how to Teach Writing

Jeremy Harmer

Longman

2 Describing written text

Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life; they feed the soul.
Anne Lamott

- Different purposes, different writing
- Differences within a genre
- Text construction
- Cohesion
- Coherence
- Register
- Implications for learning and teaching

Different purposes, different writing

In the previous chapter we suggested that, during the planning phase of the writing process, authors have to focus on the purpose of their writing (amongst other considerations) since this will affect what language they choose and how they use it. The following examples of written text show clearly how different purposes provoke different kinds of writing. The advertisement below, for example, is intended to attract appropriate applicants for a vacancy in a toy library:

Chanworth Toy Library for Children with Special Needs

Toy Librarian

12hrs per week – pay subject to experience

We are seeking an enthusiastic Toy Librarian to work in the Toy Library at the Child Development Centre and within special schools.

This post is subject to a police check.

Closing date 1st October.

Applications in writing with two referees to Judith Kelly, Chairman, Chanworth Toy Library, PO Box 32, Montley Wood, RC3 5WW.

Why has the writer chosen this particular way of designing the advertisement? It could have been worded differently and been constructed in, say, a more narrative-like form. But if it had been, readers might not have instantly recognised its advertising purpose – and so it would not have been effective.

The fact is that the writer, having decided on a purpose (advertising a job), chose to construct the advertisement on the basis of what the members

of the community would be familiar with. In other words, members of a **discourse community** – that is people such as readers of this kind of English-language newspaper – know what an advertisement does and should look like, and the writer has taken this into account in order to make sure they recognise what they are reading for what it is.

The letter below succeeds for the same reasons, although it is very different in character. It is typical of its kind (a formal letter of notification). Thus it follows an established construction pattern:

Stating the subject

⬇

Acknowledging receipt of a previous letter

⬇

Saying what is to be done

⬇

Exhorting the letter's recipient to do something

⬇

Signing off

The letter uses specialised **topic vocabulary** (e.g. *Notice of Intended Prosecution*; *alleged traffic offence*) and also employs vocabulary and grammar which ensures its formal **tone** (*I am in receipt of* ... ; *Your prompt response would be appreciated*).

Dear Sir,

I refer to the Notice of Intended Prosecution/Section 172 Road Traffic Act 1988 form sent you in relation to an alleged traffic offence.

I am in receipt of your further correspondence and have noted the contents.

I will, on receiving confirmation from the hospital, re-examine your file. If I decide to excuse the penalty, your payment will be refunded and the points removed from your licence.

Your prompt response would be appreciated.

Yours faithfully,

Genres

The intended reader of the letter also recognises instantly what kind of letter it is because it is typical of its kind (both in terms of construction and in

choice of language), just as the advertisement was typical of its kind for the same reasons. We call these different writing constructions ('advertisements', 'letters', etc.) **genres**, and we refer to the specific choice of vocabulary within genres as the **register** that the text is written in.

'Newspaper advertisements' and formal 'letters of notification' are not the only genres around, of course. 'Literary fiction' is a genre of English which is different from, say, 'science fiction'. The characteristics of the latter may well differ in a number of ways from the former, and a specific genre may influence the writer's choice of register. 'Newspaper letters' are a recognisable genre, different from the notification letter above and different again from 'holiday postcards' or 'application letters'. 'Scientific reports' represent a genre of writing, just as 'film criticism' is a genre all of its own.

Knowledge of genres (understanding how different purposes are commonly expressed within a discourse community) is only one of the many 'knowledges' or 'competences' that a reader brings to the task of reading, and which a writer assumes the reader will know. Without these 'knowledges' a communication like the notification letter above would have little chance of success.

These 'knowledges' (which we can group under the general heading of **schematic knowledge**) comprise:

- a knowledge of genres
- general world knowledge
- sociocultural knowledge (that is the social and cultural knowledge which members of a particular social group can reasonably be expected to know)
- topic knowledge (that is knowing something about the subject being discussed).

