

## Composition Essay Assignment: The Technology of Genre

In “Invisible Technologies,” Neil Postman argues that language is itself a “technolog[y] in disguise” (131). This argument has many ramifications for us as beginning and continuing writers, because what we know about the world and the people in it must be conveyed through language. Language, that is, is a foundational instrument of knowledge. If language is a technology—a tool for engaging with the world and governed by specific rules and limitations—then it follows that different kinds of language will work in different ways. In the technology of language, unwritten rules and our tacit awareness of them tell us what kind of writing we’re looking at and how we should read it.

This assignment asks you to construct an essay investigating a different kind of writing, a form of writing that you may not typically associate with a first-year composition course. In the past, students have worked with kinds of writing as general as musical notation, computer languages, and comic books, or as specific as an article in *The Onion* or an old family recipe for a traditional dish. Try to think of this kind of writing as a technology, and analyze the way it conveys knowledge.

### Requirements:

- a representative or authoritative example (reproduced and attached to your essay)
- 3-4 pages of analysis
- an imitation of your representative example that supports your analysis (attached to your essay)

### Getting Started:

1. Think about the kinds of texts you’re most **familiar** with. We are all familiar with a great variety of kinds of texts, though we’re not all aware of them as kinds of texts. Some unexpected kinds of texts are: advertisements (and more specifically, hack insurance ads, ads for personal injury lawyers, ads for high-end cosmetics or brand name designers, etc.); comic strips or graphic novels; nutrition or ingredient information; C+ or—for the old-schoolers, Basic, C, Pascal; weblogs; mission or personal statements; and so on. Select one that you feel most strongly about, either in a positive or a negative manner.
2. Find a **representative example** of this type of writing. A representative example is an example that displays all the typical features of its kind.
3. Make a two-columned **list**. On one side, list all the **notable features** of the kind of writing you’ve selected. This list should include any unexpected features of the particular example you’re looking at, as well. For instance, if you selected a family recipe, then you’ll want to note the size of the recipe card, whether it has any stains on it, how old it is, where it came from, etc. How, in other words, do you know it’s a member of the set “family recipe”?
4. On the other side, list your **interpretation** of these features. Try to answer the

questions: What does this feature mean for the transmission of information? How does this feature affect the way I acquire knowledge from this kind of writing? Using the example above, you might note that fact that the recipe came from your Austrian great-great-grandmother who immigrated to America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century signifies the recipe's role in maintaining a tradition.

5. Think about how you'll want to **organize** this information, the tone of voice you want to take (detached, humorous, pedantic, satiric?), and the kind of language you want to use.

Once you've got a good topic, made your list/outline, and fleshed it out with concrete details, you're ready to start drafting. Here are some tips for writing your first draft:

1. **Revise your list/outline** into a more coherent and detailed outline that reflects the organizational structure you've chosen for your essay. What details will you use, what will you put aside?
2. Do you have to **define any terms** for your readers? If so, be sure to do this in a manner consistent with your topic and purpose. You might choose to use a term in an unexpected manner, for instance; in this case, you'll have to make sure your readers are "in the know."
3. Because this is an **analytical essay**, you need both to interpret your observations and describe your findings in such a way that makes your readers feel, understand, or believe what you want them to feel, understand, or believe. This means, again, concrete detail, the sort of detail that paints a highly specific image in your reader's mind. Be sure that your observations are precise and your interpretation of their meaning detailed and specific.
4. Now, you need to make sure that all these observations and interpretations tend toward one main point: your **thesis**. To get to your thesis, you might want to take a step back and ask, "What do all these points mean for the way this kind of writing transmits knowledge/information?" Remember that a thesis can be more than one sentence long. Your argument should build over the course of the essay.
5. After you've selected and arranged your details, add **an introduction and an ending**. The introduction should capture your audience's attention (maybe begin with a provocative image or a surprising example) and set the tone for the rest of your essay. It should also contain the main point of your essay.
6. **Workshop** your draft with your peers; is your argument clearly accessible? What worked really well, and what seemed less effective? Is your diction, syntax, and organization as effective as you'd hoped? Does your argument proceed in a logical manner? What about your use of detail? Your tone?

Now that you've got a good draft and some comments, you'll begin the work of revision (revision: re-vision, seeing again). You might want to check out the "So What and the Seven

Common Moves” included in the assignment for Essay 1, and be sure to come see me if you have any other questions!