

Writing for Use: Intersections Between Genre and Usability

Rob Koehler

This article tackles usability—a very big idea—in a small amount of space. And, because I don't believe in doing things in a small way, this article also takes up the idea of how genre and usability, when thought about together, can help us write more effectively.

Let's start with a few scenarios: mentally put a check next to the situations that apply to you:

- ✓ Have you ever been looking for something in a store and not been sure where to go? For example, when you want a filter for a water pitcher, you can't really be sure where to go in Wal-Mart to find what you want. Sure, Wal-Mart has signs up that tell you where stuff is in the store, but they really aren't very specific, so it's difficult to know where to find one item in the store when it's all you need.
- ✓ Have you ever been so mad at a piece of technology that you thought about throwing it out the window? Maybe your phone won't connect to the internet no matter what you do. You've tried what they showed you at the phone store, but that isn't making anything happen. Now, you can't check the score for the game, and you don't know another option for fixing your problem.
- ✓ Have you ever had to fill out a tax form? Not only are you giving your hard earned money to the government because they've ordered you to, but you

also have to fill out this form with a whole bunch of stuff like Interest, Benefits, and other categories that don't apply to you. And even worse, because you don't receive money in many of the categories on the form, you don't really understand what most of the stuff on the form is even for.

- ✓ Have you ever been on a website looking for some specific information and been completely unable to find it? For example, you're on Amazon or eBay or Half, and you're searching for a product that you don't know the name of. You know that it slices, it dices, it does whatever, but you can't remember what the stupid thing is called. Amazon may have every product under the sun, but because they do, you better know the name of what you want if you want to find it in less than 20 minutes.

All of the situations I describe above are examples of breakdown in *usability*. To quote the experts, “[U]sability refers to how well users can learn and use a product to achieve their goals and how satisfied they are with that process.”¹ A product can be just about anything that a person creates, from a brick to a supercomputer. The examples of products I gave above were fairly diverse: a store, a phone, a form, and a website. But usability also applies to products like cars, soda machines, pencils, chairs, and just about any other stuff made by human beings. Usability is important because when products aren't usable, people have problems like those I described above.

WHAT ABOUT GOOGLE?

For a great example of a usability test, check out this video about when Google was first launching its site and asking people to come try it out.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AH-Vd6uNUU>

Can you imagine a Google Homepage that wasn't just a plain white screen?

In fact, usability is so important that most corporations spend a significant amount of time doing usability testing before they release a product or publish a website. Usability testing sounds a bit scary, and it can be quite complicated, but the basics are simple. Usability engineers will bring people in to use the product; in usability lingo, that person is called a user. The engineers sometimes ask the user to do a set of tasks that can take anywhere from ten minutes to an entire day, or they may also just observe the user as he/she figures out the product and begins to use it. The usability engineers record the person's experience and then interview the person to discover how he/she felt about using the product. This process can go on for a few weeks or months as the usability engineers discover problems with the product as people use it.

In general, what the usability engineers discover gets relayed to the other people developing and maintaining the product, who then try to fix the problems the usability engineers found.

At this point, you're probably wondering why I'm talking so much about this concept when I'm supposed to be talking about writing. Well, if you haven't guessed yet, this article is about applying usability ideas to writing. It may seem a bit strange right now, but usability is one way to help us write in new situations that can sometimes be very difficult. However, to make the connection between writing and usability clearer, we first need to discuss genre.

A genre is, to quote Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin, “a dynamic rhetorical [form] that develop[s] from responses to recurrent situations and serve[s] to stabilize experience and give it coherence and meaning.”² This definition is a bit heavy, but if we unpack it piece by piece, the connection between genre and usability becomes clearer. The first crucial word in the definition is form, used here in the same sense as you would use the term “the human form” to talk about the body. In essence, genres give a shape to information and ideas in the same way we say that the human body gives a shape to our minds. But where do genres come from; why do these shapes exist? The next part of the definition explains that genres “develop from responses to recurrent situations.” A recurring situation is one that happens over and over again. Thus, genres, as forms for information and ideas, develop as the same need for communication occurs over and over again. As the same situations occur over and over again, a genre develops and changes in response; for example, go to the website www.archive.org and use the Wayback Machine to check out the history of a particular website (I'd suggest the *New York Times* at nytimes.com). Observe how the layout of the page, the information shown, and the placement of menus and pictures stays the same or changes over time. What you are seeing is how the genre of the newspaper website changes as readers interact with the genre and give feedback about what they like and don't like. The website changes as readers demand change, but the website also retains a recognizable structure that ensures it remains somewhat familiar to readers. Thus, as the definition of genre above notes, the newspaper website genre “stabilize[s] experience and give[s] it meaning and coherence” as it changes, yet remains the same, according to the needs of the people reading and writing the genre.

Genres then are forms of organizing and stabilizing information for readers and writers that change as readers and writers *use* them. The key word in that sentence is *use* because it's at the point of *use* by both writers and readers that usability can be helpful in improving our writing.

So, what does it look like if you start thinking like a usability engineer when you write? Well, below I give some ideas for applying usability in writing with some examples of how I've used these ideas in my writing.

