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Does a Personal Letter Belong to a Genre?

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Personal letters are sent and received everyday. Slang is widely used and sometimes spelling is not conventional. Grammatical rules are broken and the organization of information may vary a lot. All the same these letters keep something in common to be recognized as personal letters. They keep the intrinsic structure and form of their genre.

What is genre? If we look up the word in Webster's Third New International Dictionary one of its meanings states it is " an artistic composition characterized by a particular style, content and form." It is easy to agree that is the idea people have in mind when they read the word genre. It is generally associated with novel, drama or comedy. The content of a novel is a specific long story. Its form is the division of the whole story into chapters. The content of a play is a particular story too, but its form is the division of the whole story into acts and these ones into scenes. Their structures influence the way their contents are written, producing particular styles. Their own internal rules establish their rationale.

The concept of genre in Modern Linguistics can be extended to many other kinds of compositions and complete texts. John Swales in Genre Analysis defines genres as communicative events with distinctive features:

1. Purpose. The use of a text to communicate specific information.
2. Recognition of this goal by the community. All the members of a society can recognize that a novel communicates a story, a bill the amount to be paid and, a personal letter inform of private news. Again, the relation between content and form give rise to the internal principles of these texts.
3. Schematic structure. According to Widdowson, in the process of learning a language people not only learn individual concepts but clusters of related forms and structures that provide them with prototypes of behavioral pattern. These ones, in turn, give people expectations on daily activities so they could recognize these patterns and reproduce them in a social interaction. That means that when people receive a personal letter they already have a prototype of it in mind and so, they could recognize it as such. When people need to write a personal letter they recall the particular scheme from their mind and can reproduce such a letter. The form of a letter consists of the date, heading, salutation, body of the letter, close and the name of the sender, though not all of them should be present. The content will be vary greatly but will be restricted to personal themes.

Genres are communicative events and so is a personal letter. The text has its own form and structure with a determined goal. All the members of a society or particular groups such as musicians and scientists share a reality, certain knowledge and thoughts which provide them with particular mental prototypes. As a result, the members of those groups can produce and recognize similar kinds of texts to communicate among themselves .

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