



CHAPTER FIVE:

WRITING IN GENRES

Having looked at the general idea of technical writing, the relationship of technical writing to the user, the visual communication angle of technical writing, and the process of document design in tech writing, we next need to cover a major pillar of technical writing in the minds of many: genres. (This is the part where we talk about report writing).

When we work in genres, we're working in what are essentially categories of texts that have formed over time to mean something. We often run into genre when it comes to books and television, with some books or shows (or films) labeled with categories like "Suspense" or "Mystery" or "Comedy." We can also get much more specific, especially in television where there are very well-worn genres that have appeared over time, so you might run into a "police procedural," a very specific type of show. In the case of police procedural, you have a show that is entirely about the process of the police investigating a particular crime. The genre gives you a clue as to the general type of show or film you're going to watch. (Bear with me in this discussion—you may wonder why I'm talking about TV, but I promise it will all wrap back around in a useful way in a bit).

Genre, however, is not specific to the point that it controls everything about a production: genre is fluid and changes over time. For example, the police procedural of the earlier years of television with shows like *Dragnet* did not have a major relationship component to the show—it was just about the crime for the most part. However, if you made a police procedural today without heavy interaction between different leads and ongoing stories about the police and their lives, you'd likely have a flop on your hands. The genre has evolved and expectations have changed.

Many genres come with an expectation even that you'll have a sub-genre that will come into play to flavor the dominant genre. Think about police procedurals again—you have shows that are much more direct and serious like the various iterations of behemoths like *Law & Order* and then you have shows much more playful at times such as *Castle* or even shows that skirt further towards the edge of the genre (if they belong there at all) like *Psych* (A true gem of television, up there with *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Midsomer Murders*, and *Fringe*). In these cases, there is a general approach to the genre, but all of that is filtered through the general gist of the sub-genre, such as comedy. With very common genres like the police procedural we often judge these shows on how they take the genre constraints and then push them or subvert them with a secondary genre or a new approach. Very few shows gain success for being an ideal procedural—it's all about what they do beyond that framework that gets folks excited. Sorry *Dragnet*.

Now, let's bring this back home—all of what I've said applies to technical writing genres. When we think about a genre like a report, that term is just like a genre in television like a police procedural. The term itself gives you a general idea of what the document you're going to create might look like, but for the most part it is utterly meaningless if you're expecting the genre to give you a detailed insight into what your report should look like. Just like the television examples, the technical writing genres are not laws carved into the bedrock of reality—they are categories, fluid ones at that, that give you a general gist of the type of document you'll be making without really getting into the specifics of things.

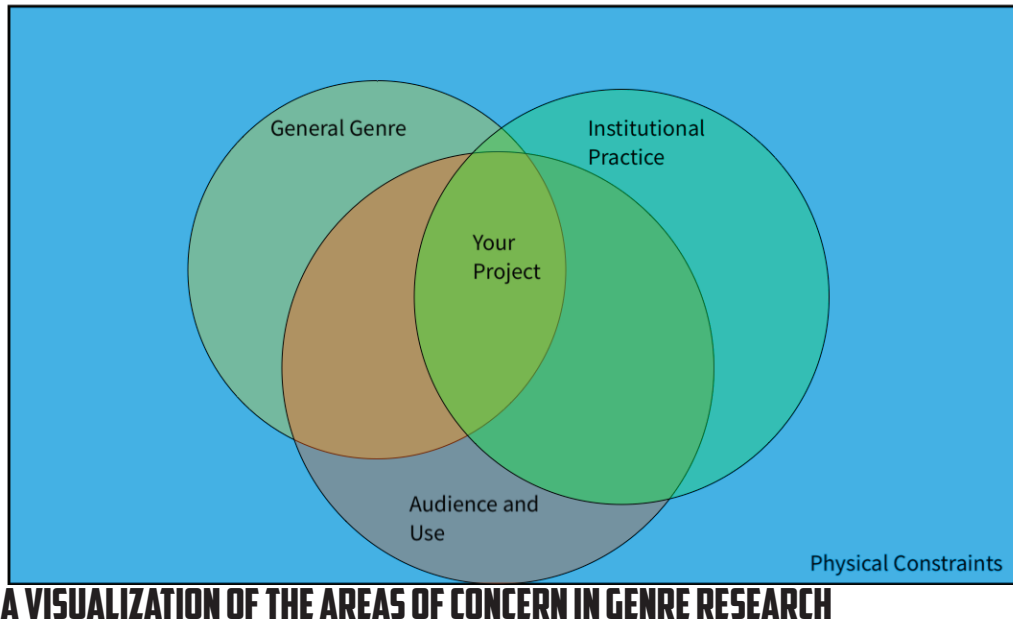
Asking someone to teach you how to write a report or any other genre in the specific sense of what steps to take and what sections to include is akin to asking someone to teach you how to make a po-

like procedural—they can give you a general sense of the expectations and permutations of the genre in a broad and classic sense, but they cannot tell you exactly how to write it. And, to go even further and hammer this point home, if I was to tell you how to write a report it would be at best a polite fiction. My idea of a report and your future employers' idea of a report would differ, and even the types of reports you'd write within the same organization would change over time. There is no secret bastion of knowledge where you can uncover the true secrets of writing the ultimate report, no secret recipe to follow for success across time and space. And to be clear, anyone who tells you different isn't being very honest. So, what are we left with? We are left with research. Imagine that. Didn't see that coming, did you? :)

