Generic criticism is rooted in the assumption that certain types of situations provoke similar needs and expectations in audiences and thus call for particular kinds of rhetoric. Rather than seeking to discover how one situation affects one particular rhetorical act, the generic critic seeks to discover commonalities in rhetorical patterns across recurring situations. The purpose of generic criticism is to understand rhetorical practices in different time periods and in different places by discerning the similarities in rhetorical situations and the rhetoric constructed in response to them—to discover “how people create individual instances of meaning and value within structured discursive fields.”¹ As rhetors develop messages, genres influence them to shape their materials to create particular emphases, to generate particular ideas, and to adopt particular personae. Similarly, audience members’ recognition of a particular artifact as belonging to a specific genre influences their strategies of comprehension and response.²

The French word genre is the term used to refer to a distinct group, type, class, or category of artifacts that share important characteristics that differentiate it from other groups. A rhetorical genre is a constellation, fusion, or clustering of three different kinds of elements so that a unique kind of artifact is created. One element is situational requirements or the perception of conditions in a situation that call forth particular kinds of rhetorical responses. A genre also contains substantive and stylistic characteristics of the rhetoric—features of the rhetoric chosen by the rhetor to respond to the perceived requirements of particular situations. Substantive characteristics are those that constitute the content of the rhetoric, while stylistic characteristics constitute its form.³ The third element of a rhetorical genre, the organizing principle, is the root term or notion that serves as an umbrella label for the various characteristic features of the rhetoric. It is the label for

Although Foss breaks genre into elements, she names four, which is confusing. We’ll primarily be looking at the first two elements: the community using a genre and its content and form.
1. situation (or community)
2. substance (content) and style (form)
3. an organizing principle - how you see the situation, the content, and the style all working together
the internal dynamic of the constellation that is formed by the substantive, stylistic, and situational features of the genre.

If there is a genre of eulogistic discourse, for example, then speeches of eulogy for Eleanor Roosevelt, John Lennon, Ronald Reagan, and soldiers killed in the Iraq War should be similar in significant aspects. They should share situational, stylistic, and substantive strategies as well as an organizing principle that binds them together. While strategic responses and stylistic choices, in isolation, may appear in other rhetorical forms, what is distinctive about a genre of rhetoric is the recurrence of the forms together, unified by the same organizing principle. A genre, then, is not simply a set of features that characterizes various rhetorical acts but a set of interdependent features.

The roots of the notion of genre and thus of generic criticism can be traced to the writings of Aristotle and other classical rhetoricians. Much of classical rhetorical theory is based on the assumption that situations fall into general types, depending on the objective of the rhetoric. Classical rhetoricians divided rhetoric into three types of discourse—deliberative or political, forensic or legal, and epideictic or ceremonial. Each of these types has distinctive aims—expedience for deliberative speaking, justice for forensic speaking, and honor for epideictic speaking. They have distinctive strategies as well—exhortation and dissuasion for deliberative speaking, accusation and defense for forensic speaking, and praise and blame for epideictic speaking. Thus, classification of discourse on the basis of similar characteristics and situations has been part of the tradition of the communication field since its inception.

The first person to use the term generic criticism in the communication discipline was Edwin Black in his critique of neo-Aristotelianism in 1965. He proposed as an alternative to the traditional method of criticism a generic frame that included these tenets: (1) "there is a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find himself"; (2) "there is a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically to any given situational type"; and (3) "the recurrence of a given situational type through history will provide a critic with information on the rhetorical responses available in that situation." Black suggested, then, that distinctive, recurrent situations exist in which discourse occurs and encouraged critics to analyze historical texts to describe their common features.

Lloyd F. Bitzer's notion of the rhetorical situation, presented in 1968, also contributed to the development of generic criticism. Bitzer's focus on recurring situations was particularly significant for generic criticism: "From day to day, year to year, comparable situations occur, prompting comparable responses; hence rhetorical forms are born and a special vocabulary, grammar, and style are established." Although his conceptualization of the rhetorical situation has generated controversy, it further developed the theoretical base for generic criticism.

Yet another contribution to the development of generic criticism was a conference held in 1976 called "Significant Form' in Rhetorical Criticism." Sponsored by the Speech Communication Association (now the National Communication Association) and the University of Kansas, the conference...
was organized around the idea of significant form, which referred to recurring patterns in discourse or action. These patterns include the "repeated use of images, metaphors, arguments, structural arrangements, configurations of language or a combination of such elements into what critics have termed 'genres' or 'rhetorics.'" The result of the conference was a book, *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, edited by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, which provided theoretical discussions of the concept of genre and included samples of generic criticism.