All of this is exemplified in the following newspaper headline taken from *The Observer* newspaper:

Because of our knowledge of genres we recognise this collection of words as a newspaper headline. However, in order to make sense of them we need more than this. Someone who did not have the relevant knowledge might need to be told firstly that *reality TV* involves cameras watching people who have been put, on purpose, in difficult situations (as survivors on a desert island, for example) and secondly that the most successful of all these programmes was called *Big Brother*, where contestants were crammed into a house, filmed all the time, and voted out of the house one by one by the viewers. Of course, it might be possible to deduce some of this information: we could, for example, recognise that the capital letters of *Big Brother* suggest that it is the name of something. But members of the discourse community do not have to make that effort because of their shared sociocultural and topic knowledge.

Differences within a genre

Although we can describe newspaper advertisements as a genre, it is clear that not all advertisements within that genre are the same. Clearly a lot will depend on what is being advertised and, in this case, how much advertisements cost – a genre constraint.

Some writers of newspaper advertisements, as we saw in the 'toy librarian' advertisement above, go into considerable detail, even informing readers that applicants will have their names checked by the police (because no one wants undesirable people working with children). Because a written application is necessary, the advertiser has to give an address and other details.

This advertisement from the same newspaper, however, is significantly different in construction. The writer has clearly put together the information as economically as possible, and this is reflected in the way the advertisement is structured. Nor does he need to include much of the information that the designers of the 'toy librarian' piece required. Mark Jones' advertisement contains no 'well-formed' sentence, and does not need to spend a lot of time exhorting readers to contact him. He merely puts a phone number there, and members of the discourse community who wish to hire a large, smart car for some grand occasion know exactly what to do.

EXECUTIVE CAR hire, available for weddings etc. – Call Mark Jones: 09876 123654

In other words, there are various sub-genres within a genre. Since within each genre and sub-genre we find typical text constructions, it is useful to look at how such constructions can be described.

Text construction

Literature provides us with perfect examples of how a genre constrains writers, imposing construction patterns that help them to express their purpose. The sonnet (a sub-genre of poetry) demonstrates such constraints:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O, no! It is an ever-fixéd mark,
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wandering bark,
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Sonnet 116 by William Shakespeare

A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem where each line – in English, at least – usually consists of ten syllables. The subject matter is most often romantic in nature, and there is generally some kind of a pause – or change in thought or subject – after the first eight lines. Interestingly, there are two main rhyme schemes. Shakespeare, perhaps Britain's most prolific sonneteer, wrote using the Elizabethan rhyme scheme (i.e. *a b a b c d c d e f e f g g* – where *a*, in *Sonnet 116*, represents the *minds*, *finds* rhyme, and *b* represents the *love*, *remove* rhyme, etc.).

The American poet E.E. Cummings, writing more than 300 years later, also used the sonnet form to compose his own love poem:

it may not always be so

it may not always be so;and i say
that if your lips,which i have loved,should touch
another's,and your dear strong fingers clutch
his heart,as mine in time not far away;
if on another's face your sweet hair lay
in such a silence as i know,or such
great writhing words as,uttering overmuch,
stand helplessly before the spirit at bay;

if this should be,i say if this should be—
you of my heart,send me a little word;
that i may go unto him,and take his hands,
saying,Accept all happiness from me.
Then shall i turn my face,and hear one bird
sing terribly afar in the lost lands.

it may not always be so by E.E. Cummings

Interestingly, Cummings' poem is still constrained by the sonnet form (romantic in nature, 14 lines, 10 syllables per line, and a break after the eighth line), but is different in two respects. Firstly, he uses a variation of the Petrarchan rather than Elizabethan rhyme scheme (i.e *a b b a a b b a* followed by two or three other rhymes in the remaining six lines). Secondly, he brings his own idiosyncratic style to bear on the genre; he liked to write using almost no capital letters (thus violating some of poetry's genre constraints at that time). Where he included capital letters he did so sparingly and for poetic effect. In *it may not always be so* we can suppose that the key concepts he wants us to notice, therefore, are *Accept* and *Then*.

The sonnet form demonstrates how a very tightly structured sub-genre constrains the writers within it. But of course sonnet writing and reading is a minority occupation. Much more common are the holiday postcards, for example, which millions of people write every year. The following example is typical of the genre.