Genre work, just like any other part of technical writing, relies on research to get things right. Report writing, white paper writing, grant/proposal writing, technical description writing, and any other type of genre you'd want to associate with professional or technical writing will always rely on the context that you're writing in and the expectations that surround you. That isn't to say that having a general sense of a genre is useless—it isn't at all! You need to know the general sense of the genre just to orient yourself and help identify it. But, expecting a general sense of the genre to guide you from start to finish is expecting too much from too little.

When you operate within an organizational context and you're writing a genre like a white paper or a report, you're often writing within a series of constraints that will guide your work. On one level, you have the general gist of the genre that will be guiding what is going on. Unless your organization likes to call things odd names (my niece, for example, used to call buzzards “pelican badgers” for reasons unknown to anyone), the general genre constraints will apply. At the same time, the formal history of the genre within your organization will come into play—how have people done this in the past, and how do they do it now? In addition, the physical format of your genre will impact what you do (is it a template, or is it something that you have more control over?). Finally, the audience and use of the document will come to play as well. This confluence of forces will shape the final format of your text, and unless your workplace has very strict rules on such things (and some do, I'll freely admit) there will be some movement between documents as to what the genre looks like and does.

When you think about researching your work in a genre, realize that each of these elements will play into the others to create a final version of your genre. In some cases one element may be more dominant—for example you may have a use or audience that is hyper-specific, such as a federal grant that asks for a series of employment documents and professional assessments of your project by subject-matter experts (such as an archival expert if you're getting funds to preserve an artifact or archive). You might also have an audience that is extremely formal or informal that will impact how you write, which may clash with your institution's existing culture—it gets tricky fast. Below you'll see the confluence of all of this mapped in a visual form for those that prefer to see rather than to read:



In each case, you'll want to query the general genre, the institutional practice, and the audience and use of your text to get an idea of what needs to be done.

For the rest of this chapter, we'll break down the discussion of genre into two major bits of content: we'll cover the general questions of research you need to carry out work on any particular genre situation, and we'll go through a top-level overview of a few genres and what you can generally expect in those genres. The real heart of the chapter will be the discussion of the research questions—they will be your guide in virtually any genre-dependent situation. The coverage of the various genres at the top level will supplement this by giving you an idea of what genres you might be called on to write and some general (subject to context) tips you might want to know when you're writing in those genres.

GENRE RESEARCH

When it comes to researching genre, as with almost all of our research that we've covered, it comes down to understanding the situation you're operating in and the expectations the situation places on you and the amount of freedom the situation allows you that you can make use of. The level of research needed really depends to a large extent on the amount of freedom that you have with the genre as it is designed physically. If there is a template, you're going to be highly constrained, but if there isn't a template you're going to get to have a bit more power. General genre, institutional practices, and audience and use still come into play in restricted situations, but in different ways than in a truly open context.

PHYSICAL CONTEXT

Some genres have very little freedom baked into them—think about most of the forms you fill out when you visit a doctor's office—this is done by design to get a certain type of information and to control what gets recorded and what doesn't. Forms tend to be the types of genres that strive to be

durable—the particular information recorded is there because someone somewhere has decided that it matters a great deal to them, though the value isn't always apparent on the front end.

Forms and other limited genres are useful because they create a set of data points that can be correlated across time and participants, creating a general sense of how things are working in the broader context as well as a sense of history in individual cases. Having a record of all of your vitals for example gives your doctor a sense of how your overall health changes from month to month and year to year. In fact, these types of ongoing records are vital in catching things like high blood pressure and other diseases that come on slowly at times.

The same benefits associated with forms also come with other genres that are highly regulated like grant and proposal applications. Many times these applications are highly specific to the particular project and agency that is offering money for projects or soliciting work. The categories exist because they matter in the rubric that the organization will use to judge the participants; they also exist because they help create a uniform standard for comparing the different applicants. Imagine how difficult it would be to compare different grant projects if the only universal requirement was that you send in a document describing your project—it would make valid project-to-project comparison much more difficult!

