

Teaching guide: genre

An introduction to genre

The aims of this document are to:

- introduce the idea of genre and show how it can be used to analyse media products
- define key theories for study and terminology to be used in media analysis
- identify how genre can be used to help understand the meaning created by the close study products.

Genre is part of the Media Language aspect of the theoretical framework. Ideas about genre could be assessed in both the AS and A-level exams. The enabling ideas that need to be studied are identified in the specifications as:

- conventions and rules
- sub-genre
- hybridity
- genres of order and integration
- 'genre as a cultural category'.

Genre is the term used for the way media products are categorised by their shared characteristics. Each media form will contain a number of different genres, for example:

Media Form	Genres
Newspapers	Broadsheet Tabloid
Magazines	Fashion magazines Lifestyle magazines Specialised magazines
Music videos	Narrative videos Abstract videos Performance videos
Television	Documentaries Sit-coms Soap operas Chat shows

Codes and conventions – the rules for genres

Each form has its own shared codes and conventions. The individual genres within each form are more 'specialised' versions of the form and so genres have their own codes and conventions shared with other products within the genre. Codes are the media language choices that help us identify the genre and conventions are the ways these codes are used.

Newspapers are printed on cheap paper and published every day. Newspapers use images and text to pass on information to the reader about the news and events of the day. All newspapers use headlines and organise their stories in columns on the page. Broadsheets and tabloids both follow these conventions but they do so in very distinct ways – the media language choices made in their construction are often quite different. Tabloids and broadsheets have their own media language codes. For example:

- tabloids are printed on smaller sheets of paper than broadsheets
- tabloids tend to use more imagery and fewer words to tell their stories than broadsheets
- tabloids use more informal and sensationalist language than broadsheets.

The differences between these types of newspapers goes beyond their size and the way they look. Tabloids cover different types of stories than broadsheets as tabloids prioritise soft news (human interest, celebrity gossip, scandals etc) while broadsheets focus on hard news (politics, foreign affairs, economics etc). In the UK, tabloid newspapers such as *The Sun* and *The Mirror* look similar and tell their stories in similar ways, even though their politics are quite different. They follow tabloid codes and conventions. British tabloids are not all the same though and the genre is split further into two sub-genres. The red-top tabloids (eg *The Sun*) and the mid-range tabloids (sometimes called black-tops) which include *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Express*. These papers are similar in size and look similar to *The Sun* and *The Mirror*. They present a lot of soft news stories and illustrate stories with lots of images. They often use very emotional language in their headlines and within their stories but their reports will often be more detailed than found in the red-tops and there will be more hard news reported in a middle-market tabloid.

There are a number of different types of genre codes and conventions.

- **Iconographies:** the specific types of media language choices that make a genre recognisable. These iconographies can be visual or aural. For example, many science fiction products use the mise-en-scene of outer space, space ships, alien planets etc. These are iconographies that we recognise as belonging to the sci-fi genre.
- **Representations:** the specific types of representations that we associate with a genre. The hero of a crime drama is likely to be a detective and may be a lonewolf who has a dark personality caused by personal problems. The hero of a romantic comedy is likely to be a lighter character who is well meaning but may be clumsy or unlucky or a little foolish. These representations are conventions within these genres.
- **Themes:** different genres will deal with different themes. Science fiction often deals with ideas about exploration, living in enclosed communities or technological developments. Crime dramas deal with the consequences of violence, the search for the truth and maintaining law and order whilst romantic comedies deal with love, romance and dating.

The rules of genre are not fixed. Some media products use codes and conventions from more than one genre. These are called **hybrids**. A sci-fi romance would use the iconographies of sci-fi and merge them with the themes of the romantic story.

The first stage in being able to discuss genre is to be able to recognise codes and conventions that enable us to identify the genre but further study will show that genre is important for both media audiences and media industries.

Genre and audience

Different genres create different gratifications. A soap opera allows for identification with recognisable characters and story-lines; sit-coms provide humorous entertainment and crime dramas create suspense and excitement. Audiences use genre to help them select media products. Some people become fans of a specific genre and like to access lots of versions of these similar media products.



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Fans of beauty vloggers may have favourites but whether they watch videos made by *Makeupshayla* or *Manny Mua* or *A Model Recommends*, they will be watching a vlogger speaking to camera who demonstrates the application of make-up, shows swatches of colour on the back of their hands and who offers tips, advice and buying guides. Genres help audiences make sense of the vast amount of media material available to them and help them reject and avoid material they are not interested in and select products they are more likely to enjoy.

Genre and industries

Media industries are able to use genres in a number of ways. Having clear genre codes and conventions helps to simplify media production. Conventional sit-coms are created on a sound stage, sometimes in front of a live audience and are filmed using a multi-camera set up. Scenes are edited together showing the action on the set from the different points of view offered by the cameras. This conventional approach means that sit-com producers can follow the conventions used by previous producers of sit-coms to create a media product that is recognisable to fans of the genre.



