

## Introducing Genre

### STEP 1: Getting started

#### Task 1: Thinking about letter writing (Individual or group)

People don't just write letters for no reason at all. In general, we write letters because a particular situation has arisen. We're going to call this particular situation, the **occasion** for writing the letter.

Nor do we write letters to nobody. The person (or group) that we write to is called the **addressee**. Sometimes we know the addressee and our relationship with them might be quite close. At other times, we may not know the addressee at all, so that our relationship is distant or formal.

As writers, we also bring to our letter writing one or more **purposes**. Our purpose is what we want to achieve when we write a letter.

Finally, you don't have to be a brain surgeon to figure out that letters are written in language. If we focus on the language of a text such as a letter and ask the question: "What job is the language being asked to do?", then we are referring to **language function**. As you'll see, language function is usually related to a speaker or writer's purpose.

In the following table, you will find examples of occasions, addressees, purposes and functions for a variety of letters jumbled up. Re-draw the table and match the items so that the table makes sense.

Occasion	Addressee	Purpose	Function/s
1. A person needs a job	A young person in another country	To ask for a loan	Explaining a situation and demanding action
2. You are writing to a penfriend for the first time	Parents	To make a formal complaint	Arguing the writer's merits for a position
3. A parent is angry that their child is being bullied at school	Personnel manager of a company	To introduce yourself	Re-establishing contact and arguing a case for a loan
4. A son traveling overseas is broke and needs money	The principal of a school	To seek employment	Providing information about you and your land

Table 1: Letter-Writing Situations

#### Task 2: Exploring letter-writing situations (Individual or group)

Re-draw the table in Table 1. Come up with four letter-writing occasions of your own and match them with appropriate addressees, purposes and functions.

#### Exploring Further:

Imagine you are the son or daughter in example four of **Table 1**. You have been traveling overseas and (for a reason you will have to imagine) you have found yourself desperately short of money. Although you don't feel particularly good about it, you decide to write home to your parents. They are your last resort!

1. Write the letter.
2. Explain: what was your purpose in writing the letter.
3. Look at the language you used in your letter. Write down the jobs (functions) that your language is doing. Note: Be aware that your language will probably be doing different jobs at different points in the letter.

## STEP 2: Finding a focus

In this chapter, we are looking at a particular kind of letter: the letter to the editor. Our focus for the investigation which follows is the question:

### Are there features that all letters to the editor have in common?

Let's suggest a few hypotheses in response to this question. (A frequently used Year 9 Science book defines a hypothesis as '... a guess which we make suggesting what will happen in a particular situation.')

- Letters to the editor have as their **purpose** the *expression of opinion*.
- The main **function** of letters to the editor is *to persuade*.
- Letters to the editor are usually short pieces of paragraphed prose.
- Letters to the editor usually begin by referring to a topic or issue and then go on to argue a case by stating opinions and giving reasons.
- Letters to the editor usually use formal diction.

## STEP 3: Investigating text

### 1. An example:

Read through LETTER TO THE EDITOR A. This one comes from *Cleo* magazine.

#### LETTER TO THE EDITOR A

##### A dog's life

I read with interest "Humans Do This To Animals" (March CLEO). Although this article is very true, not every person who attends the shows can be stereotyped as "animals." My dogs are very loved, they sleep on the bed, swim in the lake, have a quarter acre section to run around on all day, but I also show them. I would not show my dogs to the extent of boredom, traveling the country every weekend. My dogs actually come to life at the shows and seem to enjoy the fuss for the short time they are in the ring, so it is kept as a novel adventure. I have not been successful in the show ring, but this is mainly because having long-coated dogs swimming the lake or rolling around in sand does not do their coats any good. I believe my dogs are dogs first, to be loved, cared for and treasured, not dogs who come out on the weekend to be shown and then caged up so their coats don't get damaged or dirty. I therefore hope people will enjoy the dog shows and ignore the people who have forgotten what a dog is for.

**Yoghurt's Mum, address supplied.**

Source: *Cleo New Zealand*, June, 1996, p. 14.

Let's check our hypotheses against this letter.

