

What Am I Reading? How Teaching Genre Improves Civic Skills

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Abstract

This paper explores an effort to improve information literacy within an undergraduate political science course by teaching students about the related concepts of genre and rhetorical context (purpose, audience, and context), how to look for the subtle cues that indicate genre, and how to identify the genre and rhetorical context of the things they read and use as sources in their own work. Assessment data is used to explore the impact of this type of pedagogical intervention. We argue that the ability to notice, identify, and interpret the genre of various texts is an important component of information literacy, which contributes to the development of civic skills.

Introduction

In today's highly digital world, college students receive the majority of their information about news and current events through their phone, tablet, or laptop. The Pew Research Center reports that 91% of people ages 18-29 get news "at least sometimes" from digital devices and 86% *prefer* getting their news from digital devices (Pew Research Center). One challenge facing those who consume news digitally is that it all looks very similar, with few physical markers to help readers distinguish between news, analysis, and opinion. While regular newspaper readers might know to expect opinions and editorials clustered on a single page (physical or digital), we argue that those who have come of age in our new digital news environment don't always possess the skills to understand what they are reading--the document's genre--to help them interpret the information as being primarily informative or persuasive in nature.

A growing body of research in both political science and library science emphasizes the importance of developing information literacy as a key component of civic skills. Much of this research confronts the problem of "fake news" and identifies methods of teaching students to recognize and avoid misinformation and disinformation. In contrast, this paper explores a related but underdeveloped aspect of information literacy in the discipline of political science: understanding genre and rhetorical context.

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines genre as "a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content." In our usage, genre refers to the stylistic and writing conventions associated with a particular type of written communication (Leeder, 2016).

This paper explores an effort to help improve information literacy within an undergraduate political science course by teaching students about the related concepts of genre and rhetorical context (purpose, audience, and context), how to look for the subtle cues that indicate genre, and how to identify the genre and rhetorical context of the things they read and use as sources in their own work. Assessment data is used to explore the impact of this type of pedagogical intervention. We argue that the ability to notice, identify, and interpret the genre of various texts is an important component of information literacy, which contributes to the development of civic skills.

We first summarize the literature in both political science and library science linking reading, writing, and information literacy to the development of civic skills. We then describe the approaches taken in an undergraduate political science course to incorporate a focus on genre and report the impact of these actions. We conclude with some reflections about how and why faculty should consider introducing students to the concept of genre.

Literature Review

An important function of higher education is the development of civic skills, or what some scholars have termed, “civic competence.” Anson (2017) defines civic competence as “a broad set of skills that empowers fledgling citizens by allowing them to make sense of political information, to work with others to accomplish political goals, and to develop strategies for political action” (389). As Bernstein (2008) argues, civic competence is more than just knowing about politics and government, but is “the ability to manage information, people, and strategy” (2). Bernstein acknowledges that one of the challenges that citizens face is making sense of “the vast amounts of political information out there” (5). Multiple scholars point to ways in which improving student skills in both reading and writing contribute to the overall development of civic skills, helping individuals navigate the deluge of political information.

In the discipline of political science, scholars have devoted substantial attention to improving student writing and developing writing skills through both traditional writing assignments and more creative genre-based assignments. Multiple authors explore the use of creative or real world writing assignments, designed to provide a more authentic rhetorical context for students (Sherman and Walsmel-Manor, 2003; Schneider and Adnre, 2005; Blount, 2026; Pennock, 2011; Pennock, 2019; Cook and Walsh, 2012; Trueb, 2013; Hansen, 2016; Brown, James, and Soroka, 2020; Mastro, 2021). In addition to helping students prepare for the types of writing they might do after graduation, these types of creative assignments also encourage students to consider rhetorical aspects of writing like purpose, audience, context, and genre.

Even in the midst of more traditional types of writing assignments, several scholars emphasize the importance of teaching students to consider audience, context, and purpose (Anson, 2017; Brown, James, and Soroka, 2020; Brown 2021) or to learn how to join professional “discourse communities” (Anson and Forsberg, 1990). As Anson (2017) argues, “learning through writing is strongly contingent upon context considerations including knowledge of the specific contours of genre-based expectations” (391).