CYPRUS 139

Paphos, the famous ancient mosaic
Paphos, L'ancienne mosaique fameuse
Paphos, das beruehmte antike Mosaik.

Palm trees, pool, waves lapping, sun, daily massage, good fish to eat. Hope you do as well in Madeira & have a good rest.

Love J & A

Palmer family
38 Renton Road
Cambridge CH1 5CC
UK

Just as we were able to describe the construction of the formal letter of notification on page 16, we can also describe the postcard in the same way:

Description of place where the writer is/activities the writer is involved in
(palm trees, waves lapping, daily massage, good fish to eat)

⬇

Exhortation to the reader
(Hope you do as well in Madeira & have a good rest.)

⬇

Sign off
(Love J & A)

Because postcard writers know this construction pattern, they are able to write cards (such as the one above) at great speed and with great fluency. It takes no time at all to produce a new postcard following the same pattern of construction, such as the example on the right.

Text construction constraints do not only apply to whole texts. Individual paragraphs within a text also tend to follow set patterns. In the example on the next page, few people would have trouble in rearranging the sentences on the left into the properly sequenced paragraph on the right.

That is because even in this kind of narrative the paragraph obeys a common organisational structure, as shown on the next page.

Having great time, expeditions to museums/galleries in the morning, lunch and cerveza followed by siesta, and then down to Plaza Garibaldi to hear the mariachis – and then dinner in a good restaurant. Wish you were here.

Love Amelia

Out-of-sequence sentences	Sequenced paragraph
But then the phone rang, and it was his friend Sarah asking if he wanted to go and see a movie. He agreed immediately, and was out of the door in almost no time at all. He didn't have any ideas. Paul was sitting at home, wondering what to do.	Paul was sitting at home, wondering what to do. He didn't have any ideas. But then the phone rang, and it was his friend Sarah asking if he wanted to go and see a movie. He agreed immediately, and was out of the door in almost no time at all.

Sequencing sentences to make a paragraph

Situation (Paul was sitting at home ...)

⬇

Problem (He didn't have any ideas.)

⬇

Solution/response (But then the phone rang, ...)

⬇

Evaluation/result (He agreed immediately, ...)

As with the holiday postcard, it would not be difficult to write a different paragraph using the same paragraph structure.

There are many different types of paragraph structure, of course. The extract on page 22 from a book about the early days of the Internet does not show the 'problem + solution' shape of the text above about Paul, but instead follows a different pattern:

Topic sentence
(introduces the subject matter of the paragraph)

⬇

Example/explanation sentence
(expands on the information given in the topic sentence)

⬇

Follow-on sentence
(expands on the information given in the example/explanation sentence)

⬇

Conclusion
(ends the paragraph by reminding us of and/or evaluating the opening topic sentence)

> Many people thought that they could make a lot of money from selling goods and services on the Internet. They started up companies called 'dot coms' after the suffixes used in their Internet addresses. They hoped that people would rush to buy online because it would be more convenient. But, for the most part, they did not make the kind of money they expected and, in some cases, they lost everything they had invested.
>
> From *How the Internet Crashed* by Peter Hedley

All text can be analysed in terms of its construction. All genres and sub-genres (of which the sonnet is an extreme example) have relatively strict formulae governing their construction. Business people write letters that are very similar in terms of layout and text organisation even where the content is different. Legal contracts have a standard construction. Wedding invitations follow set construction patterns and so do cooking recipes and car manuals.

When writers put together texts in a particular genre, they follow the constraints of the genre either because they feel obliged to (as in a job application letter) or perhaps because they have got into the habit of doing so (as in a holiday postcard). Of course this does not stop anyone from purposefully violating the genre constraints, as E.E. Cummings does gently in the poem on page 19, but it does help people to write and it helps their readers to digest what they are reading.

For writing to be truly accessible, however, it also needs to be both **cohesive** and **coherent**.

