

GENRE CHARACTERISTICS CHART

Following is an overview of some genres (text-types) that are often read by students and the task-specific processes a reader uses to read them. As you introduce a genre to kids, develop such lists of characteristics with your students. Through think-alouds and other lessons, model how you pay attention to these features to help you read and enjoy the text.

Mystery

The Basic Definition

- A subgenre of narrative fiction; often thought of as a detective story.
- Usually involves a mysterious death or a crime to be solved. In a closed circle of suspects, each suspect must have a credible motive and a reasonable opportunity for committing the crime. The central character must be a detective who eventually solves the mystery by logical deduction from facts fairly presented to the reader. This classic structure is the basis for hundreds of variations on the form.

Purpose

To engage in and enjoy solving a puzzle. Explore moral satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) at resolution. Consider human condition and how to solve or avoid human problems.

Tip-Offs (also known as rules of notice)

- Mystery, crime, or another puzzle to be solved.

- Main character who is a detective who sets out to solve a mystery.
- Suspects and their motives; these must be weighed and evaluated.
- Overt Clues about the crime are presented.
- Hidden Evidence is presented, i.e., essential details are offered in such a way that they seem unimportant.
- Inference Gaps—mysteries, by their very nature, do not tell the whole story. It is up to readers to notice the gaps in the story and try to fill these gaps by using and connecting the information that is presented.
- Suspense—having to hold various possible conclusions at bay as you wait to see what happens; reader is expected to enjoy the suspense, and to read to find out what will happen.
- Foreshadowing—clues left by the author as to possible outcomes.
- Red herring—a kind of foreshadowing clue that leads the reader to false conclusions.

What a Mystery Requires of a Reader

The reader's job is to put the puzzle pieces offered by the author together to figure out the mystery, to appreciate the detective's craft, and to take moral satisfaction from the solution to the mystery. To do this, readers must notice and make meaning with the codes offered above, i.e., they must notice the various forms of evidence and evaluate them; they must notice inference gaps and try to fill them.

Biography

The Basic Definition

- A subgenre of narrative nonfiction/historical nonfiction.
- Presents the facts about an individual's life and makes an attempt to interpret those facts, explaining the person's feelings and motivations. Good biographers use many research tools to gather and synthesize information about their subject, including the person's words, actions, journals, reactions, related books, interviews with friends, relatives, associates and enemies, historical context, psychology, primary source documents.

Purpose

Often to understand the person and the events and history affected by that person.

Tip-Offs

- Often starts with birth or early life and often covers birth-to-death.
- Often delves in to a person's formative years, exploring early influences on a subject's later life.
- Situates person's life in historical terms and a cultural context.
- Uses direct quotes from person and those who knew her.
- Sometimes uses fictionalized scenes/dialogues but always based on what is known about the person and the events described.
- Often uses pictures, maps, photographs, or other historically available documents.
- Biographer possesses a point of view, a larger agenda, and a purpose in reporting on the person's life.

What a Biography Requires of a Reader

Reader should consider author's purpose in presenting the biography. Is it idealized? fair? Why or why not? Is bio a hatchet job? Why? Who is the biographer? When was this biography written? How does this affect my reading of it? How does this help me to understand the influence of this person on history, and history and culture's effect on her? How might this person be a model for things to do or not do in my own life?

Tall Tales

The Basic Definition

A subgenre of narrative fiction/folktales. One of four categories of folktales generally recognized by folklorists. (Others are the variants of European folktales, such as Jack and the Beanstalk, the folktales of African Americans that grew out of African and European roots; and the tales of Native American groups) Tall tales include “exuberant combinations of fact with outrageous fiction.” The tales feature an “improvement” on actual happenings. The contrast between fact and fiction is enhanced by giving the story a realistic framework and by a deadpan storytelling style.

Purpose

To entertain, celebrate cleverness of hero, imagine “What If?” and show resilience of group he represents.

Tip-Offs

- Realism combined with outrageous exaggeration.
- Often reflects the hardships endured by the American settlers.
- Heroes embody courage, brute force, cleverness, as well as the virtues of thrift, hard work, and perseverance.

Fables

The Basic Definition

A short tale used to teach a moral lesson, often with animals as characters.

Purpose

To instruct, to teach humans a lesson about recognizing and overcoming their foibles; to critique authority figures in humorous and anonymous ways; to poke fun.

Tip-Offs

- The story is very brief.
- Main characters are usually animals and are characterized quickly with a few broad strokes.
- One animal/character usually displays the vice or foible being critiqued. This foible is what brings embarrassment or a downfall to the character and this conclusion leads directly to the moral, which follows the fable and is stated in one sentence.

What a Fable Requires of a Reader

The reader must pay attention to the title, which will cue who or what to pay attention to. Then the reader must figure out the symbolic value of each animal or character—what human trait does each represent? The reader must recognize introductory situation and what causes the complication and consequences. He reads moral and understands how the events of the story,

particularly the conclusion, lead to and mirror the instructive statement summarized by the moral. Reader should consider how the moral might apply to her own life.

Arguments

The Basic Definition

The process of presenting or comprehending a reasoned case.

Purpose

To inquire into problems and possible solutions, to persuade or convince others to change belief or take action, to try and get one's way!

Tip-Offs

- A need or desire for something new or for something to change is expressed.
- This assertion is supported through the use of evidence and warrants explaining how the evidence leads to this claim.
- Something is being promoted.
(Advertisements almost always contain an argument. Argument is incorporated into many forms of propaganda and persuasion.)

What an Argument Requires of a Reader

The reader must first understand what is being claimed and what is at stake. What will happen or follow if we agree with or reject the argument? If others agree with or reject the argument? Then the reader must recognize and evaluate the evidence and

how it is explained or linked to the claim.

The reader may want to express reservations and see if these are or could be responded to. Ultimately, the reader must decide if she is compelled by the argument and if so, what she should believe and do as a result.

Satires

The Basic Definition

A text that uses irony, sarcasm, and ridicule to expose and make fun of human folly and vice.

Purpose

To critique the status quo, to make fun of others and the self, and to offer renewed alternatives and possibilities for being different.

Tip-Offs

- Something is being made fun of, irony is being used, there is a tone of mockery or derision, perhaps the author seems to be supporting a point of view that you cannot expect her to seriously support.

What a Satire Requires of a Reader

The reader must discern what is being made fun of and what possible alternatives are being offered. The reader must decide what is not under dispute in the text, what is under dispute, and how to reconstruct the real implied meaning behind the false satiric meanings being literally presented by the author.