Exclusive Engagement Now Playing: The Genre of a Book Trailer

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Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar. ~ Charles Bazerman, The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classrooms1

Since the 1960s English/Language Arts classroom have stretched the traditional canon to include such forms of popular culture as movies, television, music lyrics, and advertising as well as the “lesser” genres of science fiction, horror, and young adult literature. In the last decade digital tools have allowed students to go beyond being “readers” of pop culture to being producers and publishers of their own works in a widening array of contemporary genres: spoken word poetry, street fiction, graphic novels, blogs, fanfic, digital gaming, Wikipedia entries, and mashups.

Since 2002 when Circle of Seven Productions created the first book trailers for the publishing industry, this genre, which emulates the conventions of movie trailers, has taken off. At this writing, Scholastic listed 82 book trailers on its website, and there were over 55,600 book trailers posted on YouTube by publishers and by students as a contest entry, as classroom work, or as a self-sponsored activity. As Bazerman pointed out, genre is a “[location] within which meaning is constructed. . . and the [guidepost] we use to explore the unfamiliar.” Student work in the YouTube productions shows that they have internalized a variety of conventions of the movie trailer genre, but they may need guideposts to strengthen the quality of their work. We can encourage them to stretch by helping them analyze elements of high quality guiding models.

Coming Soon to a Classroom Near You

Movie trailers generally introduce characters, characterizations, conflict, and plot through the use of action or dialogue clips, text, and voice-overs. They may also give setting information (through the visuals or text), overviews of themes, and references to the studio, to awards earned, and to other movies. Trailers often end with some kind of hook such as a question or a cliffhanger to entice the audience to see the movie. More sophisticated trailers may be enhanced by visual or sound effects or music to create a mood or to punctuate an idea. By identifying and critiquing techniques used in examples, students can make explicit their background knowledge of this genre, using these insights to make deliberate decisions about content, technique, and intent as they produce their own.

As students view mentor trailers, they should observe

• How were words (dialog, voice-over, text) used? What information about the story was given? Was there word play or clever turns of phrase?
• What do you think the story is about? Was there enough information without giving away twists or the ending?
• Was the pacing effective? Did some parts drag or seem too brief?
As students create their scripts, they should include “stage directions” on tone of voice and sound effects. They should periodically read the scripts aloud so that their trailer runs between 30 seconds and 2 minutes. If visuals are used, students should use a storyboard template, roughing in the visuals, whether still, text, or video, and writing the script for that segment next to the image.

The simplest and least time-consuming trailers to produce are audio trailers. Depending on the tech experience of the students, access to multiple quiet areas for recording, and on how much reliable equipment is available the audio trailers with simple music and minimal sound effects can take as little as three class periods. Always, though, plan for additional independent time for the groups with members absent, groups that experienced some glitches, or groups that had a more elaborate vision. Students can record their script and add background music or sound effects with an mp3 voice recorder, an iPhone, or on a computer with a USB microphone and GarageBand, Audacity, or QuickTime Pro. Without the distraction and complication of visuals, audio trailers focus the emphasis on the quality of the writing. Dialog and narration must be used or the trailer is basically a book talk. The writers may need to apply their understanding of the work to create dialog that is true to the story, as in this example by Ryan, Kristen, and Ashley of “Lady or the Tiger,” a story that has no dialog.

Narrator: In the very olden time there once lived a king.

. .

King (haughtily): For your crimes, you shall pay!

Who’s to say that it’s unfair? For did you not choose your fate yourself?

Narrator: When a man, a commoner by birth, dared to love the princess . . .

Princess (urgently): Go! Go! For my father is coming.

Narrator: Will their love end happy?

Princess (pleading): But, Father, I love him.