Some research within the discipline of political science explores efforts to improve students’ reading skills. Some of this work focuses particularly on helping students learn to read challenging texts or to read critically (Daley, 1995; DiYanni, 2017; Staudinger, 2017, Bush and Rivkin) while others focus on teaching skills for evaluating news or evaluating and selecting sources that might be used as evidence in writing assignments

(Hall, 2002; Blings and Maxey, 2017; Matthews-Schultz and Sweet-Chushman, 2023). This second area of focus often falls within the scope of efforts to develop information literacy.

Information literacy refers to “the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (ACRL Framework, 2015). Since Marfleet and Dille’s seminal article introducing the term to the political science literature in 2005, multiple authors have explored efforts to integrate an information literacy approach within political science (Cope and Flanagan, 2013; Thomson and Atkinson, 2022). Several even do so in collaboration with librarians (Cook and Walsh, 2012; Gilbert et al., 2012; Harden and Harden, 2020; Lupien and Rourke, 2021; Stevens and Campbell, 2007; Stevens and Campbell, 2008; Williams et al., 2006). In a relatively recent survey of political science faculty, Thornton and Atkinson (2022) found that though 80% of faculty don’t think students come to college with enough information literacy skills to be successful, only 44% include information literacy training in their classes.

In both the work that focuses on reading challenging texts and the work that focuses on evaluating and selecting sources, scholars tend to focus on identifying what we might call “high quality” or peer-reviewed sources, with less attention paid to other forms of political writing that students are likely to encounter such as news articles, op-eds, speeches, blog or social media posts, press releases, etc. Research that does include these other types of political writing is often focused on helping students evaluate the trustworthiness of information and recognize disinformation or misinformation (Hall, 2002).

Some scholars have described assignments that require students to read and consider a variety of genres. Bernstein (2008) describes one such assignment, a simulation in an introductory U.S. government class designed to increase student learning and civic competence in which students read a variety of genres as preparation. While we view assigning multiple genres of reading as a useful endeavor, we also believe that it should be coupled with explicit instruction about genre.

The absence of an explicit discussion of genre, we argue, does a disservice to students by leaving them ill equipped for some research projects and failing to strengthen the development of civic skills. In fact, research demonstrates that expectations about genre impact how people read and comprehend texts (Zwaan, 1994). Rather than allowing students to develop rhetorical flexibility in their ability to both identify and write different genres, assignments requiring students to find a certain number of peer-reviewed articles and replicate that singular genre gives them scant opportunity to truly match an information need (purpose) with the appropriate information source (product). The task-based research assignment of find, select, integrate, belies the metacognitive moves and habits that expert researchers employ to move through the networks of both scholarly and non-scholarly conversations in order to get a greater sense of the state of the question or topic.

Unsurprisingly, librarians have paid great attention to the value of teaching genre in information literacy instruction (Simmons, 2005; Gullbekk, 2016; Brannon, 2017; Broderson and Kavli, 2019; Freiman-Roach, 2021). With the proliferation of emergent forms of information found online and through electronic resources, such as library proprietary databases, students’ need to identify genre is great. Leeder (2016) noted that students’ difficulty in identifying the genre of various information resulted in a corresponding decrease in skills related to finding, evaluating, and matching appropriate information sources with an information need.

This rhetorical approach to teaching information literacy is furthered by Brannon's (2017) assertion that a focus on a source's purpose and intended audience can help students to make more nuanced decisions both about what they are seeing and how they will use it in their own research. As such, Russo, et. al, (2019) suggest the teaching of genre through the use of "containers." Because librarians organize and make available information based on format or type, this can be a useful way to teach students the conventions of specific genres and give clues to a source's "purpose, process, and product" (Russo, et. al, 2019).

This approach, however, is not without its difficulties. As Burkholder (2010) notes, a single source can exist on a webpage, in a database, and in print. Burkholder also argues that librarians could do a better job of defining the concept of a "source" and suggests that introducing sources through the lens of genre might be a useful approach (Burkholder, 2010). Following this lead, librarians have now started to consider how modern genre theory that employs a critical consciousness lens (Devitt, 2004) can help students think more critically about how information operates in their daily lives, recognizing that a source's rhetorical appropriateness and value can be broad and changeable (Burkholder, 2010).

