

**Genre Analysis:
A Method for Figuring Out How to Write Literature Reviews**

Genre analysis focuses on how new knowledge is made and shared in a field, and how writers participate in their disciplinary discussions. It includes considering the processes and strategies for making new knowledge in a discipline and the processes and strategies for sharing that knowledge with others.

Process for Analyzing a Genre

1. Collect samples that represent the genre.
 - In this case, literature reviews.
2. Analyze the samples and identify substantive and stylistic features that are shared among them.
 - Questions to consider about *substantive features* (content): What “stuff” goes into a Literature Review? What is the “raw material” that goes into Literature Reviews? If the broad answer is previously published studies, what parts of those studies go into a Literature Review? What elements of those previous studies are distilled out and discussed in a Literature Review? What kinds of arguments are made with that material in a Literature Review? What are the main point(s) writers make in a Literature Review? And how do they make them?
 - Questions to consider about *stylistic features* (organization and style): How do people in this field write Literature Reviews? How do they organize their documents? How do they write them? What is the appropriate tone? Language use and style? Length? Format? Citation system?
3. Talk to writers who produce texts in these genres and find out how they go about their work.
 - Questions to consider when talking to writers about how they work: How do writers tend to do research for a Literature Review? How do they read the things they find for a Literature Review? What are the typical methods / procedures for generating / distilling material for a Literature Review? How do writers tend to produce texts in this genre? What are the typical processes? How do they begin? How do they structure / schedule / organize their work? What are the typical phases of the process?
4. Think about some of the broader knowledge making practices in your field.
 - Questions to consider: How do people do research in this field? What kinds of research designs do people in this field use? What kinds of things do they study? (What are their objects of study?) How do they study these things? What kinds of “data” do they collect? What counts as “good” data or ideas in this field? What doesn’t really count as usable data in this field?
5. Formulate the organizing principles of the genre. You can write up a set of guidelines for a genre – really just a set of Notes to Self – specifying the substantive and stylistic features that define the genre of the Literature Review, as well as the processes for creating one.
 - “If you want to write a literature review in Education, here’s what you do...”

A Couple of Deep Thoughts

- Genres are typical ways of doing things with texts in certain situations. Writers in similar situations (recurring situations) make similar rhetorical choices (rhetorical actions) which readers come to expect (typified). That’s a genre. And we can distill the basic rules of genres using Genre Analysis.
- Genres change and evolve over time. The “rules” of a genre are always loose (the rules are not absolute), flexible (the rules can be bent, though usually not broken completely), and ever changing (they change over time). But you can see basic patterns.
- Genres both enable and constrain. They enable us to communicate in different disciplines because they set up a common set of expectations between readers and writers. You know what to expect so you can learn the expectations as a reader and a writer of a genre. They constrain because they encourage us to meet those expectations.