King (scornfully): Love? You are but a child. He will
pay for this treachery, for none escape the judgment of
the king’s court!
Narrator: Two doors. One . . . a beast. The other . . . a
maiden of noble birth to which he will be married. She
has the choice. Shall she surrender her love to another
woman? Or have him be killed? Which is stronger –
Love or Jealousy? A short story by Frank R. Stockton,
Lady or the Tiger?
(This audio trailer with artwork, dialog, and dramatic music can be found at www.mctc.org/journal/mej09/trailers.html)

Voice-overs or narration can be an important feature of the
script. The voice-over can deliver the lead-in, summarize action,
state background information about setting, time period, theme,
or characters, provide a bridge between segments of the trailer,
give author or award information, or bring the trailer to a close.
Printed text can also be used in these ways. Voice-over artists
are such an established convention of movie trailers that audiences
recognize many of the voices without knowing the artist. The
Geico commercials finally let us meet Don (“In a world where.
. . .”) LaFontaine, one of the most recognized voices in the
industry. Included in the resources below are some entertaining
videos that give a behind-the-scenes view of voice-over artists.

Another simple option for composing book trailers if you
are on a short time-frame is a slideshow of text with appropriate
music or narration. Students who have finished this basic project
early can extend their work by adding appropriate still images,
either photographs taken by students or images found on
the internet or scanned from print. To reduce the extra class time
needed, they could create or search for images outside of class.
Some options for creating slideshows or movies include iMovie,
Movie Maker, Photoshow, PowerPoint, or iPhoto.

Using student-produced video footage presents complications
in creating realistic settings, costumes, characterization, and
action. If live action is chosen, some of these problems can be
minimized by using extreme close-ups, fade-outs, voice-overs,
and black or unlit backgrounds. Students may also choose to

film at suitable locations they have access to outside of school.
For more advanced filmmakers, the Sherlock Holmes trailer
listed below creatively uses still images of realistic backgrounds,
records the actors in blue screen style, and inserts them into the
setting.

Roll the Credits
Before students begin to look for images, music, and sound
effects, they will likely need instruction in copyright and fair
use. Extensive new material, cited below, published in 2008 by
media literacy scholars at Temple University has taken a radically
new approach toward this issue. This Code of Best Practices for
Fair Use in Media Literacy Education, as well as the supporting
material also listed below, are meant to “offer guidance, not
guidelines” to classroom teachers, who, ultimately “are the ones
who really have to decide what they think is fair and reasonable.”
The commonly quoted “10% rule” and “30 second rule” are not,
in fact, law. Instead, fair use is determined by situations where
the user adds value to, transforms, or repurposes material for
a use different from what was originally intended, or modifies
existing media content, or places it in a new context. The work
can be published digitally if it meets this transformativeness
standard. The original works should be credited.

Another option is to search for material that is published under
Creative Commons licenses (http://search.creativecommons.org). The license for each work determines its acceptable use
and the appropriate citation needed for that work.

And the Nominees Are . . .
Technology-based projects, more than most other class
projects, are vulnerable to Murphy’s Law: Anything that can go
wrong will, and at the worst possible time. It is a good idea to
establish ahead of time the essential skills you will assess. The
basic skills of this project can be assessed from the script. In the
worst case scenario, all else can be a process or participation
grade. If students are creating their trailers in small groups, it is
also a good idea to plan for individual accountability. This could
be an appraisal of what the student learned or of the group’s process, decision-making, and collaboration. Or it could be a reflection on what the student would change or add if there had been more time and how those changes would improve the trailer. Or the student might write a second script for a trailer on a different book.

To help students self-assess their work as well as evaluate the work of classmates, they might consider to what extent

- The trailer’s opening captured the audience’s attention
- The information was true to the book without giving away the plot
- Enough information about the book was given to enable the audience members to decide if they are interested in reading it
- The trailer established an appropriate mood or tone
- The pacing of the trailer fit the story line, neither too rushed nor too slow
- The transitions between the ideas were smooth.
- The sequence of information was logical
- The multi-media components enhanced the script
- The trailer was original and creative