Much of current information literacy instruction is confined to the academic environment in support of course assignments, ignoring the complexity of the information landscape that our students experience in their everyday lives (Olubiyo and Olubiyo, 2023). In their literature review on the subject, Martzoukou and Abdi (2017) call for adaptive, non-prescriptive information literacy instruction to address this complexity. There is a noticeable lacuna, however, in research that is specific to how information literacy instruction helps to develop civic skills.

Multiple authors have made the case for increasing other literacies as a means to promote civic participation. Smith and McMenemy (2017) argue that an individuals' ability to evaluate, identify authority, and recognize the affective experience that information elicits are three main components of a digital literacy framework that inform young peoples' consumption of political information. The results of this study also show that young people are using a variety of political information sources across media with little ability to distinguish political fact from political opinion (Smith and McMenemy, 2017). Media literacy, one might argue, is a subset of digital literacy. In their study, Park, et. al. (2023) argue for a multidimensional, skills-based approach to teaching media literacy as a way to build individuals' confidence and subsequently their participation in online civic discourse.

Although today's students have access to an unlimited stream of politically relevant information, and are much more likely to access the political information they consume through a digital device, they often lack the skills to sort through this information. Brabazon (2006) described this "flattening" of information as the Google Effect, arguing that "the lack of literacy skills and strategies to sort the trash from the relevant" were a major concern (158). A few years later, Cope and Flanagan (2013) argued that though political science students have access to more information than ever, they have difficulty sorting and weighing the information. This echoes an earlier call from Dudley and Gitelson (2003) in regard to civic education that "what citizens need is not simply more information, but information in context" (265).

Compounding the problem of "flat" information is that the current generation of students often has a "news finds me" attitude, reading only the news fed to them through news aggregation applications and absent of meaningful context (Swart, 2023). Teaching students to understand genre is especially important in this digital

environment (Leeder, 2016). As Harden and Harden (2020) point out, students will often encounter information in online searches that are far removed from their original context.

In summary, while pedagogical research in political science has explored efforts to improve information literacy and the development of civic skills through innovative writing assignments and instruction and a focus on identifying quality sources, less attention has been paid to exploring the role of genre and rhetorical context in developing these skills.

Description of Approach

U.S. Public Policy is a 200-level elective for undergraduate political science majors and minors offered at a four-year private liberal arts college. The assessment mechanisms used in the class have varied, but have usually included multiple essays and exams. Inspired by Andrew Pennock's 2011 article in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, "The Case for Using Policy Writing in Undergraduate Political Science Courses," I (Kate) added a policy analysis assignment to the course beginning in 2013. When Pennock published his book, *The CQ Press Writing Guide for Public Policy*, in 2019 I adopted the book as required reading in the course and added multiple forms of real-world writing assignments including a policy history, op-ed, and legislative testimony.¹ These changes all greatly enhanced student learning in the course, helping students see connections between abstract policy theories and concepts and their real-world applications and developing their skills as writers. The extra focus on writing in the course dovetailed neatly with an initiative underway at the college to develop students' information literacy skills through a new general education requirement.

Our work together as librarian and political science faculty began in spring 2019 as part of a pilot project for this new graduation requirement, Writing and Information Literacy (WRITL). WRITL courses were intended to "foster information literacy skills by requiring students to investigate and evaluate different forms of information (print journalism, digital forms, visual media, etc.). Students then use such information to create arguments for general audiences." By the end of the course, students were expected to "distinguish and evaluate different forms of information (e.g. news reporting, opinion, satire, advertising, scholarly research, social media) and analyze the arguments that such information supports."

In shifting the focus of the course to more real-world policy writing with an emphasis on understanding and differentiating different forms of information, we soon realized that, while students were more aware of the genre expectations and conventions of the things they were writing, they had difficulty transferring that knowledge to help them with reading. The nature of the problem crystallized during a small group discussion about an assigned op-ed in which Kate overheard one student say to another, "this is just so biased!" Students use the word "bias" to refer to all manner of things, but in this case, it was simply reference to the fact that the author of the document was making (and supporting) an argument. After a bit of questioning, Kate realized that the student perceived the writing as "biased" in large part because they had read the document as a newspaper article, a genre which they (rightly) believed should be neutral or unbiased. It didn't take long to realize that other students in the class had done the same.

