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GENRES

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In Chapter 1, “Rhetorical Situations & Choices,” we explained that the composition scholar Lloyd Bitzer described a rhetorical situation as a communication event that includes an exigence or purpose, an audience, and constraints or limitations that help shape how the speaker can respond. Bitzer was concerned with describing the rhetorical situation, but he doesn’t address how to respond to the rhetorical situation. That’s where “genre,” the key word in this chapter’s title, comes in. Genre is how the speaker chooses to respond to the rhetorical situation.

The concept of genre has existed since the ancient Greeks used it to classify literature, and following the Greeks, today the word is sometimes oversimplified to mean “category” or “type.” Scholar Carolyn Miller, however, gives a modern-day definition of genre as a social response to a rhetorical situation. The word “social” highlights that genre is a form of communication between a speaker and an audience; it involves social interaction.

For example, let’s say you are working on an assignment for your biology class the night before it is due and you realize you don’t understand the assignment. The rhetorical situation you find yourself in involves a purpose (you need to figure out what the instructor wants you to do) and an audience (your instructor). You also need to take into account that it’s too late to call your instructor, office hours have been over for many hours, and you know you probably should have read the assignment more closely when you first got it and asked questions then, instead of waiting until the last minute. As you consider your options for communicating with your instructor (genre responses) about this pickle you’re in, you are considering *social responses to your rhetorical situation*:

1. You could write an e-mail in which you apologize for waiting until the last minute and ask for clarification.
2. You could text a classmate and hope that she can explain the assignment.
3. You could wait until tomorrow and go to the instructor’s office first thing in the morning to ask for clarification.
4. You could make some educated guesses about what the instructor wants, do the assignment as best you can, and keep your fingers crossed.
5. You could just take a 0 on the assignment.

Notice that each of the first four options includes a particular form of communication: an e-mail, a text, an in-person conversation, and an assignment that may or may not have been completed correctly. But even the fifth option, not submitting anything, is a genre of communication: doing nothing in this case is a deliberate choice, and so it counts as a social response to the rhetorical situation.

WRITE

Think of a rhetorical situation you found yourself in recently in which you considered two or more possible responses. Write a brief paragraph in which you describe the two (or more) options you considered and explain why you went with the one you did.

Reading Genres

Why bother thinking about genres? Because they represent possibilities. We wrote this book to acknowledge that in college and beyond there are many more genres available to us besides the five-paragraph essay or the traditional term paper. As respectable and time-honored as those genres are, there are a whole lot of other options out there. We wrote this book to help you understand and create in a variety of genres—and we invite you to produce works that matter to you and enjoy doing so. As an added bonus, paying attention to genre will make you a better writer and artist because you'll be focused on the needs of your audiences and your own purposes as a composer.

The Blog as a Social Response

Because genres are responses to social situations, they are dynamic, changing over time as people and their needs change over time. Before digital composing, writers who wanted to record their thoughts wrote with a pen in a journal or diary, in a physical notebook. Then blogs were created, and since then, blogs have changed. The original blogs were more stream of consciousness and had smaller audiences than many blogs today. Blogs changed because the people using them, both composers and audiences, realized that blogs could be interactive, could be shared, could be multimodal, and more. Thus, the genre of blog continues to change.

The blog *The Dragonfly Woman* is hosted by Christine Goforth, who identifies herself as an “aquatic entomologist with a blogging habit.” In her first blog entry, dated May 28, 2009, she explains why she adopted the name “Dragonfly Woman” and how she went from being a kid terrified of insects to a woman obsessed with dragonflies.

The “About DW” page on Christine’s blog states that she is now a “bona fide entomologist/scientist” who manages citizen science for the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. She explains her rhetorical situation, speaking directly to her readers. In several paragraphs, she acknowledges her audience and purpose:

If you arrived here, you probably wanted to learn a little more about the crazy woman who tells strange stories and goes on and on about aquatic insect respiration on this blog. I’d hate to disappoint, so here is everything you ever wanted to know about me or my blog condensed down into a few bullet points.

I am a bona fide entomologist/scientist—I have an undergraduate degree in biology and a grad degree in entomology. I don’t know whether that makes me seem any more reliable or trustworthy to my readers or not, but there it is. I study aquatic insects, especially behavior and respiration in giant water bugs and dragonflies. If you’ve spent any time here in the summer, you’ll know I also run a citizen science project called the Dragonfly Swarm Project.