- Yes, the letter is expressing an opinion (that not everyone who shows their dog at a dog show is an “animal.”)
- The main function of this letter is to persuade. The writer is offering herself as an example of someone who cares for animals *and* enters them in dog shows.
- This letter is fairly short, is in prose, but is *not* broken into paragraphs.
- Yes, this letter begins by identifying the topic, then moves on to the expression of opinion, then makes its case.
- The diction here is fairly formal. Notice the absence of **contractions** and **slang**.

As you can see, it is possible to set out these findings in the form of a table.

Hypotheses	Findings: Cleo Letter
Letters to the editor have as their <b>purpose</b> the <i>expression of opinion</i> .	<b>Yes:</b> This letter argues that not everyone who shows their dog at a dog show is an “animal.”
The main <b>function</b> of letters to the editor is persuasion.	<b>Yes:</b> This letter-writer wants to persuade us that people can care for animals <i>and</i> enter them in dog shows.
Letters to the editor are usually short pieces of paragraphed prose.	<b>No:</b> This letter is short, but <i>not</i> broken into paragraphs. (However, we think it might have been clearer if it <i>had</i> been.)
Letters to the editor usually begin by referring to a topic or issue and then go on to argue a case by stating opinions and giving reasons.	<b>Yes:</b> This letter begins by identifying the topic, then moves on to the expression of opinion, then makes its case.
Letters to the editor usually use formal diction	<b>Yes:</b> The diction is fairly formal. There are no contractions or examples of slang.

**Table 2: Matching hypotheses and findings**

**Exploring Further: Thinking about language function**

**Function** is a word we will be using often in this book. You'll recall that in **Step 1** we defined language function as the job which the language in a particular text is doing.

With the *Cleo* letter, we can easily see that the *main* function of the language is persuasion.

In using the word “main” in the above sentence, we are acknowledging that the language used in a text such as a letter can serve more than one function. For example, in the *Cleo* letter, we can identify a story-telling function. (At a number of points, the language of this letter recounts a number of events.) We suggest you use the term **secondary function** to refer to *less* important functions you see a text as serving.

Read the following short extracts. For each one:

- Identify what you consider to be the main function.
  - Suggest secondary functions that might be served in the extract.
- a) Once upon a time, there was a fearsome tiger who had terrorized the area around Bangaloo for three long years. There were nights when villagers would be awakened by awful screams and, sure enough, the next day one of their number would be found to be missing. Naturally, the parents and old folk of the village used the opportunity to warn their children of the dangers of traveling and playing alone ...
- b) Before you go tramping, it is important that you:
- have a good knowledge of the area you will be tramping in;
  - check out a weather forecast;
  - have a change of warm clothing;
  - have emergency food rations;
  - let authorities know where you are going and when you expect to come out.
- c) Ladies, gentlemen and [pause] others,  
It is not my habit to pull punches, so I will start by saying that with few exceptions, I’ve never seen a more colorless bunch of people. I’m here to talk about the importance of presentation as a way of getting on in the world. To begin with, let me take a few moments to talk about dress.
- d) There is nothing wrong with the education system that would not be remedied if we abolished schools. The main problem with schools is that they create an artificial environment that has nothing to do with the real world. How many people in the real world have their abilities judged by being asked to sit a written examination? How many people in the real world are told that their ability to do a task depends on their wearing the correct uniform?

## 2. Formal and informal language (Individual)

The letter below was written by Jason Jurke to his local traffic authority after he received a letter telling him he’d been picked up by a speed camera. Your job is:

- To list the words or phrases which you think Jason was rather unwise to use if he is going to make a good impression on the traffic department;
- And then to rewrite the body of his letter for him using more formal language. (I hope you’ve noticed that Jason isn’t the world’s greatest speller also.)

Look you guys,

Give a joker a chance will ya. The fact of the matter is that my little guy had cut his foot real bad. Blood was poring out all over the show. We’d put three bandidges round his foot and it had made dam all difference. What’s more, he was screaming like a banshee right in my left earhole.

I know you guys want to keep the road toll down and all that stuff. But we all know, don't we, that you're also using those traffic camras as a tidy little money-spinner. Well, the fact of the matter is that I'm broke at the moment.

So, in conclusion, you can stuff your precious notification wherever. I just can't pay it.

OK?