¹ The first year I (Kate) got a little too excited and added way too many writing assignments. I ended up having to cut several of them out midway through the semester.

By not recognizing what they were reading--the genre and the writing conventions associated with it--the students read the document as a biased account rather than as an argument. This led them to discount the information rather than to view it as a legitimate and important contribution to the public debate over the policy.

Reflecting on this interaction, we also realized that recognizing the document as an argument-driven op-ed was extra challenging because of the document's format (electronic) which obscured many of the clues pointing to it being an op-ed that would have been present had the student encountered it printed on the last few pages of a paper newspaper.

The "bias" interaction vividly illustrated what we had learned about the students' ability to recognize genre earlier in the semester. As part of the pilot for the new WRITL designation, students were given a pre-test assessment.² On the first day of class, students read a document and answered a series of questions including: 1) what kind of a source/text is this? 2) What is this source/text's intended audience? 3) What is this source/text's intended purpose? And 4) Is this a credible source/text? The selected document was a news article from a local newspaper (*The Mankato Free Press*) describing a recent visit by two state lawmakers to a nearby university to talk with college students about college affordability. The document included the article's title, author's name, date of publication, and source, though the article was reformatted to fit on a single sheet of paper, so it didn't look like a traditional newspaper article.

Nineteen students completed the pre-test assessment. Of these, only 10 (53%) were able to correctly identify the genre of the document as being a news article and only 6 (32%) correctly identified the audience (Mankato residents). Only three of the students concluded that the purpose of the document was to report on a meeting or event that had taken place in the community (the central purpose of a news article). When asked about purpose, most students answered with some variation of the topic of the article, namely that it was about the costs of higher education. Finally, a majority of the students (12 or 63%) concluded that the source was credible and pointed to the quality of the sources cited in the article, the use of evidence, or the inclusion of verifiable information as evidence of their conclusion.

Between the "bias" episode and the pre-test data, we realized that it was important to not only introduce students to the concept of genre in their role as writers but also in their role as readers. We began to look for small changes we could make that would help students quickly and accurately understand what they were reading (the genre) so they could better interpret what they were reading (the purpose).

The good news is that we found that it doesn't take much time or effort to help students understand the concept of genre. In the next section, we describe several small steps we took to introduce students to the concept of genre and to give them practice identifying and interpreting different genres. Any of these approaches can be used independently or collectively and none takes more than a portion of a single class period to enact.

² We consulted with the chair of the Institutional Review Board at Gustavus and received approval to use course-based assessment data in this paper without undergoing a full IRB review. No individual students are identifiable through this data.

Techniques for Emphasizing Genre

Introducing Genre

The first set of activities is primarily about introducing and defining the concept of genre so that the class has a common language and to prime students to pay attention to genre as they read and write. Most students are familiar with the idea of genre as it relates to entertainment media (i.e. country, rap, or classical music or action, comedy, or science fiction movies) so this can be a useful analogy for introducing students to the concept. Each of these musical or cinematic genres has a set of conventions that creators and consumers come to expect; If a rom-com doesn't have a happy ending, it isn't a rom-com. In the same way, we explain, different genres have different style conventions and expectations and our goal is to understand them enough to be able to recognize them and, in some cases, reproduce them.

Genre Handout

The most basic and easiest addition to the course was the creation of a handout for students that identifies genres (genres we read in the course, genres we write in the course, and other genres a student might encounter), purposes, and audiences to introduce students to these concepts and to give us a common vocabulary (Appendix A). This handout is shared with students early in the semester, along with the explanation that a “genre” is a form of communication that is used for a particular purpose that incorporates certain writing conventions. The handout gives students a shared language to use in reference to genre, purpose, and audience to which we can refer throughout the class as we discuss readings, research, and writing assignments. A handout like this can be tailored to any class's reading list and assignments.