In contexts where you have very little control over the physical constraints that your text will work within, you may think that your job is fairly simple—you just fill in the data and move along with your life. That can be true in some situations, but especially in competitive environments where your text will be battling others that have the same constraints, the opposite is true. If you have five sections that are each limited to 500 words then the weight of each of those sections and the weight of each of those 500 words is exaggerated far beyond the normal weight that any given selection of 500 words would ever have. They matter because there is very little room for error or for elaboration. You simply must do the very best job you can with your allotment, and ideally you'll do a better and more persuasive job than anyone else writing under those same constraints.

In competitive cases, you need to focus intensely on the information provided about what is going on and how your text will be weighed. You need to be strategic in the deployment of every single word that you're using. Many times researching your audience and their description of these constraints can be useful, but you also stand to gain a great deal of advantage by having a clear understanding of the general expectations of the type of genre you're writing and an understanding of how your organization operates and uses these texts.

Because of the weighting power that forms have on what is valued and what isn't, the contents of any given form can have an incredible amount of sway over the politics of any particular writing situation. The form tells everyone involved what officially matters. Anything that the form omits or doesn't cover simply doesn't matter in the world of the form and making a case that it does matter means battling uphill against the form and those behind it. This is one of the reasons, by the way, that long term residents of bureaucratic systems are valuable assets and why institutional knowledge and history matters a great deal: if you know how the system works and what it values and why, you can craft a text that will get things done. If you don't have this knowledge, you may lack the ability to get a task done because you don't know the particular language and presentation that a situation

requires to create value within a given form and institution.

One other aspect of physical constraints in the context of forms worth covering is the interaction that forms have with the level of freedom that those working with the forms have. Like any automated system, forms remove a great deal of power from those doing the work. At times this is very much the goal behind the entire system. In these contexts the value of individuals to the system depends on the expertise needed to fill out of form or run a system. The more work the system does and the less work the individual operating the form or system does, the more replaceable any particular individual can be. As you can imagine, many organizations and companies that chase after profit and other metrics that focus on data rather than people love the idea of replaceable workers. The less value a worker has in a given situation, the less power they have to negotiate for more pay, better benefits, and better working conditions. The idea here is that the less power workers have, the less they can demand and the more profit and other metrics that can be squeezed out of a given context.

In case it isn't evident from the rest of this text, I find this practice to be more than a little bit troubling. The true value in a given organization rests in the people that know how things work and what is needed for success. A system or form is only ever a poor substitute for those folks, but their value is often hidden to those that don't see the daily grind of the workplace. One pillar of technical writing is advocating for such individuals, allowing their worth to be more visible and giving them more agency. At the end of the day, people deserve to be treated as people rather than data points, and from a purely functional standpoint you'll likely have a better end experience if folks doing the work in a situation have freedom to develop and leverage expertise and are valued for that expertise. Sure you can get things done with less expertise and more automation, but the end result of that trade is you're blindly swapping money and metrics for the well being of people and hard-earned local expertise; that seldom ends well in the long run.

Having focused on the power of forms and limited context, we also need to focus on the physical aspects of production in genre. In some situations, you'll be working in a digital environment where everything will be accessible and readable via devices. In these contexts, color and length matter a great deal less than in a paper-based world. Knowing where the genre will be living helps you because it gives you a set of limitations in all your other research and choices. You'll want to keep in mind that the format you're allowed to take will limit things. For example, if you're creating a white paper that will be printed, you'll want to keep in mind what the length and color usage will do to costs. If you're creating a brochure to be passed out, there are severe limits on text in a traditional tri-fold brochure that will control what is possible. Physical context is the lens that filters almost everything else.

For assessing physical context, a few quick questions can be helpful to give you some guidance in your research:

PHYSICAL CONTEXT RESEARCH

1. IS THERE A SPECIFIC FORM THAT I MUST USE FOR THIS DOCUMENT/GENRE?
2. IS THIS AN ELECTRONIC DOCUMENT OR A PAPER-BASED DOCUMENT?
3. WHAT ARE THE BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS OF THIS PROJECT IF I'M PRINTING THINGS?
4. IS THERE A PHYSICAL FORMAT THAT MUST BE FOLLOWED, SUCH AS A TRI-FOLD BROCHURE?

There are obviously other things that you can and should ask, but these questions form a useful starting point for any investigation into genre.

GENERAL GENRE

In addition to looking at the physical constraints of a project, you need to investigate the general gist of the genre that you're going to be writing. We'll call this the triple-g of the situation. While the genre doesn't tell us everything we'd ever want to know and more about a given writing situation, and it certainly won't give us a set of concrete rules to follow, it can give us a firm understanding of the expectations that are generally out there for a certain type of text and what we need to do get our text recognized as a member of a particular genre (unless of course that isn't our goal at all).