Jason Jurke

### 3. More on purpose and function (Group)

You may have noticed that the function or functions served by the language in a text often reflects the purpose of the speaker or writer. Hence we can say the purpose of the writer of the *Cleo* letter is to persuade and that the major function of the language is persuasion (or argument). After re-reading the Jason Jurke letter, complete the following tasks:

- Identify Jason's purpose in writing the letter.
- Decide the various functions served by the language in Jason's letter.
- Decide: Do these functions match Jason's purpose?
- Come up with a situation where a speaker has a purpose that is badly matched by the way he or she has used language in that situation. Perform the speech to the class.

### 4. Investigating letters to the editor

- a) Read **LETTERS TO THE EDITOR B, C and D**.

#### LETTER TO THE EDITOR B

##### plagiarized poems

I'm writing to tell you all that the poem "Just A Friend" by Jaime-Lee of NSW wasn't by Jaime-Lee at all. It was printed in another mag last November. Jaime, did you really think no-one would notice? I can't stand people (like you) who take credit for someone else's work.

Sally, Tas

Thanks Sally and all the other readers who spotted this. Just for the record, I'm not stealing other writers' work 'cos you're gonna get busted and besides, when I'm the pirate in being a rip

**Source:** *Dolly*, April, 1996, p. 8.

#### LETTER TO THE EDITOR C

##### Soccer is not a wimp's sport

Dear TEARAWAY, I am writing to you concerning the letter in your September issue entitled "Is soccer a wimp's sport?".

Myself, not even being a crazed fan of soccer, was taken quite aback by this letter quite plainly showing that this person did not really know what he was talking about.

Soccer is a game of tremendous skill, and the soccer players that we see in the world cup spend many years training and practicing.

Soccer players have a special passion for their sport which makes them such devoted sportsmen/women.

He also mentioned that soccer players are sulks when they get hurt but we must remember that rugby is a very physical game and soccer is not really. Soccer needs more skill to play.

I think this "soccer is a wimp's sport" is very harsh, and may even have offended some soccer fans. Soccer is definitely not a wimp's sport.—Y. RUSSELL, Auckland

(You and all the other people who wrote to us about this have convinced us now that neither soccer or rugby are wimp's sports. Honest! We just got completely snowed under from all your excellent letters. It seems there's nothing like the rugby vs. soccer argument to really RILE you—Ed)

Source: *Tearaway: The Voice of NZ Youth*, October, 1994, p. 4.

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR D

### Sermonising pap

*Independence Day* is the “worst movie ever made”? (*B*, August 13). Either your reviewer, Diana Simmonds, spent a bit too much time out in the sun during her visit to Hawaii, or she completely misses the point of a movie like *ID4*.

Our family has seen *Independence Day* twice now, and we would be the first to agree that it is derivative, lacks meaningful character and plot development, and probably sets a new record for the number of negative stereotypes in a single movie. So what? Do people go to Dreamworld and ride the “Wipe Out” to gain some great societal insight? I think not. It's the visceral enjoyment of the ride itself.

I want also to take strong exception to Ms Simmonds' comment that “... American society is violently internally divided.” I am hard-pressed to imagine a more xenophobic rationalization for not liking a movie that the sermonizing pap that Ms Simmonds wastes over three pages of text. Perhaps Ms Simmonds needs another vacation to Hawaii so she can learn to take herself—and the concept of “art”—a little less seriously, and learn to have some good, gut-level “fun.”

JEFF C. GARDNER  
PORTLAND, OREGON, USA

Source: *The Bulletin*, September 3, 1996, p. 11

- b) Find at least *two* additional examples of letters to the editor from different publications.
- c) Test each of letters **B**, **C**, **D**, and your own examples, against the five hypotheses set out above by attempting (for each letter) to:
- say what the purpose of the writer is;
  - say what function is being served by the language in the letter;
  - comment on the length of the letter, whether it is prose and whether it is paragraphed or not;
  - say whether it begins by identifying an issue and proceeds to argue a case by stating opinions and giving reasons;
  - decide whether the diction is super casual, casual, moderately formal or rather formal.

Use the example provided in **Table 2** as a guide as to how to go about this task. You will notice how the “Findings” column contains brief reasons for saying “Yes” or “No”.

- d) Record your findings in chart form using the format in **Table 3**. (Your teacher may provide you with a worksheet for this task.) To achieve a neat record of your findings, you should make notes before filling in the blanks on your chart.