Searching for Clues

When students mostly used hard copies of sources (i.e. physical books, journals, and newspapers), distinguishing genre was relatively easy. A student could easily see that a journal article was published within a specific journal issue or that a news article appeared in the “news” section of the paper instead in the opinion section. In today's digital environment, students encounter disembodied book chapters and journal articles, not to mention the constant stream of non-peer reviewed sources. A student might, for example, find a press release posted on the website of an advocacy group. But they might just as easily turn up a press release in a generic Google search.

To overcome this challenge, we teach students to look for “clues” they can use to identify a document's genre, which helps to identify purpose and audience. This involves being overt about the writing expectations associated with different genres and helping students look for markers that are often less obvious when a document is in digital form than they were in print formats.³

For example, when introducing students to an op-ed or editorial reading or writing assignment, we take time to describe the development of the genre, its purpose, and audience: With a traditional print newspaper,

³ To support my goals in this course, I developed an open-access [public policy textbook](#) that includes specific sections devoted to various public policy genres.

op-eds and editorials are easy to spot because they are grouped together on a clearly marked page, usually at the end of the main section of the newspaper. Op-eds and editorials online circulate disconnected from these traditional markers. Instead, students need to look for keywords like “commentary”, “opinion”, or “editorial” written in often small letters at the top of the page. We teach students to look for writing conventions such as very short paragraphs, a lede, and a clear, often provocative argument. We specify that an op-ed or editorial won’t have a bibliography or footnotes, like students would see in a journal article, but sources might be hyperlinked or embedded within the text.

A press release, in contrast, has its own set of distinguishing features. Press releases might include the phrase “media release,” “news release,” or “for immediate release” at the top. Since the goal for an author of a press release is to write something that can easily be incorporated into a news article, a press release will be written like a news article, with an attention-grabbing headline, lede, and inverted pyramid approach. Sources might be quoted with names of sources written in bold font to make them easy to identify. There will likely be a short paragraph at the end describing the organization issuing the press release and there is often some signal to signify the very end of the document (such as three hashtags).

Identifying these “clues” for students that we as librarians and political scientists recognize without much conscious thought helps students to watch for and interpret them as readers and researchers. In doing this, we follow Simmon’s (2005) call to make the conventions of a particular discourse explicit to students.

Practicing Genre

Introducing students to the concept of genre and pointing out clues they can look for when reading that will help them correctly identify the genre is a great starting point, but with all learning, students tend to do better if they have opportunities to practice what they’ve learned. The assignments described below were heavily inspired by research on learning from the field of cognitive psychology described in the book *Make it Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*.

Document jigsaw

In one activity, I (Kate) identified a series of policy documents focused on a particular policy area. Documents included bills, policy briefs, agency websites, press releases, op-eds, news articles, legislative testimony, and letters to/from elected officials. Working with a partner, students read one assigned document and answer a series of questions related to genre, audience and purpose [What kind of source is this? What is the purpose of this writing? Who is the source’s intended audience and how can you tell?]. Only after exploring these questions of genre and rhetorical context are students asked to consider the content and argument [Restate the sources’ main argument or main idea in your own words. What evidence (information) do they use? Is the evidence credible and how can you tell? Do they make an explicit argument (and, if so, what is it)? Do they address counterarguments? Do they use graphic design? How effective is the communication?]. Following the preliminary work, I divide the class into new groups, with one original member of the pairing in each group. The students then share what they’ve learned about both the documents and the information they contain. Through this activity, students learn more about a policy area but they also have the opportunity to think deliberately about genre and rhetorical context and to share what they’ve learned with other students. I usually devote all or most of a class period to this activity.

