

Categories within Categories within Categories
Lesson Plan / Activity
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Scaffolding: This activity works best at the beginning of the year, helping students to break down their ideas of genre as simply categories and making complex ideas of media/mode/delivery.

Also note that this activity doesn't speak to the complex cultural/historic aspects of context in genre, but has more to do with debunking categories as simple and thinking about characteristics and features. Thus, it works best when ideas of genre are first being unpacked.

Considerations: This activity can be really productive, but takes at least 2 hours. Also, it works best if the instructor steps back and lets students take charge of the activity... the nature of the activity forces them to problematize, but with too much instruction, it doesn't work as well.

Prep: Bring construction paper, scissors, markers and blue painters tape

Objective: Think about genre as a method of categorization of texts, but also far more complex than this definition. Begin to identify texts which have a common formula, how to identify this formula and determine what meaning can be made from adhering to and diverting from these expectations.

Activity- Day 1

- Start with the term “narrative”, which I write in giant letters on construction paper
 - Ask students how they would define narrative, and discuss for a while exactly what the term means
- Ask what kinds of texts they would put under this heading, and write these on construction paper, also placing them on the board
 - This can go a lot of ways—grouping widely by media (film, television, book) or perhaps by style (short story, poetry, novel) or even right into traditional “genre” ideas (horror, science fiction, romance, etc)
 - Don't worry about what categories they pick—focus on talking about it and throwing in wrenches—the idea about using painters tape and a wall is that it can be moved
- Then go more narrow and more narrow until they feel like all “kinds” of narratives are up there
- Students then (as a class) make decisions about how to move these terms around to group/categorize/organize them. This becomes complicated, and may not be able to finished in one 50 min class. Allow students to take the lead here,

focusing on the idea that there is no “right” answer, but that they must logically try to organize texts in the way anyone working with various texts must do.

Activity- Day 2

- Finish categorizing and organization from day one. Discuss how/why this was difficult and what that says about genre.
- Divide into groups, and ask them to use examples to dictate the types of texts in the smaller groups (aka, types of horror movies, types of romance novels, etc). How can they break down their categories further by thinking about particular characteristics? How does talking about examples simplify and also complicate categorization in terms of genre.
- Let students volunteer for categories they know about (if two groups volunteer, quick rock paper scissors). Each pair is responsible for breaking that category into subcategories. For each one, they write the name they give the subcategory on one side, and a few quick notes about what distinguishes it on the other, including a few examples. They may also create sub-sub categories if appropriate. Give pairs about 20 min to do this, then each pair has a couple minutes to share.
- If time permits, also ask groups to move up the chain in their category and write in pen/pencil on the bigger labels the characteristics. Bear in mind, they have to consider this carefully—what characteristics exist for ALL horror movies, versus just slasher films, etc

Discussion (or short in class writing): What does this map help us to understand about genre as categories, even within just one (albeit broad) category like “narrative”? Are there texts that you feel fit, but you don’t know where? What does this tell us about the nature of categorizing texts, and when it is useful or limiting?