I am NOT a taxonomist, so I will get the occasional identification wrong. If you happen to notice a mistake, please let me know (use that Contact Me button above). It's frustrating enough to read all the misinformation about insects online without being part of the problem.

I cover a variety of topics, but everything is at least tangentially related to insects. I had originally intended for this blog to be purely educational, but it's evolved into more of a celebration of insects, scientifically, culturally, and personally. I like it better this way.

Christine Goforth, from her blog *The Dragonfly Woman* (thedragonflywoman.com)

By acknowledging that she is not a taxonomist, Goforth makes it clear that her purpose is not to be meticulous with identifying insect species, but rather to use her blog to host a "celebration of insects, scientifically, culturally, and personally." In keeping with the celebratory theme, the tone of the blog is enthusiastic and even a bit folksy, as she tries to entice people who might be more like the scared kid she was into becoming more appreciative and less fearful of insects. By sharing her personal excitement about bugs, she helps her audience see them as beautiful and fascinating. All of this also helps her develop ethos and come across as a credible source.

Goforth uses the genre of the blog because she wants to reach out to many more people than she could through her job at the museum in North Carolina. She can tell museum-goers that her blog is a place for them to pursue their curiosity about insects, and she can also count on getting traffic to her blog from people who Google topics she covers, including "giant water bugs" and "terrestrial insects." Since the blog also includes many links to other blogs and Web sites on insects, it is a rich resource for anyone interested in entomology.

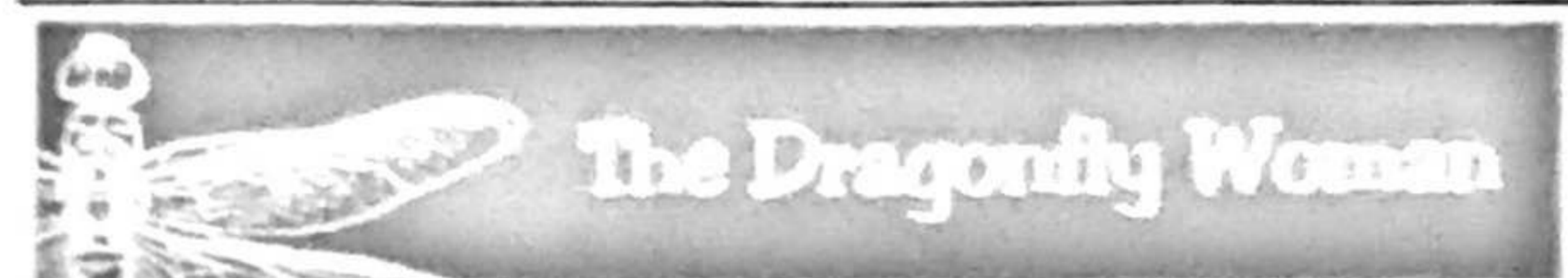
While blogs are no doubt a familiar genre, think for a moment about the different genres you read and compose in each day. As a student, you write research papers and presentations; these are two examples of academic genres. In each case, you know what is expected of you as a writer because you understand certain features of the genre. You know that to write a research paper, you must gather a variety of reliable sources and cite them in a specific way.

▼ BLOG

Christine Goforth, *The Dragonfly Woman*. In her post titled "Well-Nigh Wordless Wednesday: Itty Bitty Wasp," the blogger writes: "I was walking past my back door about a month ago and caught sight of something out of the corner of my eye. I went to inspect and discovered this: [see image] A very tiny wasp! I'm betting it's one of the parasitic wasps, based on the diminutive size and enormous hind legs. I grabbed my iPhone and my "macro" lens and snapped a few photos because it was simply too adorable to pass up. Apparently my glass could do with a bit of cleaning, though." See thedragonflywoman.com.

Credit: Christine L. Goforth.