Cohesion

When we write text we have a number of linguistic techniques at our disposal to make sure that our prose 'sticks together'. We can, for example, use lexical repetition and/or 'chains' of words within the same lexical set through a text to have this effect. The topic of the text is reinforced by the use of the same word more than once or by the inclusion of related words (e.g. *water*, *waves*, *sea*, *tide*). We can use various grammatical devices to help the reader understand what is being referred to at all times, even when words are left out or pronouns are substituted for nouns.

We can see lexical and grammatical cohesion at work in the extract from a newspaper article on the page opposite.

Lexical cohesion is achieved in the article by the use of two main devices:

- **Repetition of words** – a number of content words are repeated throughout the text, e.g. *grandparents* (twice), *grandchildren* (twice), *people* (five times), etc.
- **Lexical set 'chains'** – the text is cohesive because there are lexical sets (that is words in the same topic area) which interrelate with each other as the article progresses, e.g. (1) *grandparents*, *daughters*, *sons*, *grandchildren*,

Grandparents 'juggle career and caring'

People in 50s and 60s feel pressure to work on

John Carvel
Social affairs editor

Growing pressure on people in their 50s and 60s to stay in paid work is set to divert grandparents from helping their working daughters and sons with childcare, according to a report today from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

It found a shortage of young people in the population – confirmed by the national census on Monday – would make employers do their utmost to retain older staff.

This would shrink the number of retired people who were able to care for their grandchildren or frail older relatives, said researchers from the Institute of Education in London.

After a survey of more than 1,000 employees over 50 and recently retired local authority staff, they identified a 'pivot generation' of people combining work and care roles.

Two-thirds of people between 50 and retirement were in paid employment, one-third had grandchildren by the age of 50, and 60% had living parents.

Nearly half the local authority staff had some caring responsibility. One in three looked after an elderly relative or friend, one in six provided care for a grandchild and one in 10 did both.

From *The Guardian* newspaper – 2.10.02

relatives, *grandchild*; (2) *work*, *employers*, *staff*, *employees*, *retired*, *employment*; (3) *two-thirds*, *one-third*, *60%*, *one in three*, *one in 10*; etc.

Grammatical cohesion is achieved in a number of different ways too:

- **Pronoun and possessive reference** – at various points in the text a pronoun or more frequently a possessive is used instead of a noun. In the first sentence (*Growing pressure on people in their 50s and 60s …*) *their* is used to refer back to *people*.

  Like most texts, the article has many examples of such pronoun and possessive reference. The second *their* in paragraph 1 refers back but this time to the noun *grandparents*, whereas *their* in paragraph 2 refers back to *employers*. Such **anaphoric reference** can operate between paragraphs too. *This* which starts paragraph 3 refers back to the whole of paragraph 2, whereas *they* in paragraph 4 refers back to *researchers from the Institute of Education* in the previous paragraph.

- **Article reference** – articles are also used for text cohesion. The definite article (*the*) is often used for anaphoric reference. For example, in paragraph 4 the writer refers to *retired local authority staff*, but when they are mentioned again in paragraph 6 the writer talks about *the local*

authority staff, and the reader understands that he is talking about the local authority staff who were identified two paragraphs before.

However *the* is not always used in this way. When the writer talks about *the national census*, he assumes his readers will know what he is referring to and that there is only one of it. Such **exophoric reference** assumes a world knowledge shared by the discourse community who the piece is written for.

- **Tense agreement** – writers use tense agreement to make texts cohesive. In our 'grandparents' article the past tense predominates (*It found*) and what is sometimes called the 'future-in-the-past' (*would make*) also occurs. If, on the other hand, the writer was constantly changing tense, the text would not hold together in the same way.
- **Linkers** – texts also achieve coherence through the use of **linkers** – words describing text relationships of 'addition' (*and*, *also*, *moreover*, *furthermore*), of 'contrast' (*however*, *on the other hand*, *but*, *yet*), of 'result' (*therefore*, *consequently*, *thus*), of 'time' (*first*, *then*, *later*, *after a while*), etc.
- **Substitution and ellipsis** – writers frequently substitute a short phrase for a longer one that has preceded it, in much the same way as they use pronoun reference (see above). For example, in *He shouldn't have cheated in his exam but he did so because he was desperate to get into university* the phrase *did so* substitutes for *cheated in his exam*. Writers use ellipsis (where words are deliberately left out of a sentence when the meaning is still clear) in much the same way. For example, in *Penny was introduced to a famous author, but even before she was she had recognised him* the second clause omits the unnecessary repetition of *introduced to a famous author*.