For example, reports tend to report things and focus on providing information that is then used to inform decision making. The goal behind any given report is not simply to report findings—you're not just gathering data for the sake of gathering data. Instead, the report is being used as part of a decision-making process. Now, I suppose in some particularly vindictive contexts you might be generating a report for no other reason than the person responsible for your work doesn't like you and wants to make your life miserable, but generally speaking reports should have a role to play in deliberations. You may have already made the leap here, but in case you haven't, this then leads us to understand that with reports in particular what can matter a great deal is the types of information that will be valued in the deliberation the report is going to contribute to. Your 150 page report on the feasibility of a water garden being installed across the middle of your corporate campus will be of no value if you don't build the report around the metrics and data that your organization's decision makers will respect (or take the time to create metrics and explain their value if they are foreign to the organization).

Understanding things like the nature of reports and why they exist is part of understanding the general gist of a genre: it doesn't tell you how to do something, but it often can tell you why that something is done historically. Understanding the general gist of things after getting a handle on the context can be valuable because it helps you understand the institutional practice you find yourself

within. Once you get how reports work, then you realize that the particular focus in your individual context on the executive summary a little bit more—the decision makers involved apparently highly value the short gist of a project or simply can't be bothered to read longer projects that don't interest them after a quick skim.

One other aspect of a genre can be valuable in the general sense—the popular associations with the genre. For example, reports are usually not the sort of document that immediately quickens the pulse of your average individual. Yes, some people get quite excited about reports, but people get excited for all kinds of weird stuff. Generally speaking, reports have a rather dry and dull reputation. If you know that, you can go out of your way to counteract that in the structure and format of your text, as best allowed by other constraints. It is always good to know when you're going into a situation with a fundamental disadvantage.

To focus your work on the general gist of genres, the following questions may be of some use:

GENERAL GENRE RESEARCH:

1. WHAT IS THE GENERAL DEFINITION OF THIS GENRE?
2. WHAT IS THIS GENRE GENERALLY USED TO DO?
3. WHAT ASSOCIATIONS DOES THIS GENRE USUALLY HAVE?
4. IS THIS GENRE HIGHLY REGULATED OR DOES IT REGULARLY SUPPORT EXTREME INTERPRETATIONS?

Once you have this information available, you have another level of clarification and context to add to your investigation of the practices in your institution and the audience for your text.

INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE

Once you've ironed out the physical constraints and the general gist of your genre, you need to take a long hard look at what your organization does with the genre you're writing within and how that genre operates in the context of your workplace. Just like different types of television series can be flavored by the broadcast network that supports them, or at least carry associations with audiences (think about the types of shows you associate with say HBO and Hallmark), genre and institution are linked. When you live and work within a workplace, you have to operate with the constraints that come along with it. You can certainly make an impact on how things are done, but that isn't usually something you have the power to do immediately without any dialogue or discussions.

For example, your organization may have an annual publication that it puts out for clients that covers major projects that have been completed this year and the benefits of those projects. It may be a weird hybrid genre, one that exists within your context as almost a take on the white paper. In the landscaping business, this might be a useful way to both celebrate the artisanship of your organization, create a sense of camaraderie between your clients, and could serve as the impetus for future work by clients that are on your list but haven't done much work lately. Think of it as the corporate

equivalent of keeping up with the Joneses.

In the context of our example, there may be constraints that come with this genre. It may always have the same color paper with the same general length and same general types of material within. If the primary purpose of the genre is to get people to come in for more work, knowing that also helps because it gives you a sense of how your institution values the work and what will be seen internally as good work (which may not be the same as what is seen externally as good work on the text).

Even in cases where the physical constraints are already decided for your organization, such as with a call for proposals that has a very specific set of requirements, there may be a historically successful or required template within your organization, a certain way of doing things. In that case, knowing how things are normally done helps you understand when and where you need to advocate for different choices and whether making certain choices is a wise use of your political capital. There is no use burning through the good will you've developed in an organization just to get a minor change to a document that really won't matter.

For our purposes, the following can be some useful questions where querying your institutional practices:

INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE RESEARCH:

- 1. WHAT DOES THIS DOCUMENT NORMALLY LOOK LIKE AND CONTAIN?**
- 2. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT FOR OUR ORGANIZATION?**
- 3. WHICH PARTS OF THIS DOCUMENT ARE HIGHLY VALUED INTERNALLY?**
- 4. WHAT IS THE NORMAL WORKFLOW FOR PRODUCING THIS DOCUMENT?**
- 5. IF THERE ARE EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS, HOW ARE THEY NORMALLY ADDRESSED?**

These questions can give you a great starting place in your work, allowing you to figure out the particular expression of this genre in your workplace and the way the document is put together, why it is put together that way, and the workflow behind it that you may very well need to respect (such as letting the CFO see your draft before you get it edited because they have strong feelings about the text). Again, this is one more level of clarity you can gain in viewing the process you're going to carry out, one that helps you put the final level of research into even more specific of a context.