Each year the motion picture industry presents Golden Trailer Awards to recognize creativity and craftsmanship in that year’s movie trailers. This classroom project wouldn’t be complete without a red carpet showcase of the projects. Categories for awards could be created, and trailers judged by an outside panel, by ratings of online viewers, or by class vote. As my students munch popcorn and watch the trailers of their classmates, we discuss what we liked about each one. These discussions always surprise me with the insights, often very subtle insights, the students show about effect and effectiveness. Students fill out ballots for categories such as Best Voiceover, Best Sound Effects/Music, Most Creative, and Best Information about the story/book. They also vote for the People’s Choice, the trailer that was their favorite. I confer certificates to rounds of applause, and the award-winning trailers from each class are shown to all classes the next day and are posted on my class website.

In a world where students are confronted with the challenges of taming new and strange genres, where their opportunities for interaction with each other and the world increase, where their bold, creative spirit will astound their teacher, this experience could very well be a heart-warming affirmation of their learning, a triumphant example of the can-do spirit of student engagement, and the white-knuckle thrill-ride of the year.

References
(All resources were retrieved from the sources below in July 2009)

Some People’s Choice short story trailers from my classroom
[www.mcte.org/journal/mej09/trailers.html](http://www.mcte.org/journal/mej09/trailers.html)

Storyboarding resources


Simple template in pdf: [www.mcte.org/journal/mej09/StoryboardTemplate.pdf](http://www.mcte.org/journal/mej09/StoryboardTemplate.pdf)

Mentor texts (movie trailers)

_The Greatest Game Ever Played_ (2005): This is one of the most multi-dimensional trailers I’ve found. Techniques: use of dialog clips for conflict/plot preview and characterization, voice-over as bridge, introduction of themes, information on studio and other works. Search for this trailer and more at [www.apple.com/trailers](http://www.apple.com/trailers) (will play in large screen through iTunes). You may want to use trailers from current movies that most students have seen. Selecting mentor trailers for yourself will help you clarify techniques you want the stu-
dents to notice.


**Student-produced slideshow trailers**

_A Great and Terrible Beauty_ by Libba Bray – Techniques: excellent use of text, still photos with Ken Burns effect, and dramatic music [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivXJSAUVwgE&NR=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivXJSAUVwgE&NR=1)


_Hoot_ by Carl Hiassen – Techniques: still pictures, text, music, statements of themes. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qW2kb2baV-8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qW2kb2baV-8)

**Student-produced trailers with video and advanced techniques**

_Sherlock Holmes_ by Arthur Conan Doyle – Very sophisticated. Techniques: short “blue screen” video clips against period backgrounds, effective costumes, dialog, music, sound effects. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5d5mFMD4QE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5d5mFMD4QE)


_City of Bones_ by Cassandra Clare – Techniques: fan-created artwork, special effects, text, music. [http://voicethread.com/#q+book+trailer.b452234.i2408884](http://voicethread.com/#q+book+trailer.b452234.i2408884)


_Found_ by Margaret Peterson Haddix – Techniques: still pictures, video, text, music, sound effects. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=swRTZpnsXgY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swRTZpnsXgY)

**Book trailer contest examples**

Kirkus Teen Book Video Awards (sponsored by Random House):


**Voice-over artists**

Legendary Movie Voice (CBS Early Show): [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhg0HtLMEIU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhg0HtLMEIU)

5 Guys in a Limo: Humorous video, written in voice-over clichés, of Don LaFontaine and four other best-recognized voice-over artists on their way to an award ceremony. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQRtxxdfQHw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQRtxxdfQHw)

Some of the voice-overs Don LaFontaine generously donated for student projects: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3Ynpt6eYYM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3Ynpt6eYYM)
Copyright and attribution resources


Creative Commons license descriptions: [http://creativecommons.org/about/licenses](http://creativecommons.org/about/licenses)

Videos on Creative Commons that can be used with students [http://creativecommons.org/videos](http://creativecommons.org/videos)

Excellent source for music licensed under Creative Commons: [http://ccmixter.org/view/media/home](http://ccmixter.org/view/media/home)