Coherence

The cohesive devices we have discussed help to bind elements of a text together so that we know what is being referred to and how the phrases and sentences relate to each other. But it is perfectly possible to construct a text which, although it is rich in such devices, makes little sense because it is not coherent. The following example is fairly cohesive but it is not terribly coherent:

> This made her afraid. It was open at the letters page. His eyes were shut and she noticed the *Daily Mail* at his side. She knew then that he had read her contribution. Gillian came round the corner of the house and saw her husband sitting in his usual chair on the terrace. She wished now that she had never written to the paper.

As we can see, for a text to have coherence, it needs to have some kind of internal logic which the reader can follow with or without the use of prominent cohesive devices. When a text is coherent, the reader can understand at least two things:

- **The writer's purpose** – the reader should be able to understand what the writer's purpose is. Is it to give information, suggest a course of action, make a judgement on a book or play, or express an opinion about world events, for example? A coherent text will not mask the writer's purpose.
- **The writer's line of thought** – the reader should be able to follow the writer's line of reasoning if the text is a discursive piece. If, on the other hand, it is a narrative, the reader should be able to follow the story and not get confused by time jumps, or too many characters, etc. In a descriptive piece the reader should know what is being described and what it looks, sounds, smells, or tastes like.

  Good instruction manuals show coherence at work so that the user of the manual can clearly follow step-by-step instructions and therefore complete the assembly or procedure successfully. Where people complain about instruction manuals it is often because they are not written coherently enough.

Coherence, therefore, is frequently achieved by the way in which a writer sequences information, and this brings us right back to the issue of genre and text construction. It is precisely because different genres provoke different writing (in order to satisfy the expectations of the discourse community that is being written for) that coherence is achieved. When writers stray outside text construction norms, coherence is one of the qualities that is most at risk. Indeed our description of paragraph constructions on page 21 is, more than anything else, a demonstration of how coherence is achieved.

However, it must not be assumed that genre constraints serve to stifle creativity – or that the need for coherence implies a lack of experimentation. Whether or not writers choose to accept or violate genre constraints (and thereby, perhaps affect the coherence of their texts) is up to them.

Register

The text below is an example of the 'sleeve-note' genre – the musical description which comes with CDs to explain what the listener will hear (in this case Mahler's *9th Symphony*). Non-musical readers, while recognising the names of instruments (e.g. *cello*, *harp*, *horn*, *viola*), might have more difficulty with terms such as *sparsely scored*, *syncopated rhythm*, *sextuplet*, but these are easily understood by those who are familiar with music terminology:

> Mahler first presents, in a brief and sparsely scored introduction, four very basic ideas which assume importance throughout the movement: the cellos' and horns' opening syncopated rhythm (three notes); the harp's first strident four notes; five notes played by muted horn; and an accompanimental flutter – a sextuplet – played by the violas.

From the sleeve-note for Mahler's *9th Symphony* by Stephen Petit, Philips records

These sleeve-notes are written in a particular type of musical **register** which we might describe as 'classical' and 'academic'. Register is a word used to denote the actual language that we use in a particular situation when communicating with a particular group of people. Once a genre has been chosen and identified, it is the register the writer chooses that determines the choice of words. Texts in the same genre, therefore, can be written in different registers: the sleeve-notes for a new album from Eminem or Christina Aguilera will probably be written in a different register, one from the other, and certainly from the words accompanying a new recording of works by Bach or Handel. However, the more closely a sub-genre is identified (i.e. 'classical music sleeve-notes') the more likely it is that the genre will determine what register the piece is written in.

One aspect of register is the choice of **topic vocabulary**. In the case of the Mahler text, phrases like *sparsely scored*, *muted horn*, and *accompanimental flutter* exemplify this kind of choice. They would not be used in notes for a pop record, nor would they be found in a scientific journal or a computer manual.

