are ready

to read a new book independently and continues to read historical fiction aloud. During class discussions and sharing sessions students describe additional features they notice about the historical fiction they are reading, add more characteristics to their charts, and revise their working definition of historical fiction.

Understanding the Process

The different time periods, content, and other variations in the texts they read help Mrs. Lee's students think further about historical fiction as a genre. The idea is not to produce an extensive and uniform set of characteristics but to approach understanding the genre as a fluid process. Students build understandings over time and change and expand them as more examples are encountered. They explore themes and content through discussion, drawing out characteristics that make a text clearly identifiable as historical fiction. They refer to their charts of characteristics and their working definition to guide their thinking.

The charts are revised as the students read and discuss more texts. Mrs. Lee presents minilessons on the characteristics of historical fiction, and students look for these characteristics in their own independent reading. After a few weeks, students have developed:

- The ability to analyze a text and identify it as historical fiction.

- A strong understanding of the characteristics of historical fiction.
- An understanding of the difference between historical fiction, realistic fiction, and nonfiction texts on historical topics.
- A shared language for talking about historical fiction.
- A higher level of appreciation for historical fiction.
- A greater understanding of the role of setting in relation to plot.
- A greater knowledge of history and its issues and challenges.

The students continue to refer to the genre throughout the year as they encounter more texts.

Figure 2.11 summarizes the steps in the inquiry process for genre study. Use it to guide your thinking as you discuss various genres.

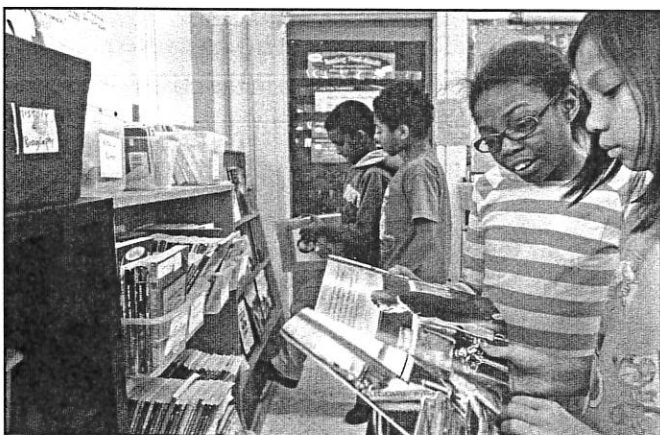


Figure 2.10 Students making genre choices for independent reading



STEPS IN THE INQUIRY PROCESS FOR GENRE STUDY

<p>1. Collect (Create Text Sets)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect a set of mentor texts in the genre to read aloud. • Be selective; use high-quality, authentic picture books or shorter texts (when possible). • Collect books (at a range of difficulty levels) to place in a genre basket in the classroom library—books students can choose to read independently. • Collect multiple copies of books for genre book clubs (books of interest to the grade level) and guided reading groups (must be appropriate instructional level for the group).
<p>2. Immerse</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immerse students in several clear examples of the genre. As you read these mentor texts aloud, encourage students to think about, talk about, and identify common characteristics. • Give book talks on texts in the classroom library in the genre and invite students to select the genre for their independent reading. • Provide multiple copies of texts in the genre for book clubs and guided reading groups. Help students think about genre characteristics.
<p>3. Study</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After the students have read several examples, have them analyze characteristics that are common to the group of texts. • List the genre features they notice on chart paper. Make sure that students are able to distinguish between characteristics that are <i>always</i> evident and those that are <i>often</i> evident.
<p>4. Define</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define the genre. Use the list of characteristics to create a short working definition.
<p>5. Teach</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach specific minilessons on the important genre features on the list, using the mentor texts and adding new mentor texts to the initial text set.
<p>6. Read and Revise</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expand student understandings during individual conferences about their independent reading, and facilitate group share sessions. • Encourage students to talk about the genre in their book clubs, guided reading discussions, reading conferences, and any other appropriate instructional contexts. • Add more characteristics to the class charts and revise the working definition of the genre if needed.

Figure 2.11 Steps in the inquiry process for genre study

Suggestions for Professional Development

Explore some genres yourself (it will be more enjoyable if you work with colleagues). Gather four or five examples of picture books in two or three genres. You will be amazed at the quality of these shorter texts and their potential when used even at upper and middle grade levels.

1. Stack the books in piles according to genre.
2. Divide the texts and read them as partners or small groups.
3. Make a list of the things you notice across the texts.

4. Make charts like the ones in this chapter listing characteristics that always appear and those that often appear in texts in the genre. You will of course have much more background information than Mrs. Lee's students did, but don't try to make the lists exhaustive. The goal is to explore.
5. Create some genre text sets that will be exciting, engaging, and appropriate for your students. As you prepare these text sets, you may want to keep in mind which genres you will be asking your children to use as writers across the year since many of the sets will also become mentor texts for your writers' workshop.