Hypotheses	Dolly letter	Tearway letter	Bulletin letter	Your first example	Your second example
Letters to the editor have as their <b>purpose</b> the <i>expression of opinion</i> .					

The main <b>function</b> of letters to the editor is persuasion.					
Letters to the editor are usually short pieces of <u>paragraphed</u> prose.					
Letters to the editor usually begin by referring to a topic or issue and then go on to argue a case by stating opinions and giving reasons.					
Letters to the editor usually use formal diction					

**Table 3: Recording your investigation findings**

**Exploring further:**

Re-read **LETTER TO THE EDITOR A**. Use the following list to divide the letter into labeled sections:

- statement of topic
- statement of position
- provision of evidence
- concluding statement

Then write a brief paragraph saying how convinced you were by the case being made by “Yoghurt’s Mum.”

**STEP 4: Drawing conclusions** (Individual or group)

You now have to decide which hypotheses you can accept and which ones you want to reject or modify. You will be able to do this by studying your findings as set out in **Table 3**. Do this in two steps:

- Step 1: Put a tick next to the hypotheses that are *supported* by your findings.
- Step 2: Put a cross next to the hypotheses that are *not supported* by your findings. Find a way of rewriting these hypotheses so that they *do* fit your findings.

**STEP 5: Reflection**

In the course of this investigation, you have been exploring the concept of **genre**. Read the explanation for this term contained in the box below:

**THE CONCEPT OF GENRE**

At its simplest, a **genre** is a type of text which can be described in terms of such things as the participants involved, purpose, function, structure, layout and **style**.

We can think of a letter to the editor as a genre written by a person who wants to make their views known to the editor of a newspaper or magazine. A common function of such letters is to persuade. Letters to the editor usually begin by identifying a topic and then proceed to argue a case (making points, giving reasons, providing evidence). Such letters can, however, vary enormously in their layout and style. Depending on the readership of the newspaper or magazine, letters to the editor can range from very formal to very casual.

### Explaining differences (Group or individual)

During your investigation, you discovered various ways in which letters to the editor are *similar*. At the same time, you will be aware of differences between the various examples of letters that you studied. Choosing two of these examples, come up with an explanation for the difference between them, especially with respect to matters of style.

### Exploring further:

Think about the various school reports you have received over the years. List the similarities that exist in the situations that give rise to these reports. You might find the following list useful in thinking about the word “situation.”

- Who writes the school report?
- For whom are they writing the school report?
- What is the purpose of a school report?
- What function does the language of a school report serve?
- What kind of information does a school report contain?

## STEP 6: Producing text

### Option 1:

Imagine you are the letter-writer that Y. Russell is responding to in **LETTER TO THE EDITOR C**. Write the sort of letter you think this person wrote to **Tearaway**. The **Sample Layout** below will help you to *shape* your letter.

51 Anzac Cres  
Northbridge  
Auckland 3105

23 October 1996

The Editor  
*Tearaway Magazine*  
PO Box 473  
Wanganui

Dear Editor



[Paragraph 1: Introduce or background the topic of your letter.]

[Paragraphs 2, 3.....: Make your points, give reasons, provide evidence.]

[Last paragraph: Say what you think should be done.]

Yours sincerely

[Signature]

Mary Jones

## Option 2:

**Transformation exercise:** Rewrite **LETTER TO THE EDITOR D** as a letter to **Tearaway** magazine.

### Exploring further

#### Investigation

Find and read the letters to the editor in a number of issues of your local newspaper. Write a report with the heading: “[Name of newspaper]: Letters to the Editor”. Then, write your report under the following sub-headings:

- **Participants:** Describe the sorts of people who have written letters.
- **Purpose:** Say what the main purpose in the letter-writing was.
- **Function:** Say what language functions were being served in the range of letters you read.
- **Structure:** Describe a common structure you found in the letter-writing.
- **Layout:** Describe how the newspaper set out the letters.
- **Style:** Briefly indicate (with examples) how formal or informal the writing style of the letter-writers was.

#### References:

*Cleo New Zealand*, June, 1996, p. 14.

*Dolly*, April, 1996, p. 8.

*Tearaway: The Voice of NZ Youth*, October, 1994, p. 4.

*The Bulletin*, September 3, 1996, p. 11.

*New Zealand Herald*, August 11, 1945.