Anthony Paré and Graham Smart expanded the study of genre by focusing specifically on rhetorical genres in organizational settings. They define genre as a distinctive profile of regularities across four dimensions: (1) textual features such as styles of texts and modes of argument; (2) regularities in the composing process such as information gathering and analysis of information; (3) regularities in reading practices such as where, when, and why a document is read; and (4) the social roles performed by writers and readers so that no matter who acts as social worker, judge, or project manager, the genre is enacted in much the same way. Paré and Smart believe this view of genres in organizations explains how the effective production of discourse and knowledge occurs within organizations.

The work of Mikhail Bakhtin also has been influential in the development of genre studies. Bakhtin asserts that we speak only in definite speech genres, that is, all our utterances have definite and relatively stable typical *forms of construction of the whole*. Our repertoire of oral (and written) speech genres is rich. We use them confidently and skillfully in practice, and it is quite possible for us not even to suspect their existence in theory.

Bakhtin suggests that even "in the most free, the most unconstrained conversation, we cast our speech in definite generic forms, sometimes rigid and trite ones, sometimes more flexible, plastic, and creative ones." Among the speech genres that are widespread in everyday life are the various genres of greetings, farewells, congratulations, information about health, and the like. These genres have official, respectful forms as well as intimate, familiar ones.

The work of Mikhail Bakhtin also has been influential in the development of genre studies. Bakhtin asserts that we speak only in definite speech genres, that is, all our utterances have definite and relatively stable typical forms of construction of the whole. Our repertoire of oral (and written) speech genres is rich. We use them confidently and skillfully in practice, and it is quite possible for us not even to suspect their existence in theory.

The Sydney School of genre studies, named after its primary institutional base in the University of Sydney’s Department of Linguistics, offers another contribution to genre studies—the study of genres to effect social change. Michael Halliday, who once headed the department, sought to bring linguists and educators together to create a literacy pedagogy appropriate for a multicultural society. The result was the use of generic analysis to probe systems of belief, ideologies, and values. The work of the members of this school encourages critics to ask questions about genres such as: How do some genres come to be valorized? In whose interest is such valorization? What kinds of social organization are put in place or kept in place by such valorization? What does participation in a genre do to and for an individual or a group? What opportunities do the relationships reflected in and structured by a genre afford for humane creative action or, alternatively, for the domination of others? Do genres empower some people while silencing others? What representations of the world are entailed in genres? These ques-
tions suggest as an agenda for the next phase of generic studies a critical examination of issues such as the nature of the sanctioned representations in genres and their implications for people's lives, the degree of accessibility of a genre to potential users, and genre maintenance as power maintenance. More generally, the Australian genre researchers contribute to generic criticism an explicit acknowledgment of the political dimensions of genres. Other efforts to link genres to issues of power and ideology include those of critical discourse analysis (CDA) scholars. CDA is primarily concerned with demonstrating issues of power and dominance in private and public discourse, and critics who work in this tradition go beyond identifying the components of genres and seek to expose the values and beliefs of the society that shape the construction of particular genres. Their efforts, then, are devoted to discovering the role that power and ideology play in the construction and interpretation of genres.

Procedures

Using generic criticism, a critic analyzes an artifact in a four-step process: (1) selecting an artifact; (2) analyzing the artifact; (3) formulating a research question; and (4) writing the essay.

Selecting an Artifact

Your choice of an artifact or artifacts for generic criticism depends on the kind of analysis you are doing. As explicated below, generic criticism involves three options—generic description, generic participation, and generic application. If you are interested in generic description, your artifacts should be a variety of texts that appear, on the surface, to share some rhetorical similarities. These artifacts can come from different time periods and be of various forms—speeches, essays, songs, works of art, and advertisements, for example—if they all seem similar in nature and function. If your goal is generic participation, choose an artifact that seems like it should belong to or has been assigned to a particular genre but does not seem to fit. If you are doing generic application, your artifact should be one that you want to assess in terms of how well it conforms to the genre of which it is a part. This should be an artifact that, for some reason, leads you to question how it is functioning in the context of its genre.

Analyzing the Artifact

Generic criticism involves three different options for a critic, with each leading to a different contribution to the understanding of genres—generic description, generic participation, and generic application. The first option is generic description, where you examine several artifacts to determine if a genre exists. This is an inductive operation, in which you begin with a consideration of specific features of artifacts and move to a generalization about them in the naming of a genre. The second option, generic participation, is a deductive procedure in which you move from consideration of a general class of rhetoric to consideration of a specific artifact.