

Wednesday Worksheet
Week 6
February 9

"The first 3 pages"

Begin by writing your **Author's Note** on one of your manuscripts. Remember: where are you in the writing process; what are the pieces strengths; what needs work?

Getting feedback on your first 3 pages is all about **expectations**.

Many of you wrote about this yesterday. You wanted to know if people were getting a sense of the character and what they were capable of. You wanted to know what the reader cared about or thought was going to happen. You wanted to know if the set up was convincing.

Consider expectations first in terms of **genre**, and let's stretch the term, too. Last week, Jin said she thought *Matewan* was a "Western." It is and it isn't, right? What she meant was it had character-roles, some typical scenes, the structure, and climax of a Western, a genre we are all familiar with. "Genre," if it means more than "formulaic pulp fiction," as it should, is nothing more than a *recognizable set of expectations*, a "type" of story or fiction that we can label in some meaningful way. It's meaningful to notice that *Matewan* is a Western because it reveals a number of structural elements and allows it to compare it to other members of the genre. *GV's Billy the Kid* is also a Western, but it has some interesting diversions from the form. Overwhelmingly, it looks like a Western, has Western characters and situations. But the shoot out in the end is not nearly as "typical" as the shoot out in *Matewan*. What's wrong? Maybe that's part of what is interesting about Billy's death -- his life/death doesn't fit the genre properly. This lack of fit is inherently interesting and demands explanation: Gore Vidal explained it by layering the Western drama with another genre, the christ-like hero who martyrs himself for principles. Billy is also the flawed hero we see in many other tales, including Shakespearean and the classical Greek stuff: he is out of sync with his time, his environment, a misfit.

You may assume that genre corrupts our desire for originality or is a symptom of cheap literature to be looked down upon. Not at all. All literature is dependent upon genre and most literature fits a genre. In the "Literature" section of Barnes & Noble, books are

... the quick comedians
Extemporally will stage us, and present
Our Alexandrian revels. Antony
Shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see
Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness
I' the posture of a whore.

"Men accept one another's reports of past events ... So impatient of labour are most men in the search for truth, and so prone to jump to ready-made conclusions." Thucydides

William Shakespeare, as quoted by Italo Calvino in "Levels of Reality in Literature."

not arranged by genre because they've been deemed worthy of the capital "L" of Goodness. Don't be deceived. There are two players in the genre game: the text and the reader. Every text, if it does not fit a genre, has some relationship to genre. Whether it contains a mix, a reference to, a response to, or a breaking of genre, genre is essential to its construction. Writing without genre is no different from writing without words. (Many artists have lamented that their words are the same words used to sell toilet paper and titillate the worst in people.) Genre is like a big sentence. From the first word of every sentence, the possibilities for that sentence are immediately limited; every word after takes its meaning and its relationship to the other words from specific other uses of those words in life and literature. More often than not, words are combined in very typical ways. From the reader's perspective, genre is essential to reading and making meaning. We guess and anticipate based on genre assumptions; we make certain types of meaning based on genre assumptions. Genre is like the grammar of narrative! By definition, anything that lacks genre also lacks meaning. And anything that persists in meaning lessness will be consigned to some genre of absurdist or dada or some such label for works that obstruct meaning. We've got a name for everything. Every genre rewards certain things and dissatisfies others. If you read a bodice-busting romance looking for a feminist psychological drama, you will be rudely disappointed. If you read *Ulysses* looking for erotica... well, you'll have to wade through a lot more extra stuff than usual to get to it; and it won't be worth it.

After a program I taught last year watched *2001: A Space Odyssey*, one student commented, "That was horrible—there's all this time when NOTHING is happening!" Another student quipped, "You were supposed to be *thinking*."

1. What am I asking my reader to cope with and accept in the first pages of my story?

2. How am I helping them to suspend their disbelief or otherwise get them into the right frame of mind for my story?

3. What specifically do I want them to anticipate or expect after reading these first few pages? What do I want them to care about or feel intrigued by? What conflicts, themes, or plot points have been introduced already?

4. How do these first few pages set the tone for the rest of my story?

5. What are the two or three most important things about the opening?

6. For what do I want to reward my reader – what do I want them to be doing with their brains as they read?

7. How would I describe the genre I am writing? What other works, combinations of types of story is it like?

8. What questions do I have for my readers?

In your project groups, keep in mind the nature of these pieces: they are early drafts, and they are just the beginning. As readers, try to notice what assumptions you are making about what you should get from a beginning, and be sure that your assumptions are rational and relevant for the piece you're reading.

As a group, answer this question:

When we talk about a piece of writing, we often wonder whether it has **FLOW**. What is flow and how can you tell whether something has got it or not? Be as specific as possible in your answer. Use each other's work to talk about what flow looks like, how it can be enhanced, diminished, and so on.