AUDIENCE AND USE

The last level of context that we'll cover is the intended audience and use. All the other levels of context inform our process, but the final layer of complexity comes from our use and the users of the document. This level differs from all other levels in that the user and use are often going to be without an advocate in the design process, unless the process has been explicitly designed around them from the start. Because of this one-directional workflow in many situations, your job as a technical writer is to gather as much as possible from this level that exists outside of your production process.

There are many documents out there that are visually gorgeous, make sense within a particular genre and physical context, and match up with what a given organization does, yet they fail to engage and serve their audience and assist in the tasks they're associated with. This isn't to say the other influences don't matter—each and every influence on a genre matters a great deal. But, of all the constraints on a genre, the audience and use are the most likely to be successfully ignored, that is they are the most likely to cause no consequences if ignored during the production pipeline. They don't so much create issues during production as much as they create issues after you're already out the door with a deliverable and it's too late to make changes.

Keeping in mind that audience and use can cause an otherwise successful document to fail, you can present alterations from this level of context from the viewpoint of a return on investment in the overall document creation process. You don't want all of this great work going to waste because the final audience didn't sit on the same level as the folks doing the writing and approval. As with any audience-centered process, you may run into pushback and need to scale back your goals until you can prove your point about audience/user information being valuable in the workflow of your group. But, I think you'll find the contributions this level of context brings can't be understated.

To research the audience and use, we'll primarily be walking along the same path that we traced in our earlier chapter on audience, but I'll narrow those down a bit for our discussion of genre in particular:

AUDIENCE AND USE RESEARCH:

1. WHO WILL BE USING THIS DOCUMENT?
2. WHO WILL BE ASSISTING THE USERS OF THIS DOCUMENT?
3. HOW WILL THEY BE USING THE TEXT?
4. HOW WILL THEIR USE DIFFER, IF AT ALL, FROM THE NORMAL USE OF THE GENRE?
5. HOW WILL THE USER'S CONTEXT IMPACT THEIR USE OF THE TEXT?

Once you have this information in hand, you'll be able to bring all of the various genre influences together into a single discussion. Keep in mind that the audience factors and use factors will be those that you may need to advocate for the most strenuously to those that are production-oriented rather than audience-oriented.

BRINGING IT TOGETHER

Once you've built out a picture of all of the influences on your genre, you can start to plan your actions accordingly. You may find it helpful to create a table with information on each level of influence, giving you a broad view of what is going on and what the various stakeholders and forces on your work may be pushing for.

One thing I want to stress is that this isn't a process that should always come into play when you're writing. Once you really get a genre, you will find yourself pushing through the writing process much quicker and with more surety. You'll simply get things down and not have to worry about

the specifics as much. You may eventually even get to dictate the specifics as someone with greater political power in your organization. Now, that isn't to say you shouldn't be critical of your work and reflect on it on, but by the very nature of how we learn to use genres and make them part of our workflows, this will be something that fades over time as you build your own expertise.

However, you will want to follow this process, or your own loose adaptation of this process, when you're working in a new genre and a new context. Correctly performing a genre for all of those involved is a crucial step to gaining acceptance for a text. You can't expect your report to be taken seriously if no one believes it is a report.

SECTION QUESTIONS

1. One way we show our understanding of genre and place is through satire—good satire demonstrates more than anything a fundamental knowledge of the nature of the subject of that satire. As someone who grew up in the 80s and 90s, *The Simpsons* first 8 or so seasons will always for me be the peak of satire of my American life. Think about genres you are very familiar with. Take a pass at satirizing that genre by doing something unexpected or silly with.
2. How does physical context change the way a genre works? Pick a genre from your institution that you normally use in one physical context and map out a plan to shift it to another genre. What happens?
3. Institutions evolve and change genres and terms the same way everyone else does. Do some research on your institution. What are some previous slogans, colors, symbols, and associations that are no longer part of the organization?
4. Sometimes a genre is misused by an audience because of a mismatch between what is needed and what is possible. What are some examples you can think of that involve misusing a genre?

POPULAR GENRES IN TECHNICAL WRITING

Having looked at a method to investigate genres, I want to shift our focus in the back half of this chapter to introduce you to a few specific genres in the world of technical writing. This will be a brief overview, giving you a window into what the general gist and goal of these genres tends to be in my experience as a writer, instructor, and researcher. Please note that between cultures and companies these documents may be drastically different—these are really just some popular conceptions of the genres themselves. To really dig into what they look and feel like, you'll need to do some original research. Surprised? Probably not at this point in our text.

I'd like to briefly cover some key players in technical writing circles: proposals and grants, white papers, reports, technical descriptions, instructions, and manuals. This is by no means an exhaustive list of genres—you'll find an almost endless supply of them out there. This is also by no means a definitive definition of each, but I think each overview will give you a window into the ways that these genres work and the types of problems they were invented to solve.