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As audiences use genres to select the media products they will access, media industries can use this to help promote and market new genre texts. Lifestyle vloggers such as Zoella, Thatcher Joe, Alfie Deyes and *Sprinkle of Glitter* promote one another by appearing in each other's vlogs. A fan of Zoella's videos is likely to also enjoy ones created by her brother, her boyfriend and her friends and so this is a good way to reach and try to appeal to new audiences.

Problems with genre

The nature of genre is based on repetition. Genres repeat codes and conventions so that audiences recognise the genre and know which products to select. This can create reassurance for the audience as they know what to expect but too much repetition can lead to audiences becoming bored. The gratifications created by having expectations fulfilled can soon turn to boredom as a genre becomes tired and clichéd. Neale identifies that the balance between 'repetition and difference' is one that media producers are always trying to achieve. Media producers are always trying to create a balance between giving audiences the comfort of something familiar while also being innovative and creating something new that will interest and excite audiences. This can be difficult to achieve – too much familiarity and the audience will be bored, too much innovation and the audience will feel the product is no longer part of the genre.

This need for innovation means that genres develop and change over time. Another reason that means that genres have to change is that audiences themselves also change. As cultural attitudes and values change, so approaches to representations and themes within genres will also alter to reflect this. Genres need to be able to respond to avoid being repetitive as well as to respond to cultural changes.

Genres, narrative and ideology

Some genres have specific ideologies as their codes and conventions. In a soap opera the values of family, cooperation and loyalty are often communicated through the domestic stories the genre focuses on. The theorist Schatz identified an alternative way of thinking about genre that was based on the type of story told – he called these genres the genre of order and the genre of integration. The iconographies are not important for these genres only the stories and the values they communicate.

	Genre of order	Genre of integration
Heroes	Lone wolf, individual hero	Heroic group – collective, couple, family, community.
Conflicts	External threat creates conflict – expressed through violent action	Threat comes from within the group – expressed through emotions.
Resolutions	Resolution to conflict – violent elimination of threat	Resolution to conflict – through embrace, acceptance, love.
Themes	<p>The hero often comes from outside the threatened society.</p> <p>Hero takes on all the problems to save others.</p> <p>Isolated and self-reliant hero.</p> <p>Hero may depart or die once the conflict has been solved – order has been created and they are no longer necessary</p>	<p>The heroic group is part of the community under threat.</p> <p>Collectives work together to solve problems.</p> <p>Individuals within the community are all important.</p> <p>Problem solved with cooperation and communication.</p>

Genres of order value individualism and personal sacrifice. This genre sees violence as justified in certain circumstances and the heroes' role is to reinstate the social order that has been undermined by the threat.

Genres of integration value collectives and groups who communicate and cooperate for the general good. Negotiation and compromise are often used to help solve problems so that whatever has threatened the equilibrium can find a way to be integrated into the community.

These genre conventions are not based on the look of the product or even the actual content. These two genres connect media products through their ideological perspectives.

Finally, Mittel sees genres as **cultural categories**. Individual examples from genres are part of a specific historical and cultural context. How audiences access, engage with and interpret genres will be influential on the development of genres. Genres are recognisable and use tried and tested structures, but it is the slow change of individual products reacting to and reflecting their own cultural context that develops the genre itself.

Mini case study: The Western



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One of the most successful genres of the 20th century was The Western. The genre was popular in comic books, films and television programmes. It used a range of iconographies and thematic codes and conventions set by early versions of the genre which were repeated and refined over time. A common Western theme was the need for the white settler to defend his land from indigenous Americans. Over time, this story has been seen as racist and it 'whitewashes' the history which involved displacing indigenous Americans and stealing their land from them. Audience grew bored of the repeated iconographies of men in hats on horses, saloons and farmsteads and they grew uncomfortable with the genre's themes and so the genre is less popular today than it used to be.

Many media producers have tried to generate interest in the genre again by innovating. Western hybrids have been made (for example, *Aliens vs Cowboys*; *Paint Your Wagon*). Some Westerns attempted to bring in more realism regarding the violence of the era (for example *The Quick and the Dead*; *Deadwood*) but the Western struggled to maintain its audience. In 2016 HBO aired the TV series *Westworld* which was popular with critics and audiences. *Westworld* is a hybrid product that mixes Western and sci-fi codes and conventions and it deals with contemporary themes about identity and power, artificial intelligence and robotics.

CSPs and genre

All in-depth close study products (CSPs) and the targeted CSPs that are assessed via the media language and representation elements of the theoretical framework should be analysed using ideas about genre. Products can be considered in the way

they use and/or subvert codes and conventions as well as the way genre creates relationships between audiences and producers.

Exam technique

In an exam, marks will be offered for both definitions of key terms from the theoretical framework but also for the ability to apply the ideas when talking about media products.

Activity one

Name three sit-coms. These sit-coms may have different settings and deal with different situations but what makes them all sit-coms? What are the similarities between them? These are the codes and conventions of the genre.

Activity Two

Sketch out a typical story from one of the following genres:

- western
- crime drama
- soap opera
- sit-com.

Are conventional examples of these genres using codes from genres of order or integration? What are the ideologies and values usually communicated by these genres?