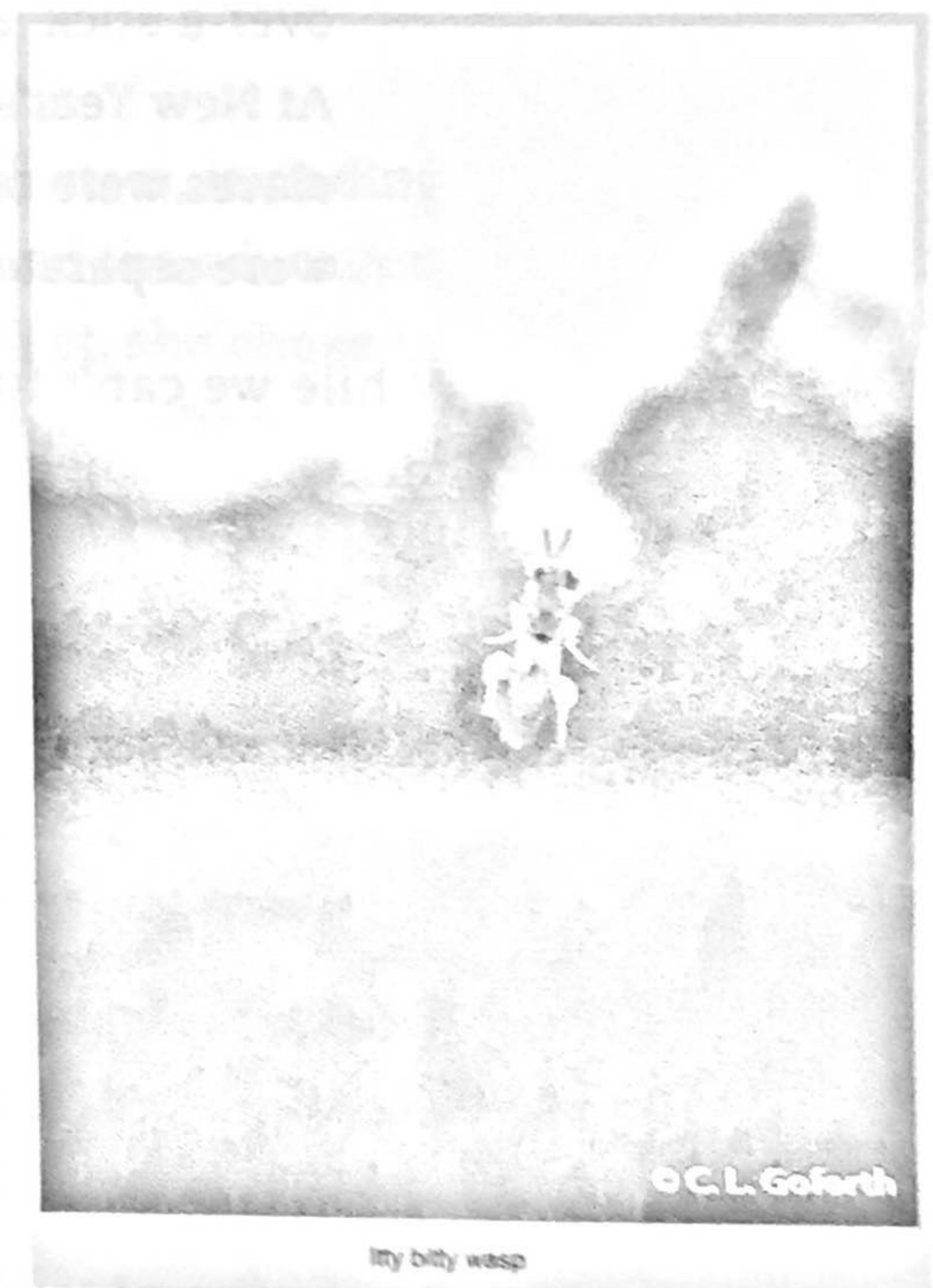
HOME GALLERY EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS GLOSSARY SCIENTIFIC NAMES ON MUSEUM ABOUT US CONTACT US



Well-Nigh Wordless Wednesday: Itty Bitty Wasp

Posted on November 14, 2012 | 8 Comments

I was walking past my back door about a month ago and caught sight of something out of the corner of my eye. I went to inspect and discovered this:



itty bitty wasp

A very tiny wasp! I'm betting it's one of the parasitic wasps based on the diminutive size and enormous hind legs. I grabbed my iPhone and my "macro" lens and snapped a few photos because it was simply too adorable to pass up. Apparently my glass could do with a bit of cleaning though...

WRITE

What kinds of composing have you done so far as a student? What are some of the features that define the works you've composed? Write a paragraph that conveys this to your reader. If you were to revise that paragraph for an audience beyond the classroom, maybe to a high school student about to enter college, what genre would you choose to present your ideas?

In other situations, you choose the genre to compose in, depending on what you want to say, who you want to say it to, and how you want to say it. Your choice of genre also depends on your own skills and interests, as well as the materials available to you. For example, your band is playing next week and you need to advertise the event. Your purpose is to persuade your potential audience to come to your show. You might choose to present your ad as a poster. Depending on your supplies and desired effect, you could create a handmade poster to tape up at school or design one to post on Facebook. Alternatively, you might choose to advertise by creating and posting a short music video.