GRANTS AND PROPOSAL

Grants and proposals are one of the most action-oriented genres that you can work with in technical writing, though they often also tend to be some of the most rigorously defined by forces outside of

your control. A grant or proposal often comes from a specific solicitation by a funding source that is either looking for a particular project to be completed for them or looking to support projects that complete certain goals.

In a corporate context, proposals will be solicited for various jobs an organization might need. For example, I might put out a request for proposals and bids to create a new computer lab infrastructure in my building on a college campus. In this case, I'm soliciting folks who will complete a particular task and tell me how they'd go about doing that and what their budget would be, guided in all of this by my own suggestions and guidelines.

The world of grants can be quite different because grants are often not designed for a particular activity: they are instead designed to promote a type of activity. For example, there might be a civic beautification grant available in a large metro area that solicits projects from local artists to create public artwork that enhances the town and tells part of the local story to those that interact with the art. For the funding agency, giving these grants out is a way they can encourage and bankroll a particular type of activity without actually completing that activity themselves. It offers a way to make use of funding to influence activities without jumping into the business of doing a particular activity or pushing for a particular cause.

In some cases, grant funding agencies have a very particular set of values that they advocate for, or a very particular way of having projects completed, such as mandatory partners on a project. Be aware of these goals and values—they may not always mesh with your organization's values and skills. Almost any grant funding organization has an agenda for their funds, and it is entirely fitting that they would—it is their money after all. Just be aware of this and the issues it can raise. (For example, getting funds from some organizations may be more politically hazardous in certain areas than others, such as getting funding from an organization that supports charter schools and school choice in an area that is strongly against such measures).

Generally speaking, a grant or proposal has a few major sections, though the sections will always be contingent on the funder of the task at hand. The call for grants or proposals will tell you what should be submitted, what is needed, and sometimes will give you an insight into what matters and why. You simply must follow these recommendations. They are not optional! When a grant or proposal is judged, it will be judged by these rules and recommendations. Anything that doesn't fit will be discarded—an easy way to winnow the pile of applications.

Your goal with a grant or proposal is to show how you'd fulfill the goals of the call for proposals in a way that meets the needs of your funder. You need to show you understand the current situation, that you have a clear plan for action, that your group is competent and trustworthy for this type of work, and that you have a legitimate budget and timeline. Beyond these you may have some specific sections and deliverables requested, but usually any grant or proposal will give you a chance to talk about these types of subjects.

A good grant or proposal has a narrative structure. This doesn't mean that it's suddenly story time and it was a dark stormy night. What I mean is that you'll want to have an overarching narrative and theme to your work. You will frame the problem in a way that makes sense for your solution.

You'll frame your past work in a way that shows your ability to complete this current task. In short, you'll be persuasive. There are any multitude of valid and honest ways to tell the story of a grant or proposal; you'll just need to pick the right one for your situation. Again, this isn't a call to stretch the truth—lies and misdirection in a proposal is a great way to get into legal trouble or blacklisted. Instead, this is a reminder that your presentation of “the facts” is not enough.

You need to think about the context and who you're writing to and why. If you're offering new technology, you can frame the current technology as out of date. If you're offering green technology, you can frame the current technology as excessively energy intensive. Each of these frames is a valid one, but the pairs I've created make more sense than framing the current technology as outdated and offering green technology or framing the current technology as inefficient and offering new technology. Remember that this is a competitive genre and you need to make the best and most accurate case possible for your team.

When you're looking at how to frame things, look for what your organization values, what you've excelled at, and what the funding group values and what they excel at and ask for. You'll often find a way to draw connections between your group and the funding group. In some cases you won't be able to make many if any connections—this can be a sign this grant or proposal is a bad fit.

As a final note, and one that goes with all genres that we'll discuss—do not use boilerplate texts. Don't create a generic grant application and send it to everyone with a few names changed. This is a great way to fail at grant and proposal submission. No one likes boilerplate texts and boilerplate texts are incredibly obvious in their overly generic approach to everything. Take a little time and customize your texts to the situation and you'll go much further!

WHITE PAPERS

White papers are an odd genre, one that is not universally present in professional communication, but one worthy of noting. At its core, a white paper is a sales document, one that is designed to motivate someone to make a purchase. What is intriguing about a white paper in our context is that they are usually designed to educate someone enough to make them desire your current product or service. You can and should make a pitch for your organization, but usually after educating someone as to why it would be of value at all. (Note: white papers are not the same outside of the US. You may run into other documents called white papers that are totally different. Cultural context matters!)