Document sort

In another activity, I (Kate) collected a variety of policy documents on multiple policy topics and divided them into 4 piles. In each pile of 12-15 documents, I include examples from multiple genres common in the field of public policy (i.e. legislation/regulation, policy briefs, issue briefs, op-eds, news articles, press releases, legislative testimony, letters to or from elected officials, etc.). After introducing or reviewing the writing conventions associated with a particular genre, I divide the class into four groups and give each group a pile of policy documents. I ask the students to review their pile and find examples of the genre we discussed. There will be at least one example in their collection, but there may be more than one. Students work together to sort through the documents, using what they have learned about the writing conventions of the genre to pick out examples. For example, after discussing legislative testimony, I would ask students to pick out any examples of legislative testimony in their stack and to be able to explain why they classify the documents they identify as examples of legislative testimony. In some cases, students are easily able to identify examples, but discussion emerges among documents that are less obvious. For example, students might mistakenly include letters to legislators in their pile (or fail to include testimony that is formatted as a formal letter), leading to interesting discussions about genre clues. This activity takes only 10-15 minutes to complete and so I do this several times throughout the semester with different genres, rotating the piles so that students view a different set of documents.

Intentional Library Instruction

The emphasis on the development of information literacy skills within the new WRITL general education requirement necessitated a close working relationship between library and classroom faculty. Rather than a single, one-shot library instruction session focused on demonstrating databases and refining search strategies, we took an embedded approach wherein library instruction was sequenced and scaffolded to meet the current assignment needs of students, while also engaging them in conversation about the civic skills developed through an information literacy approach. Thus, students visited the library three times over the course of the semester. Each session built upon prior learning and focused on developing the rhetorical skills that students needed in order to select, integrate, and write a variety of genres. A course research guide in LibGuides was also created to support student learning. In each session, students were introduced to the concept of information literacy using the definition we developed in our library based on the Association of College and Research Libraries' Framework for Information Literacy: "Information literacy means understanding how information in its many forms is produced and circulated, how to interrogate it critically, and how to enter into conversation with other people's ideas ethically when creating information" (ACRL Framework, 2015).

Library Session 1:

In the first library session, I (Rachel) compared the rhetorical situation of very broad categories of information, including popular, trade, and scholarly sources. In addition to the more traditional rhetorical categories, we also discussed how looking for the aforementioned "clues" can help students distinguish what it is they are reading. This includes, the frequency of publication; the author and their credentials or role; how the author provides evidence, either through traditional citations or otherwise; and the language conventions, like jargon, that the student sees present in the source. We then moved onto using a shared source to begin evaluating it for these rhetorical categories and "clues." The last part of the evaluation asked students what is still missing from what they just read. This prompts students to think of the limitation of a certain genre, either in the scope of its argument or the evidence provided. Included in what is missing could also be

marginalized voices who may not be represented in traditional canonical genres, including scholarship and even government documents. This final evaluation piece helps students to think about what might be next in their research or line of inquiry in order to support their work. Questions like: “What if we stopped here? How would it affect the way you describe and explain your public policy issue?”; “How could you use this source in your own writing?”; and finally, “What information sources should we still seek in order to find what is missing? Where would we find these?” all support students in reflecting upon what it is they just read.

Library Session 2:

In the second library session, I (Rachel) introduced students to the difference between primary and secondary sources in political science research. Drawing from the examples presented in the Document Jigsaw activity, we discussed how each of the following primary sources act as original documents created contemporaneously with an event being researched. These included bills/legislation, policy briefs, agency websites, press releases, op-eds, news articles, legislative testimony, and letters to or from elected officials. Focusing on the frame, “Information Creation as a Process”, we asked students to consider how the different processes by which these primary sources were created affects how they are distributed, interpreted, and used (ACRL Framework, 2015). We then drew upon our prior learning from the earlier session to find and locate secondary scholarship. Students were then asked to use a fact-checking strategy developed and named by Mike Caulfield (2017) called “going upstream” to see how secondary scholarship, as a genre, employs primary sources to analyze or review an event or phenomenon. One might think of this as “going to the source” of the argument to see how a scholar is interpreting and deploying a source in their own writing. Students looked at a shared secondary source and looked to its references to identify the primary sources the author used to support their argument. Instruction was then provided about how one might go about finding and locating these sources based on the genre of the primary source. This approach teaches students that information sources are “in conversation” with one another and provides a useful example of how they might integrate a variety of source types as evidence in their own writing (ACRL Framework, 2015).