The Memoir as a Social Response

One of the best ways to become a better writer or composer is to read like one—to pay attention to what other writers and composers do, how and why they work in a particular genre, and how they make that genre work for them. Let's look at an example from history. Annie L. Burton (ca. 1858–unknown) was born a slave and as an adult decided to write about her experiences; her 1909 memoir is titled *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days*. She writes:

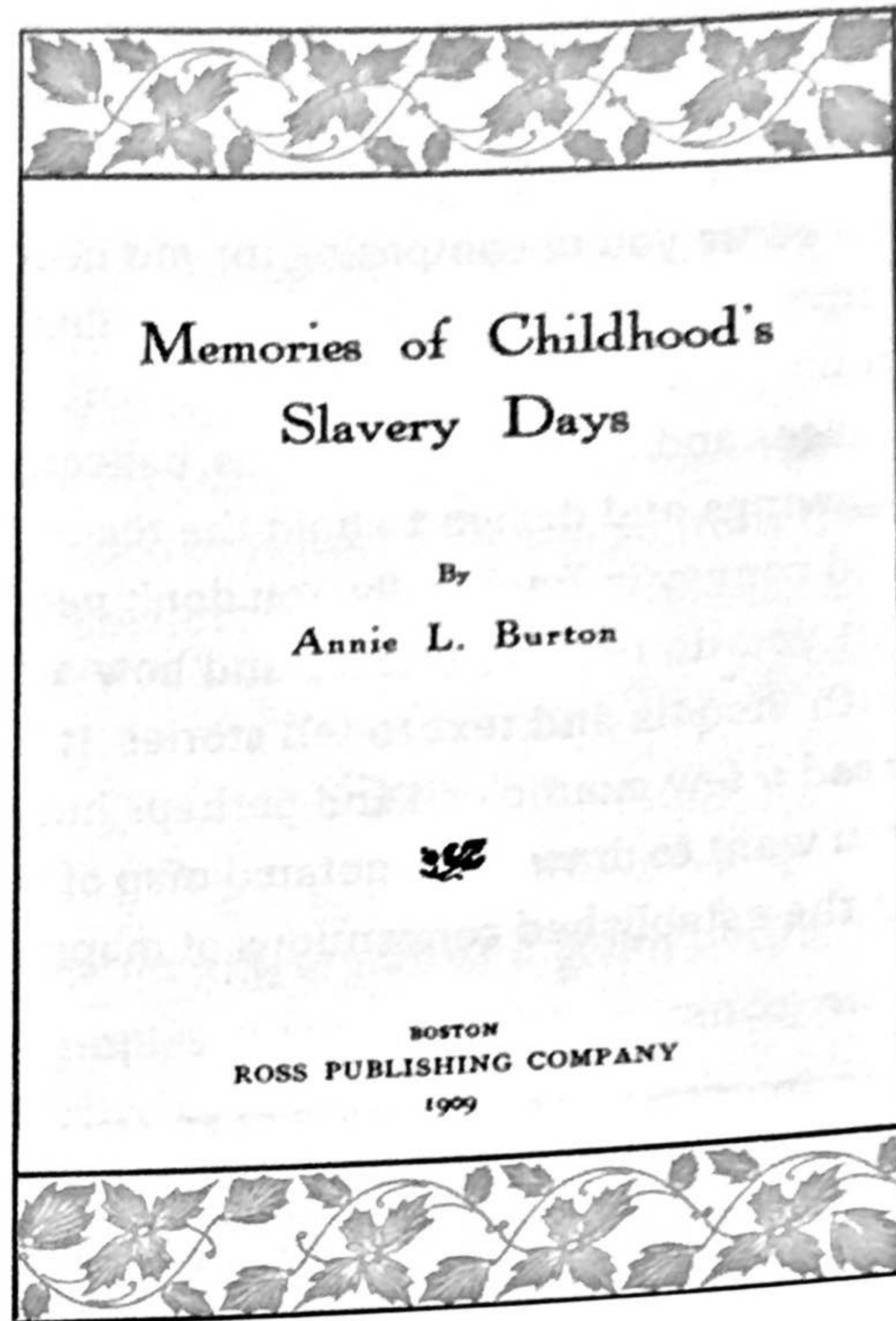
Our clothes were little homespun cotton slips, with short sleeves. I never knew what shoes were until I got big enough to earn them myself. If a slave man and woman wished to marry, a party would be arranged some Saturday night among the slaves. The marriage ceremony consisted of the pair jumping over a stick. If no children were born within a year or so, the wife was sold. At New Year's, if there was any debt or mortgage on the plantation, the extra slaves were taken to Clayton and sold at the court house. In this way families were separated.

