

Thinking About Genre

Lucy Calkins is an influential educator and one of the founders of the writing workshop model. In an interview for this project, she talked about writing inside narrative and non-narrative genres.

Transcript

"Many writers see themselves as writers within a particular genre. Poets... the identity of being a poet is very important to them or story writers or memoirists or essayists. And I think it's important for kids to feel at home with genre, within a lot of, a vast range of genre and to be able to explore how they can take their content, their messages and put them into different genre. Uh, that's important to me.

"Sometimes in high schools, teachers have been taught that there's four different kinds of writing, creative, narrative, expository, descriptive. And I find that entertaining and funny because those really aren't the kinds of writing that most of us see when we go to the library or we go to a bookstore. In a library or in a bookstore, the kinds of writing... you can't really say, 'I'm looking for the descriptive writing.' Instead you'll say, 'I'm looking for memoir.' Or, 'I'm looking for editorials. I'm looking for short stories.' And to me it's the genre that are there in the real world that we most need to teach our kids.

"Having said that, we're also teaching kids to write inside of different structures. And I think that narrative writing and expository writing, that those two structures are very fundamental, and that they underlie all of the different genre and that it is important for kids to understand that non-narrative writing follows particular constraints. And that that's true whether it's a feature article or an editorial or an essay, and that there aren't that-the differences between it, an essay, a feature article, a lot of non-narrative writing is not all that different. And the differences between narrative memoir or short stories, realistic fiction, science fiction-those are all narrative. And they are, therefore uh, somewhat similar and the constraints that a writer needs to think about are somewhat similar if they're writing inside of narrative."

"I think if you're writing inside of narrative that what you're really doing is telling a story and that a writer needs to use the elements of story. So we're creating characters in a setting and that they're moving through a, through time and through a plot. And that

there's an under story or a thematic message, a reason why somebody's telling the story. And on the other hand I think in non-narrative writing that usually writers are trying to teach people something. And that the relationship of, 'how does one teach an audience? How does one teach learners? How does one influence somebody else's thinking?" Those are [the] primary purpose[s], underlies a lot of the structures of non-narrative writing."