Library Session 3:

The final session focused on citations. Often students see citation as an exercise in monotony and arbitrary formatting rules, without a clear understanding of the power of citations for both the reader and writer. Therefore, instruction for this session emphasized how citations act as a means to: establish credibility with readers by calling on solid, reputable sources as “expert witnesses”; provide readers with the information they need to delve further into the topic; and give credit where it is due and avoid plagiarism. Using the prior session’s activity as an example, I (Rachel) discussed how different genres employ citations and how a researcher can leverage them to better understand their own topic. We also demonstrated to students how references and bibliographies can reveal to students the networks of people and publishing platforms or organizations who are or are not engaged in a certain field or topic. Finally, a large amount of time was set aside for individual work time with support from both the librarian and course instructor.

While many of these approaches to information literacy instruction fall firmly within the traditional wheelhouse of librarians, we argue that by explicitly naming how the rhetorical conventions of various genres present themselves within information sources, we are helping students to develop a broader, more transferable set of habits and dispositions in the form of fact-checking, evaluation, and understanding as they read and make choices about sources for the purposes of their own writing and development of civic skills

Effects of Emphasizing Genre

Do these interventions work? Anecdotally, yes. Students seem to grasp the concept of genre once introduced. And this impression is supported by some empirical evidence. Students who took the pre-test assessment described previously, were given a post-test assessment at the end of the semester. The students were asked to answer the same set of questions but for a new document, legislative testimony given by a representative of an advocacy group to a state legislative committee. Twenty students completed the post-assessment. This time, 60% of the students (12) correctly identified the document as legislative testimony, with an additional 5 students identifying it as a letter. The post-test was an especially challenging test because the testimony was formatted as a letter. Notably, only three of the students completely misidentified the genre in the post-test. More encouragingly, 19 of the students (95%) correctly identified the intended audience of the document as being legislators serving on the committee and all 20 of the students correctly identified persuasion to support a specific piece of legislation as being the primary purpose of the document. Despite the fact that this was an argument-driven document (which, at the beginning of the semester, would have led many students to view it as “biased”), every student viewed it as a credible source, noting that it cited credible sources and represented the perspective of a reputable organization.

These results were replicated in a similar post-test assessment from a class in 2022 in which students were asked to identify the genre, purpose, and audience of a document provided on an exam. In this case, the document was an op-ed published by a state online news source. Students were provided with the title, author, date, and news outlet (*MinnPost*), though the article was reformatted to fit on two printed pages. 15 students answered these questions, with all but one of the students able to accurately identify the correct genre, purpose, and audience for the document.

Conclusions

In this age of information overload, in which students encounter mostly “flat” information, devoid of context, we argue it is more important than ever to help students learn to see and interpret genre. By giving students a common vocabulary, helping them notice “clues” that indicate genre, and giving them opportunities to practice identifying and interpreting genre, we can help students develop stronger civic skills. As we demonstrated in this paper, adding a focus on genre need not take a lot of class time or faculty effort. Supplementing in-class activities with intentional library sessions is extremely beneficial but not necessary and any of the suggestions we identified in this paper can be used independently.

Appendix A: Genre, Purpose, and Audience in US Public Policy

GENRE <i>Genre refers to the form or type of communication</i>	PURPOSE <i>Purpose refers to the goal of the communication</i>	AUDIENCE <i>Audience refers to the intended recipient of the communication</i>
<i>Genres we write...</i> Policy/Issue history Op-ed Legislative testimony Letter Lecture notes / Study notes <i>Genres we read...</i> Issue brief News article Abstract Journal article Book (chapter of a book) Bill / Resolution Law/Statute Regulation Court opinion Decision memo Textbook <i>Other genres common in POL...</i> Annotated bibliography Literature review Research proposal Peer-reviewed journal article Analytical essay Book review Research presentation Case study Policy evaluation Grant proposal Reflection essay Legal brief Essay exam <i>More genres...</i> Resume Cover letter Application Advertisement Email Social media post Blog post Poem/ Song Biography/Autobiography	Inform Explain Summarize Evaluate Persuade Argue Express Activate Inspire Entertain Learn/understand	Self Peer Professor Hiring/Admissions committee Employer Political decision maker (elected official or bureaucrat) Constituent General public Some other ways to think of audience: ● Informed v. uninformed ● Implied v. invoked ● General public v. Professional/experts v. Scholarly/academic

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