While we can't fully know Burton's purpose in writing her memoir, we can assume she wrote to help her readers understand how a formerly enslaved African American woman experienced and resisted expected social and economic roles. What we do know, however, is that she was motivated by her faith. In her memoir, she states:

For God has commanded me to write this book, that someone may read and receive comfort and courage to do what God commands them to do. God bless every soul who shall read this true life story of one born in slavery.

Thus one purpose of the memoir was to give readers "comfort and courage to do what God commands them to do." Another purpose might have been to help women readers understand what it was like to be a woman and a slave.

Since a purpose of slave narratives is to build empathy in readers, Burton probably intended to reach white people who had not suffered the indignities of slavery. Her audience might have also included literate former slaves, most likely in the North



◀ AUTHOR PHOTO
& COVER

Annie L. Burton,
author of *Memories
of Childhood's Slavery
Days* (1909).

Credit: Images courtesy of
Documenting the American
South, Wilson Special
Collections Library, The
Memories of Childhood's
Slavery Days University of
North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Libraries.

because her book was published in Boston. Her current audience might include students like you, scholars, and historians who want to read a firsthand account of slave life.

Burton likely took into account various constraints and situational factors, including the attitudes of white readers toward African Americans. While she had the education and writing skills to sustain an ambitious writing and research project, she chose to tell her own story simply. As Burton considered her rhetorical situation—she wanted to communicate a message of resistance and faith—and pondered an effective social response, she must have noticed that a very popular genre of the day was memoir. Because memoirs were widely read, Burton could expect a good-sized audience for her piece, and she stood to make some profit from it. The memoir allowed Burton to tell her personal story the way she wanted to tell it, to make her point about resistance, and to set it in a historical context.

So, Burton chose her genre—the memoir—as a social response to her rhetorical situation. If she had been trained in music, she would have written a ballad or an opera, or if she had been born a little later, she might have told her story as a documentary film.

In her memoir, Burton wrote in the first person, portrayed real people, described settings, conveyed conflict, and told stories from her own life. These elements are features of the memoir genre and of any autobiography.