To help explain how white papers work, I'll give you an example from my own background. Growing up, my father was the third generation owner of the family tire repair business. When I was younger, the primary work the shop did was the repair of damaged tires and the purchase of new tires. You could also get maintenance work like balances and rotations. At the time though, oil changes weren't even on the menu. During the 90s, my father started getting white papers from companies selling machines for front and rear wheel alignment. These white papers came with informative models that you could use to demonstrate what an unaligned tire would do to a vehicle and generally educated you on the value of wheel alignment on the life of your tires. It also made the business case for wheel alignment and advocated for a particular machine from a particular manufacturer. After reading the documents and talking with sales folks, my father purchased the machines and from that point on his business had wheel alignments as a service.

In the context of the 90s, wheel alignment wasn't something that a traditional mom and pop tire shop would have covered. It required specialized equipment that was not cheap, and it required special training for operators of that equipment. Getting a mom and pop shop to buy the expensive equipment directly wasn't a winning strategy—the price alone could spook people. Instead of making an immediate sales pitch, white papers and strategies tailored around education allow the manufacturers of this equipment to explain the importance of and sales potential of the machinery in order to help the audience to get to a point where they understood the technology enough to make an informed choice.

White papers are often used in areas where technology is advancing in a way that needs explanation. If you're offering a new piece of software or a new type of service, you may very well need a white paper to make the case for your approach. White papers don't make as much sense in established areas with established technology that you're going to be selling to folks. If you have a new spin on that technology, maybe a white paper makes sense. Otherwise, it's not going to be that useful.

REPORTS

We've already hit on reports, and so I won't spend that much time on them here. Suffice it to say that reports are documents that give someone information on a process or series of events or a plan, anything really, and then allows the person who has that information to make decisions or advocate for decisions or courses of action. If you want to blame someone for reports, blame a business major—a large part of the logic behind business majors is that they are experts at decision-making in business environments, aided by reports as part of their understanding of what is going on and what they should be doing. The rise of reports came along with the rise of the professional business major, allowing information to move beyond people and into paper and other sources.

With any report, ask yourself who is going to be using this document and what they're going to be using the data for. This can vary depending on who is reporting and why. You may be tasked with a feasibility report on a project—in this case, you'll be creating a report that helps decide what actions are available and whether they make sense. You can also see reports generated by openly or not-so-openly political organizations that have very particular values and goals behind their reporting. Not all reports are created equal.

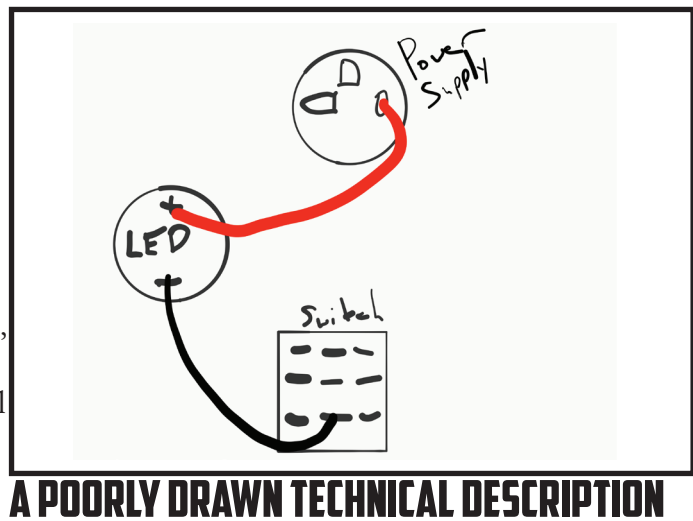
When reporting anything that carries a value judgment, the most important thing you can do is create a set of criteria. If you set up the criteria and define them, you can have a productive discussion because you're making a case for what measures matter and then using those measures to make a judgment call. If your audience agrees with your measures, all the better. If they don't, you'll need to make the case for your measures. Without criteria, your report mostly stands as opinion. I have an opinion, and you have one too. Opinions are great, but when we judge them based off specific criteria we can debate on, we can have a constructive dialog. If we're just railing at each other's opinions with no overarching context to create judgment and value, we're not going to get far. (Just watch some political talk shows and you'll see this in action very quickly).

TECHNICAL DESCRIPTIONS

A classic of technical writing that is often associated with engineering, technical descriptions are fairly self explanatory—they are a technical explanation of how a particular system or device works. The use case for descriptions can vary, depending on who is going to make and share the description. For example, there is a thriving online world of folks that reverse engineer and build their own guitar pedals (effects devices that modify signals for distortion, compression, modulation, etc.). A large part of this community is sharing how a particular pedal works and what the components are within a given pedal, so they share a lot of domain-specific technical descriptions.

