Genre Specific Writing - Why it’s Important

We hear a lot about the traits of good writing, and certainly, all good writing, across all genres, shares certain characteristics. However, knowing the differences in audience, purpose, and organization – in other words, a clear understanding of genre is just as important to the success of a piece of writing.

Imagine a student is asked to respond to a prompt or assignment such as this:

*Think about your favorite season. Write a story explaining why this season is your favorite. Be sure to provide specific examples and to elaborate on your ideas.*

There are some conflicting “cues” in this prompt. “Write a story” suggests a narrative response, probably in the first person. Yet, the cue “explaining why” seems to suggest an expository piece explaining what the favorite season has to offer.

In fact, a student could respond with a successful, entertaining personal experience narrative, which, through the plot, illustrates by way of example, why summer is the best season. The story would move through a beginning-middle-ending organizational sequence, and would be entertaining to the reader.

Another student might use “summer” as her topic and craft piece of exposition around a number of main ideas and supporting detail that explains and provides straight forward information about the important, appealing attributes and characteristics of summer. Either response would be appropriate, if executed well.

The problem is that unless the student author is clear about the genre she/he intends to pursue, the resulting piece of writing will often be an unsuccessful “hybrid” with some characteristics of both narrative and expository writing. The reader becomes confused – is this piece written to entertain or to inform? What is the author’s purpose, and what is my purpose in reading it? What am I supposed to take away from this piece? *If the author is unclear, so is the reader.* And, if the author is unclear, chances are the organizational framework will be weak as well. **The purpose, organizational strategy and many salient features of each genre differ widely and must be specifically taught.** So, even if the piece has some of the traits of good writing – powerful elaboration, for example - the piece will still miss the mark.

Attributes that all genres share:

- The piece must begin in a way that immediately grabs the reader’s attention and establishes author’s purpose. (Therefore, the techniques and craft involved in accomplishing this vary genre to genre.)

- When providing details and description, SPECIFIC detail is always more powerful than GENERAL detail.

- Always SHOW rather than TELL.

- Authors must ask themselves specific, productive questions in order to generate powerful writing. (The productive questions also differ genre to genre to best reflect author’s purpose.)
• Sentence variety is important.

• Authors use “word referents” (synonymous words or phrases) as a means of developing powerful, vivid word choice.

• Correct grammar, mechanics, spelling, and conventions enable the reader to better understand and enjoy the writing.

• Voice and tone invite the reader to connect with the writing and help establish and reinforce author’s purpose.

• The ending of a piece must leave an impression on the reader.