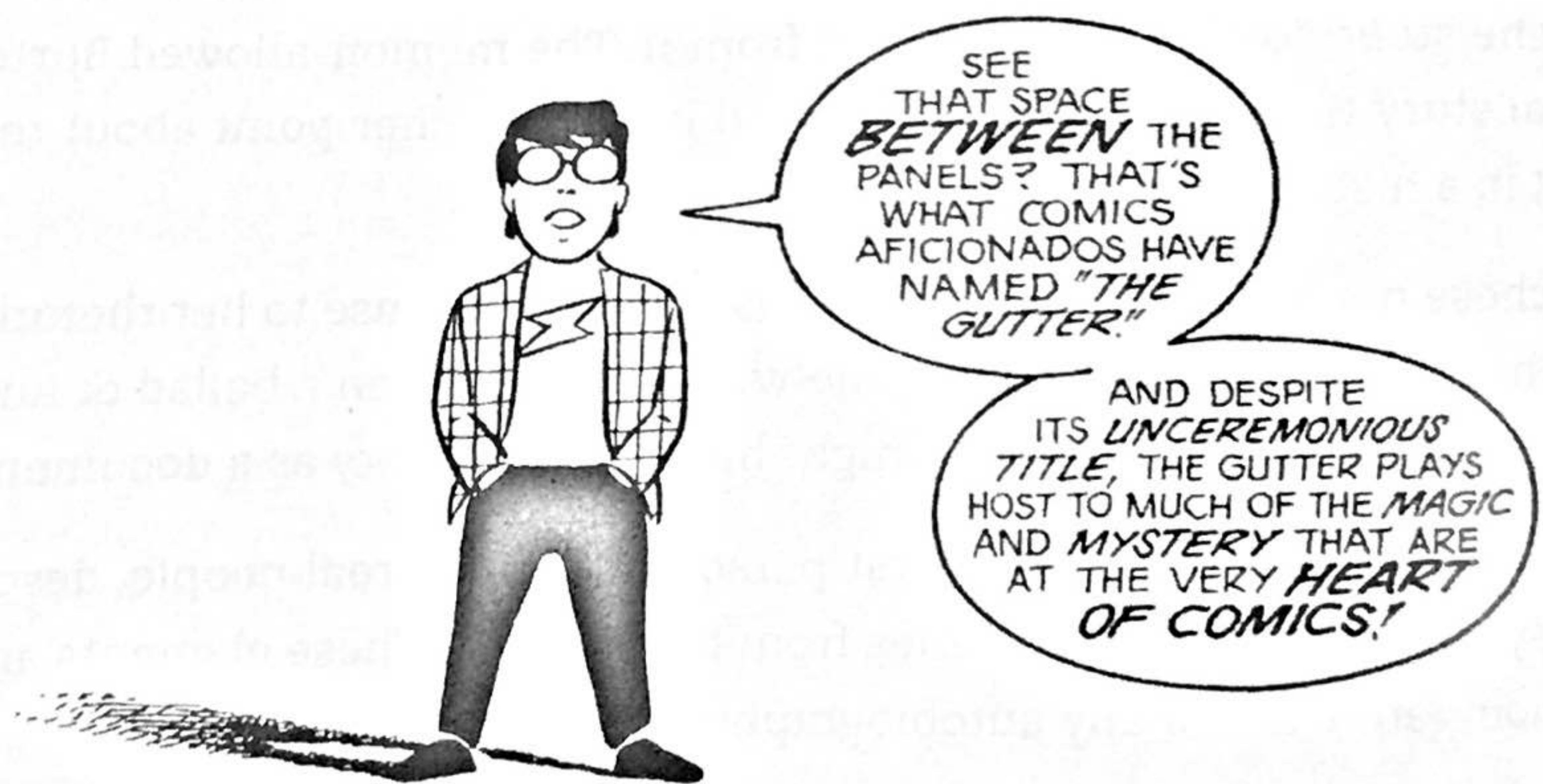
Some Genre Conventions

Do you want to be a great writer or composer? If so, you need to know something about the genre you're composing in; you need to know its basic qualities and agreed-upon conventions, and you need to be familiar with some examples. As Scott McCloud shows in his book *Understanding Comics*, writers and artists who work on comics use visual images and text to convey ideas, balloons to indicate dialogue, and simple but dynamic drawings and design to hold the reader's attention. Let's say you want to tell a story and convey it graphically. You don't need to be McCloud or Picasso or Art Spiegelman, but you do need to understand how artists, graphic novelists, and memoirists work with visuals and text to tell stories. It helps to have some familiarity with the genre (read a few examples!) and perhaps have one example in mind as a model. Or let's say you want to draw an annotated map of your neighborhood. It would help to know some of the established conventions of mapmakers, such as using color to represent specific

► COMIC

Scott McCloud,
from his book
*Understanding
Comics: The Invisible
Art*.

Credit: Excerpt from p. 66;
Copyright © 1993, 1994,
Scott McCloud. Reprinted by
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Publishers.



geography, or symbols to identify features or places. If you're using a blog or social media to share your thoughts on specific news items, you will have more authority when you link directly to the material you're responding to. Hyperlinking is a convention of the blog genre.

Keep an open mind as you choose genres to compose in. Consider collaborating with classmates who have more detailed knowledge of the genres that you're less familiar with. Often students in our writing classes will discuss and figure out together the conventions of specific genres and media (e.g., video or PowerPoint) and go from there. Other times they keep it simple but thoughtful, creating scrapbooks, print-based texts, or audio essays.

Common Elements

In this book, we ask you to pay attention to the main features of a given genre: the specific elements that are common to most examples of the genre. For instance, most press release writers try to be as brief and objective as possible and to aim at answering the questions who? what? why? where? and when? For those reasons, we consider brevity, objectivity, and thoroughness to be elements of the press release genre. (For an example, see Paul Henderson's press release on p. 36 about the Wall Arch collapse.)

Style

Style refers to the particular ways we communicate. In this book, we pay attention to the techniques that individual writers use—and to what extent these techniques reflect the style of others composing in the same genre. We look at how much detail writers include and how precise that detail is. We listen for tone (seriousness, humor, etc.) and voice (the presence of the author) and analyze how these qualities affect the overall composition. How a writer uses sources is part of style as well. A writer who has cultivated a serious, academic style will probably use serious, academic sources as evidence. A writer with a more casual, chatty style might depend more on conversations with friends for evidence.

