

---

# Multigenre Writing: An Answer to Many Questions

Sherri Larson

---

As the last month of the semester with tenth grade English students neared, I asked myself two critical questions: How will I complete all of the writing requirements in our curriculum? What can I do to energize the students for this final push to the end? Tom Romano's (2000) *Blending Genre, Altering Style* gave me an effective, flexible answer: multigenre writing. Multigenre writing means writing about a single topic in a variety of genres, styles, voices, and perspectives. the multigenre writing approach allows students to immerse themselves in a topic of choice, learn research skills, and explore the creative possibilities of various writing genres.

Romano recalls being inspired to use multigenre writing in the classroom by the short book *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, by Michael Ondaatje (1970). Ondaatje's book is not a chronological or sequential biography. Rather, it is an eclectic exploration of possibilities in a variety of genres. It jumps from topic to topic, from poem to list, from news articles to captions of photos that aren't even there. Ondaatje himself said in a recent interview, "When I was writing *Billy the Kid*, all I had was the question, How do I write this book? That's always the question" (Welch, 2000). More recently, Ondaatje spoke about his book *Anil's Ghost*, and how he lets the writing itself guide his decisions: "The structure happens as the story unravels, with

each discovery, at each plateau, a sidebar or descant, whatever it is....it's that kind of odd mix of running with the wave, then later on having the ability to go back and jog it around a bit to make it sharper" (Welch, 2000).

High school students are often required to construct traditional "research" papers, to prepare for higher level courses and college. The current Minnesota Language Arts standards group the required types of writing together in this way: "Plan, organize and compose narrative, expository, descriptive, persuasive, critical and research writing to address a specific audience and purpose" (Minnesota Department of Education). Why not accomplish those goals in a single, sustained project? Such an approach would allow and require depth and reflection upon a single topic. Ondaatje's book demonstrates that historically accurate research can be paired creatively with speculation, theory, poetry, visual art, and drama by using multiple genres. Romano (2000) describes how he envisions the application of multigenre writing in the classroom:

A multigenre paper arises from research, experience, and imagination. ... [It] is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images, and content. In addition to many genres, a multigenre paper may also contain many voices, not just the author's. The trick is to make such a paper hang together. (Romano x-xi)

Multigenre writing is a good fit for today's active students, as it both capitalizes on student need for variety and recognizes new literacies. It also speaks to my own writing process. When I write, I am like a chef with something near boiling on every burner. The phone is ringing, someone's at the door, and the potholders are out of reach. Despite the seeming chaos, there is valuable energy, spontaneity, and creativity in the process.

As I researched and considered possibilities for multigenre projects in my own classroom, I still wondered, How does it *work*? How do I really *do* this thing with students? Then one day, this sentence fell out of my mouth while I stood in front of

my tenth grade students: “If you were to pick one topic—any topic you want—to study, research, and write about until the end of the term, what would it be?” And so it began.

To share with sincerity and enthusiasm about the results of my first journey into multigenre writing, I ask myself Ondaatje’s question: “How do I write this?” I have research and stories and quotes and articles, each referencing more books and articles. I could make notecards. I could string research into paragraphs to make a unified whole, doing the repetitious work of agreeing or disagreeing with already published work. Even Romano admitted that it’s difficult to explain what multigenre writing is: “Definitions are helpful, but my students don’t develop a clear idea of a multigenre paper until they read one” (xi). With this encouragement, there is no more fitting way to write about multigenre writing than by writing a multigenre article.

First, I offer a disclaimer/ explanation: The following examples are “true fiction”; they represent the moods, ideas, and comments students offered during an actual five week unit, but they are not direct quotes or genuine copies. The topics mentioned are actual student choices, and the genre mentioned and demonstrated here represents actual choices in our unit. There really was a student with the topic of gymnastics, and she created an excellent project. However, the voice I created for the student journal entries represents the collective questions and reactions students might have experienced.

## **Forward: A Guide to Reading a Multigenre Paper**

Both the headings and the footnotes are important parts of the reading. The headings provide some explanation of the genres and what each represents.

The footnotes make the reading process unique. Melinda Putz (2006), in *A Teacher’s Guide to the Multigenre Research Paper*, actually suggests using endnotes for explanation and references, so that the text is not interrupted. I have used footnotes here for ease of reading. The notes offer both research and explanation. (When read electronically, the footnotes can be seen by the reader by scrolling across the number, which eases

the reading process significantly). Dear Reader, use whatever technique captures and sustains your interest.

## A Multigenre Journey

### **Journal Entries by a Student in Tenth Grade English—The First Days**

*November 20, 2007*

The teacher says we need to pick a topic, and we need to love it until January. Eventually, we need to write something persuasive about it. That's it. I don't know what to pick.<sup>1</sup>

*November 26, 2007*

English is weird. We went around the room today and told our topics. No matter what they were, she wrote them down, without questions. Most teachers give specific writing prompts and we have to stick to them. I'm not sure about this. I picked gymnastics because it's my life, and I don't mind studying something I already know. There were a lot of sports: two kids picked basketball, one hockey, one wakeboarding, three baseball and one badminton. Someone picked the Minnesota State Fair. Another picked ice cream. Our teacher said yes to them all. Someone even picked PopTarts. It's kind of funny, but what is there to know? They're good. That's all I need to know.