Technical descriptions are one of those genres where you may well get a chance to really get into using your field-specific terms and language because they are designed, often, for folks that are already experts or who at least know enough to read through the text. This isn't always true, but it can be many times. Here is a simple technical description of how the LED connects to a guitar pedal, badly drawn by your author:

Now, this particular technical description is entirely visual—that isn't to say that all technical descriptions are, but you do find visuals as a component in the genre. This is a particularly awful description because of my color choice on the black wire between the LED and the switch—you notice it overlaps the minus symbol, making it unclear as to whether it is positive or negative. In addition, I've neglected to include a resistor in this schematic, making it very likely my LED will burn out quickly and be ridiculously bright. But, this crude drawing could very well accompany some text like the following:



“In this pedal the LED is connected directly to a wall-mount power supply input. Not pictured here, a resistor is located between the power supply and the LED, regulating the output of the LED and preventing premature burnout. The ground of the LED connects to the foot switch—several other grounds from the PCB and the input connect here as well.”

In this simple explanation, you get an idea of what is happening in the design. This isn't very technical, but it does tell you what is happening in this particular system of a pedal. That can be enough in the hobbyist's world where you simply need enough understanding to make things happen electronically without mishap. In the world of electric engineering, this would likely be entirely insufficient. Audience and context matter.

Anytime you're going to describe a system or a process, technical description as a genre can come into play. It isn't the most glamorous genre, but it has a useful purpose and helps folks understand how things work.

INSTRUCTIONS

It's come to this. Instructions. You knew they were coming, right? If any genre is associated with the teaching of technical writing, the genre of instructions would be the one.

When we think about instructions, we want to think about them as tools for use—not those things you throw away because you don't need them or can't read them. Instructions get a bad wrap because too often they are designed as an item in a checklist that needs to be completed rather than as an essential part of any project that is oriented around sequential tasks. Good instructions can be a true joy to use, but we so often end up with the phoned-in-at-best variety that perhaps has lead many of you to despise the genre.

Time for a brief confession—I truly love instructions with all of my being. To the very depths of my soul, I love instructions. Why, you may ask? They help you do things. They tell you how things are supposed to be done. They put order into a situation. I like following instructions and I like making them because of this. I find special pleasure in good instructions that are thoughtful and useful, like so many are not. I like instructions because they take a process that might be challenging or tedious and make it easily understood and perhaps even educational. (As a side-note, I'm also a huge do-it-yourself person having built my own computers since I was a teen and having most recently tiled my bathroom floor after some intense research. I like learning about things and how to do things and instructions make that possible).

The biggest challenge with instructions is one of perspective—you often don't see a task that you're good at correctly. Think about starting a car and putting it into reverse or putting your key into your lock and unlocking your front door at your dwelling place. These are tasks that you do all the time, and as such you tend to internalize entire steps to muscle memory. It's kind of like when you start walking or driving somewhere and accidentally end up going to your normal destination when you meant to go somewhere else but managed to get a little absent minded. Instructions often suffer from this phenomenon because they internalize and omit steps that are essential to newbies.

The best thing you can do is to take a literal approach to your instructions when testing. If they don't say to do something, don't do it and see what happens. You may find quickly that you're overlooking key things like pressing the brake pedal when you shift from park to reverse when driving. This type of testing will get rid of your blind spots by forcing you to run into them.

The best thing you can do outside of personal testing is to find someone who truly doesn't understand what you're trying to explain. This can be hard with simple tasks, but if you can find a test subject or four you can find out quickly through various research methods what is going on and where things are breaking down. The final chapter of the text offers you a number of solutions.

Finally, remember that the best instructions offer a clear view of the process that is taking place and how each step comes together as part of that process. You'll find folks have an easier time with things when they know where they are going and what their progress is. In addition, useful illustrations and even things like color coding of steps and repeated processes can make things much easier for anyone actually using your work. Remember—instructions are used to do something. Make sure they are

designed around that use!

MANUALS

If there ever was a genre that was the opposite of glamorous and exciting, I think manuals would be that genre. Manuals get a bad rap I think because they aren't designed for reading, and we tend to judge most large texts by their readability rather than other metrics like use. Manuals are a reference tool rather than a relaxing read to pore through while you sit in the hammock and sip lemonade. They are designed to be searched to find information about a specific part of a process or system or procedure or to solve a particular problem.

Manuals should be judged by how they help you fix an issue or understand something, not by their capacity to entertain. For example, if you have a flat tire you'll reference your car's manual to find out where your spare is and where your jack is located (if you have one instead of a can of flat-fixing goop). You might also use a manual if you need to know how to format say, a television show when using Chicago style.

Like instructions, manuals can be annoying to use because they can be designed as an afterthought. We've almost trained ourselves in many circumstances to avoid manuals, and that can be a huge mistake! A good manual can be a powerful tool to help you through a complex process.

Practically speaking, think about a manual in a professional capacity as a barrier against having to do tech support of some type. A good manual helps folks understand systems and troubleshoot common problems without getting overwhelmed. A great manual does this in a clear, well-documented and illustrated way that allows easy identification of information that is helpful and avoidance of information that isn't helpful.