As a writer, you use style when you compose. The trick is to make sure that the style you're using is appropriate to your purpose and accessible and persuasive to your audience. For example, the writer and traveler we mentioned in Chapter 1, Gilad Hizkiyahu, uses a particular style on his blog. Because he is interested in attracting “accidental surfers” to his blog—that is, people who stumble upon his blog accidentally—he takes a casual and funny approach to his travels rather than a serious, scholarly tone. A serious, scholarly tone would probably appeal to an audience interested in the economics or politics of his travels, but because Gilad's purpose is to share his quirky, funny adventures, his casual, humorous style makes more sense.

► TRAVEL BLOG

Gilad Hizkiyahu,
Excerpt from *Gilad Is Doing South America*.
Notice Gilad's photo caption: "Just chillin . . ." He writes, "So, dear friends and accidental surfers, allow me to begin with the reasons that brought me to plan and go on [this] trip. Reason #1: *Coincidence*. I still have no idea how it happened. . . ." The blogger chooses informal language and humor to draw in his readers.

Credit: Gilad Hizkiyahu.



Just chilling...

But I jump ahead . . . first of all – thank you all for navigating your browsers to my Blog. If you've read all the way down to this line – I assume you're the "reader" kind of person rather than the "browser" type who's looking for anchor words or just looking at the pretty pictures . . . so from now on I'll consider my writing as a kind of a monologue, knowing that there's someone out there who actually listens to me babble.

So, dear friends and accidental surfers, allow me to begin with the reasons that brought me to plan and go on that trip.

Reason #1

Coincidence

I still have no idea how it happened. One day I was in a middle of a long term relationship (3 year), living in a rented apartment in Ramat Gan, working at a place I'd rather not mention – while studying for my MEd degree.

Design

Design describes the visual features of a composition, including the use of headings, format, color, and illustration. Design is aesthetic but also functional. As we discuss throughout the book, the design features you and other writers choose can be important in achieving purposes and reaching audiences. Take a look at how Gilad uses images in his blog. Maps show readers exactly where this traveler is, the timeline indicates the duration of his trip, and the photos of Gilad help readers connect with him personally. Gilad's photos documenting his travels let readers see what he saw. Because one of his purposes is to allow others to share in his travels vicariously, the photos are particularly important.

Sources

Sources are the people, conversations, documents, books, journal articles, movies, and other works that we refer to for facts, perspectives, and models as we compose. For example, sources Gilad drew on for his travel blog (see p. 25) include Google Maps, the people he meets, and tourist information, such as brochures from historical sites. In this book, we consider sources because sources shape what writers create.

When you compose in certain genres, such as academic and research essays, you need to document the sources you refer to. In other cases, such as novels, comics, and music lyrics, while you've read and used sources, you're not required to document them formally. Whether or not sources need to be documented depends on the rhetorical situation. Sources referred to in a research essay aimed at academic readers should be documented because readers will want to know where ideas and information came from; the purposes of song lyrics are different, though. Listeners of a song aren't

WRITE

How might the use of sources help boost—or undermine—your ethos as a composer? Brainstorm a quick list of five ways the sources you choose could boost your ethos and five ways the sources could undermine your ethos.