Usability Test	Example
<p>Think about the person who will ultimately make use of the genre. This seems obvious and basic, but often we forget about the user when we begin writing, whether in a new or familiar genre. The process of writing can be overwhelming, especially when working in a new genre, and we can get so caught up in our own concerns that we forget about the person who will ultimately be putting the writing to use.</p>	<p>I've spent quite a bit of time writing help documents for new software users. When I started writing instructions, I would write numbered lists of steps that the users needed to follow in order to complete the task. However, as I thought about users trying to follow my directions, I realized that I wasn't really helping them because I was giving them lists of steps without any other explanation or illustration. So, I started including brief explanations of what each help document was supposed to help users do and giving explanations of commonly used terms; I also started inserting screenshots that showed the different screens and where to click so that users could become familiar with the software more quickly. Because I started to think about how the user would <i>use</i> the writing I was doing, I was able to see problems and fix them. While I may not have solved every problem with my help documentation, I did catch some of the biggest ones before people started using my writing.</p>
<p>Take the writing to a person who reads, writes, or edits the genre regularly. No one knows more about what features make a specific genre usable than a person who's <i>using</i> that genre all of the time. Have the person read the text. When he/she is done reading, ask him/her whether the text matches up with the genre expectations that he/she has. The feedback from expert users will be beneficial because they know what makes that genre usable.</p>	<p>At my current job, I spend a lot of time sitting in on and taking notes for meetings. Before this job, I'd never had to take meeting notes before, and I was unsure whether the notes would be useful to the people participating in the meetings. To make sure they were useful, I went to one of my bosses and asked her to go over my notes with me. My boss has experience taking notes and referring back to notes taken by someone else after a meeting; thus, she's familiar with how meeting notes gets used. As we went through the notes, she was able to give me some helpful feedback about what I was and was not doing right.</p>

Usability Test	Example
<p>Analyze some excellent examples of the genre from a usability perspective. Pretend to be a user of the genre and note how the genre helps users understand the information quickly and efficiently.</p>	<p>I recently needed to write a Statement of Purpose, a genre that's new to me. Before I even started to write, I borrowed examples from several different people who had already successfully written in the genre. Looking at how they formatted the genre, what they chose to talk about, and how they framed their goals gave me a list of ideas I could borrow from them in order to make my own work in the genre more usable.</p>
<p>Do a persona test. A persona is an imaginary user that reads the writing. Creating a persona includes making a list of the persona's major characteristics, including age, gender, level of education, job, and family status and giving the persona a name so that he/she becomes someone unique. The test also includes writing a few lines that describe the persona's personality and goals in reading the text, whether those goals are to give a grade or learn something about molecular biology. Once all of that is finished, find a picture online and give a face to the persona. Imagine that person sitting down and picking up the text. Look at it as much as possible from his/her perspective, thinking about his/her concerns and priorities as a reader. This reading should provide at least a few ideas about tweaks and changes that are needed to improve the paper for that possible user.</p>	<p>I've done some web design work in the past. Because anyone with an internet connection can look at writing I put on a website, I had to think about audiences I might not consider otherwise when working in genres that are harder to access. One of the most useful personas I created was a middle-aged African teacher named Nathaniel. I created the Persona Text Example shown below and it showed me how a small amount of work on a persona could help me see where the writing I was doing wasn't very usable for a specific audience. Thinking about Nathaniel coming to a website I've made makes me check to see how much American slang I have written on that page and how many pop culture references I've made. Nathaniel not only wouldn't be interested in that material, but he also likely wouldn't understand it because he doesn't live in America. Nathaniel also forces me to consider whether I've been careful about how I've broken up the information on the page into easily scannable chunks. Both of these considerations help me reconsider whether my writing is usable for the widest possible audience.</p>

Persona Test Example			
<p>Basics about Nathaniel include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45 years old • Veteran teacher • Married • Two sons • Lives in Ghana 	<p>Nathaniel's concerns include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I want to be able to find what I need quickly because I have lots I need to get done every day." • "I prefer not to read on the computer because it makes my eyes tired." 	<p>Other background information on Nathaniel includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching in the public school system for 20 years. He quickly judges if he likes what he's reading because he spends so much time reading student papers. • He tries to avoid reading anything that he can't scan quickly unless he's reading for his own enjoyment. • Because he doesn't have a lot of time, he isn't really interested in new technology and prefers to do what he knows works. 	<p>Nathaniel's typical web tasks include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking e-mail • Searching for information for teaching • Keeping in touch with family

Thinking about the readers who will pick up a genre and use it can help us stop thinking about writing as a solitary activity involving a person and a computer screen and help us start thinking about writing as an activity that will impact someone else in the world. When we consider how our writing will be used, we can clarify what our own purposes for writing are and consider whether we are meeting the needs of the users who might come in contact with our work. Thinking about usability may seem somewhat simplistic and obvious, but as in the examples I gave at the start of this paper, it's when designers and writers don't think about the obvious that they create frustration and anger for the people who are stuck using their problematic products. So, whenever we start working in a genre, it always helps to pause for a minute and think about who will be using the writing, how they will use it, and why. Time spent considering the user is never lost time.

Endnotes

1. “Usability Basics.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
<http://www.usability.gov/basics/index.html>.
2. Quoted in Bawarshi, A. S., & Reiff, M. J. (2011). *Genre: An introduction to history, theory, research, and pedagogy*. Fort Collins, CO: WAC Clearinghouse.
Retrieved from http://wac.colostate.edu/books/bawarshi_reiff/ p. 79.



Rob Koehler is a Master's student at Illinois State University. He likes doing research, which takes up most of his time, and relaxing as much as possible, which doesn't seem to happen all that often due to his commitment to research. He'd really prefer if he could find a life choice that allowed both of these activities in equal parts, but he doesn't think it's going to happen.