Register, then, involves the choice of topic vocabulary to suit the subject matter of the piece. However, register is not just about topic-vocabulary choice. It is also about the **tone** of a piece – how formal or informal it is. The advertisement below, for example, is clearly designed for sophisticated readers using, as it does, descriptive words such as *entrancing*, *merest hint*, and *gentle restraint*. These are distancing words in some ways, appealing to cool and elegant readers who aspire to the poise and beauty which the *Essenzia* product will hopefully bestow on them.

New look for a new year

Possibility ...

For a delicate entrancing look, dust your eyes with the merest hint of colour. Suggest shades for your lips and nails with gentle restraint. Suffuse your face with possibility.

Be sophisticated, be subtle.

Be mysterious, be mesmerising.

Be you ...

ESSENZIA

We explore beauty, quietly.

GOOD NIGHT OUT?

Here are our top tips for a good night out:

1 Don't wear skimpy clobber. You'll catch your death. Splash out on a cosy jumper. Cover your legs and they'll stop shaking!

2 Too much tonsil tennis can be confusing. Much better to keep the lads guessing and your head clear.

3 Ease up on the slap. We all like a bit of lippy and there's nothing wrong with blusher or shadow, but you don't want to look like a neon sign!

However, the extract above, which comes from a magazine for young teenagers, is written in an entirely different register, even though it touches on similar topics (e.g. appearance and make-up).

The vocabulary in this piece reflects a significantly less formal or distanced tone than in the previous example. Terms like *skimpy clobber*, *tonsil tennis*, *lads*, *ease up on the slap* (= use less make-up), and *lippy* (= lipstick) are all slang terms which were current when the piece was written. Such words and expressions are of their time, and are used informally between (young) friends. The topic has determined the vocabulary, in other words, but so has the tone which the writer wished to use to communicate with the audience.

Implications for learning and teaching

We have seen that writing in a particular genre tends to lead to the use of certain kinds of text construction. This must have implications not only for the way people write in their first or main language, but also for the ways in which we teach people to become better writers in a foreign language. Since people write in different registers depending on different topics and on the tone they wish to adopt for their intended audience, then students need to be made aware of how this works in English so that they too can choose language appropriately. If, for example, a class of people studying business English need to learn how to write job application letters, then clearly they will need to know how, typically, such application letters are put together and what register they are written in – something that will depend, often, on the kind of job they are applying for. If our students wish to learn how to write discursive essays for some exam, then it follows that they will benefit from knowing how, typically, such essays are constructed.

Students will also benefit greatly from learning how to use cohesive devices effectively and from being prompted to give a significant amount of attention to coherent organisation within a genre.

It would be impossible to explain different genre constructions or to demonstrate text cohesion devices without letting students see examples of the kind of writing we wish them to aim for. Writing within genres in the language classroom implies, therefore, a significant attention to reading.

- **Reading and writing** – students might well enjoy writing 'lonely hearts' advertisements for example. It would, anyway, provide vocabulary practice but it might also allow them to be imaginative and, hopefully, have some fun. However, the only way to get them to do this is to let them read examples of the kind of thing we want them to do before we ask them to write.

  If we ask our students to read 'lonely hearts' advertisements (because, later, we are going to ask them to write their own versions), we can ask them to analyse the texts they have in front of them. In order to draw their attention to the way the texts are structured, we might ask them to put the following genre elements in the order they occur in the texts:

> Contact instruction (e.g. *Write Box 2562*)
> Description of advertiser (e.g. *Good-looking 35-year-old rock climber and music lover*)
> Description of desired responder (e.g. *young woman with similar interests*)
> For (description of activities/desired outcome) (e.g. *for relaxation, fun, friendship*)
> 'Would like to meet' (e.g. *WLTM*)

We can then ask them to find the language which is used for each element. Now, as a result of reading and analysing a text (or texts – e.g. a number of different advertisements of the same type) they are in a position to have a go at writing in the same genre themselves.