Prologue - The beginning

Gilad's Profile • About this blog • Entry from Herzlia

Trip Start
Oct 12, 2010

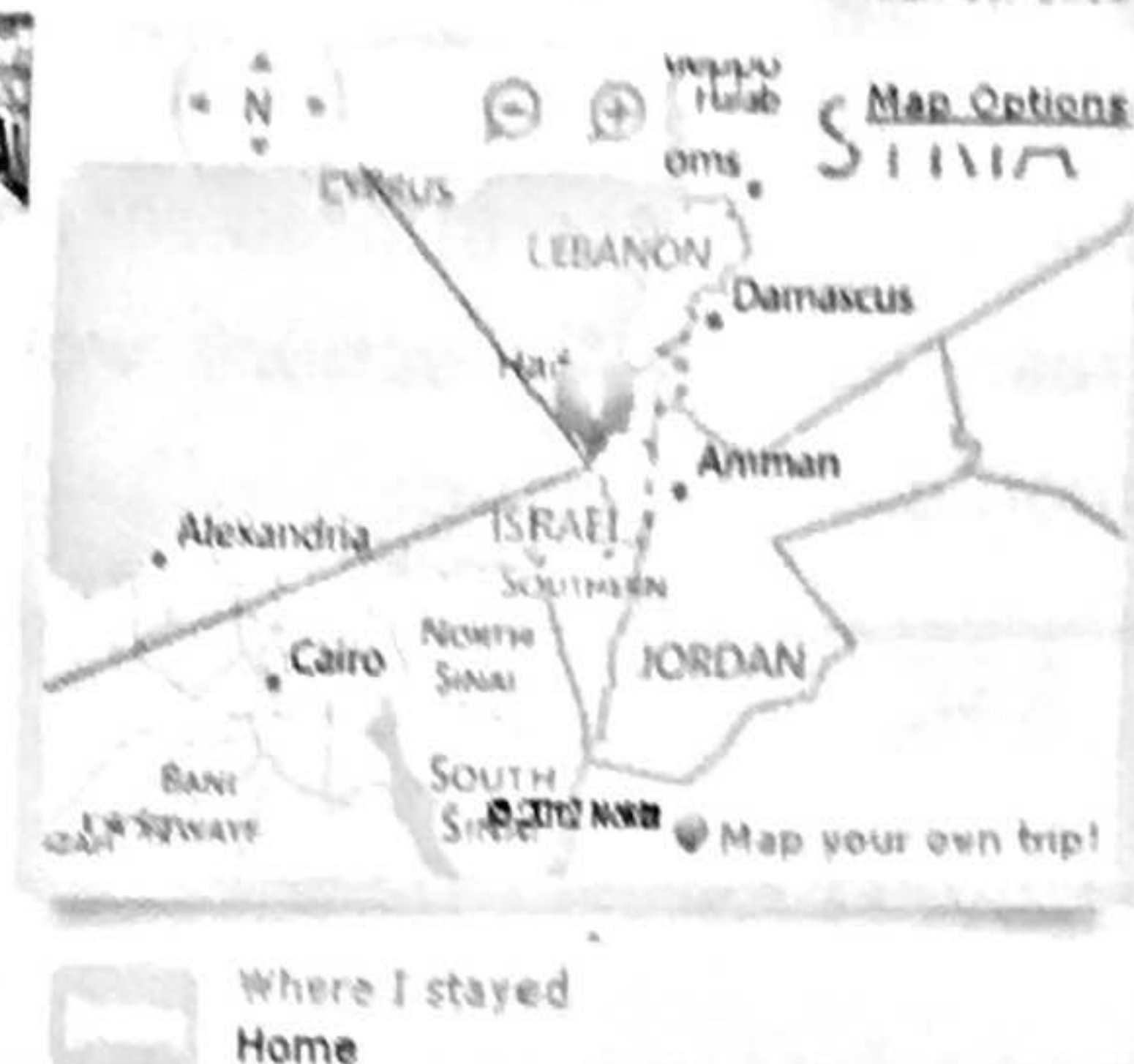
Trip End
Jun 15, 2011

Herzlia, Israel
Monday, October 11, 2010

Like One person likes this. Be the first of your friends.

Prologue - The beginning.

This really isn't an interesting part of my journey... This part is meant for those of you who wish to know me a little bit better, for some friends who hasn't been in close touch with me lately and for others who just happen to have too much free time and nothing better to do at the moment.



About the Author
Gilad Hiz



- Send a message
- Add as favorite
- Get email updates
- Turn blog into a book
- Share
- RSS

About this Blog

Gilad is doing South America

◀ TRAVEL BLOG

Gilad Hizkiyahu, Excerpt from *Gilad Is Doing South America*. The design that Gilad chose for his blog showcases his text and visuals and allows him to link out to various sources.

Credit: Gilad Hizkiyahu.

listening for information, so the sources of information are less important. Throughout the book we look at the conventions of specific genres in this regard, and in Chapter 13, we provide specific guidelines for using documentation styles.

To compose in different genres, you first should be able to identify them, see how other writers use them to achieve purposes and reach audiences, and learn some of the basic features so you can experiment.

CHECKLIST | Reading Genres

Are you looking at a text and wondering what genre it is? Ask yourself the following questions.

- Common elements.** What do you know about this genre already? What are some of the typical features of this genre? How is the content organized? How does the author use words, images, or other media to convey a purpose and reach an audience?
- Style.** What is the author's tone? How would you describe the language of the piece? How much detail does the author use?
- Design.** What does the composition look (sound, feel, smell) like? How do words and visuals and other media work together in the genre, physically? How would you describe the format of the composition? Would the format change if the mode were changed? For example, if a newspaper editorial moves from a print medium to an online medium, what changes occur in the genre?
- Sources.** What sources does the author draw on? How do you know? How does the author incorporate and give credit to sources? Is there documentation? Hyperlinking?