Obviously, we would only ask students to write 'lonely hearts' advertisements for fun. When we ask them to write a business letter, however, we will do so because we think they may need to write such letters in the future. Thus we will let them read a variety of letters, drawing their attention to features of layout (e.g. where the addresses go, how the date is written). We will make sure they recognise features of text construction (e.g. how business letters often start, what the relationship between the paragraphs is, how business-letter writers sign off) and language use (e.g. what register the letters are written in). We may also have students analyse the letters to spot examples of cohesive language. They will then be in a position to write their own similar letters obeying the same genre constraints and employing at least some of the same language.

We do not have to tell the students everything. We can, for example, get them to look at five or six versions of the same news story. It will be their job to identify any similarities of construction and to find the vocabulary items and phrases which occur on more than two occasions. They will then be able to use these when writing their own similar newspaper articles.

At lower levels (e.g. beginners and elementary), we may not be able to expect that students can analyse complete texts and then go on to write imitations of them. But we can, through **parallel writing**, get them to look at a paragraph, for example, and then, having discussed its structure, write their own similar ones. By using the same paragraph construction (see page 21) and some of the same vocabulary, they can, even at this early stage, write well-formed paragraphs in English.

In other words, where students are asked to write within a specific genre, a prerequisite for their successful completion of the task will be to read and analyse texts written within that same genre.

However, there is a danger in concentrating too much on the study and analysis of different genres. Over-emphasis may lead us into the genre trap.

- **The genre trap** – if we limit students to imitating what other people have written, then our efforts may end up being **prescriptive** (you must do it like this) rather than **descriptive** (for your information, this is how it is often done). Students may feel that the only way they can write a text or a paragraph is to slavishly imitate what they have been studying. Yet writing is a creative undertaking whether we are designing an advertisement or putting up a notice in school. Unless we are careful, an emphasis on text construction and language use may lead to little more than text 'reproduction'.

  A focus on genre can avoid these pitfalls if we ensure that students understand that the examples they read are **examples** rather than **models** to be slavishly followed. This is more difficult at beginner level, however, where students may well want to stick extremely closely to paragraph models.

  A way out of this dilemma is to make sure that students see a number of examples of texts within a genre, especially where the examples all have individual differences. This will alert students to the descriptive rather than prescriptive nature of genre analysis. Thus when students look at newspaper advertisements, we will show them a variety of different types. We will make sure they see a variety of different recipes (if they are going to write recipes of their own) so that they both recognise the similarities between them, but also become aware of how, sometimes, their construction is different. For each genre that they encounter, in other words, we will try to ensure a **variety of exposure** so that they are not tied to one restrictive model.

  We will also need to accept that genre analysis and writing is not the only kind of writing that students (or teachers) need or want to do. On the contrary, we may often encourage students to write about themselves, including stories about what they have done recently. Sometimes, in our

lessons, we should get students to write short essays, compositions, or dialogues straight out of their heads with no reference to genre at all.

We need to remind ourselves that understanding a genre and writing within it is only one part of the picture for our students. As we saw in Chapter 1, we can help them enormously if we focus on the actual process of writing. Reconciling a concentration on genre with the desirability of involving students in the writing process – and finding a balance between the two – will be a major theme of the rest of this book.

Conclusions

In Chapter 2 we have:

- described writing in terms of genre.
- discussed what genre means and looked at examples of texts within certain genres.
- shown how, even within one genre, there can be varieties of text construction.
- analysed a number of texts in terms of their construction, showing how strict genre formats can both constrain and stimulate authors.
- seen examples of cohesive devices within a text.
- discussed the issue of coherence.
- seen how writers choose their words depending on genre, topic, and tone.
- said that genre analysis implies that students should read before they write so that they can see how texts are organised and what language is used.
- pointed out, however, that if written genres are used only for students to copy slavishly then they may be counter-productive. A sensible approach to genre, therefore, is to show students many examples within a genre and to use genre studies in conjunction with other kinds of writing activity.

Looking ahead

- In the next chapter we will discuss the role and status of writing in the L2 classroom and discuss the different ways in which students can be asked to write.
- Subsequent chapters will look at different kinds of writing activity.