### **Student Assignment Week One: Introduction of the Topic**

What's your topic? Let your topic tell us! Using and citing at least 3 resources, give this essential background information in first person (using "I") in one of these ways:

- 1) a narrative explanation of your topic's history and key points, written from your topic's point of view. Let

---

<sup>1</sup> Choice is an important element of multigenre writing. In *A Teacher's Guide to the Multigenre Research Project*, Melinda Putz (2006) tells teachers: "Before you begin, it is important to decide exactly what kind of experience you want for your students. Do you want them to learn certain research skills? Are there specific types of writing you think they should master? How much freedom of choice do you want them to have? How much responsibility can they handle?" (Putz 16). With these questions in mind, a teacher can mold the project to meet curricular needs.

- your topic explain itself;
- 2) a “campaign speech” in which your topic will explain why it’s a great topic; an “acceptance speech” in which your topic will give thanks for the honor of being your topic.<sup>2</sup>
  - 3) have another idea of how to share this information? Ask.

### **A Teacher’s Multigenre Lesson Plan**

Objective: to write the introductory background piece of student topics in first person using research

Students will be able to:

- use basic internet and library research to study history
- practice writing in first person
- practice the “voice” trait through use of first person
- correctly use MLA in text citation (parenthetical)
- correctly format a works cited page and using MLA format

### **Student Journal Entry**

*November 29, 2007*

I knew there was a catch. We have to make a works cited page. I hate that. At least we only need to make one for the whole project. And we’re also doing this footnote/ endnote thing I’ve never seen, but it’s easy.<sup>3</sup>

### **A Teacher’s Memories of Traditional Research Writing**

---

2 Tom Romano (2000) suggests that every project must have a solid introductory piece. This core of information helps students decide how to continue, and it sets the tone for the multigenre project. This assignment is original, interesting, and not “plagiarize-able.” Assigning it in first person forces the students to interact with the material, combining it to construct new truth. And it’s fun.

3 Both Melinda Putz (38-39) and Romano (2000) stress the importance of the proper research format and citation. Teaching the rules of “intellectual property” are critical elements of the multigenre project. It also adds formality and professionalism. Putz suggests using endnote citations so parenthetical references don’t distract.

My first research paper. I had no idea what I was doing. I'd watched my older siblings do this. I knew I had to go to the library and fill up notecards with quotes and information. Then I'd organize the notecards and connect them all together with my own words. When all of the notecards went from the "not used yet" pile to the "used," I was done. The finished product was a multiparagraph five-page essay. Additional drafts or "revisions" meant literally starting over, winding a new blank onionskin piece of paper into the typewriter and producing a brand new paper. Thus, when it was typed, it was done. There was no adjusting or deleting, adding or sharpening.<sup>4</sup>

### **What to Do in Multigenre? One Teacher's Brainstorm List**

narratives, first, third, and even second person

poetry—all sorts

newspaper articles

pictures (photos, collages, drawings, whatever)

memories/ reflections

perspectives of related people/ events

timelines

recipes

graphs

fiction

games/ activities

point/ counterpoint or editorials, etc.

comics or cartoons

obituaries

labyrinthine sentences

box scores, charts

scripts

---

4 Romano (2000) devotes an entire chapter to, "What of Traditional Research Papers?" It's an important question. Romano even cites fellow researcher Melinda Putz's criticism: "Students do not learn to carry on a sustained written discussion of a topic" (Romano 87). Romano recognizes that traditional expository writing is both required and respected, but in a recent anthology entitled *Teaching the Neglected "R,"* he writes, "...expository writing is not the only genre in town... Writing is a big world mural, not a snapshot" (Newkirk & Kent 88).

web pages, wikis  
radio/ tv shows  
models/ “containers” for projects  
music/ soundtracks<sup>5</sup>

### Email from Parent of Tenth Grader

<b>Date:</b>	Fri, 7 Dec 2007 08:59:33 -0600
<b>From:</b>	“parent of student” parentofstudent@parentmail.com
<b>To:</b>	“Sherri Larson”
<b>Subject:</b>	assignment

Ms. Larson

My son tells us that he is going to be writing about the 1927 Yankees the rest of the quarter. We don’t think he’s telling the truth. He’s always been obsessed with the team and spends a lot of time looking up facts about them. Now it’s even worse, and he claims it’s an assignment. We don’t really understand how this could be his English assignment for a whole month. Are the other teachers doing this?

Parent<sup>6</sup>

---

5 Almost anything can be included in the multigenre project. Both Romano (2000) and Putz (2006) insist on the importance of determining *purpose* for each choice of genre. Genre instruction must include both what the genre is, as well as appropriate uses for that genre. Readers and writers learn that form communicates as much as (and perhaps more than) content. This expands students’ definitions of writing. Romano writes, “Writing is book reviews, email messages, poems, journal entries, news stories, love notes, editorials, technical instructions, so many genres and subgenres that assembling a comprehensive list of them is impossible” (Newkirk & Kent 88-89).

6 The parent concern that their son is not gaining important writing skills using just one topic (and perhaps because he’s having too much fun) is a common misperception. Teacher Julia Gillespie (2005) used multigenre techniques for literature study in her secondary classroom. Her testimony might be a good answer to an email like this: “Students willingly experimented with various genres. Some borrowed ideas from classmates, while others tried something original. They willingly reread parts of the book for clarification. They dig deeply and made connections between their own lives and the text students accepted the challenge and met much success” (Gillespie, 2005). (This is not a real email; this student’s parent enthusiastically support-

## Student Journal Entries

*December 12, 2007*

Some days, this project doesn't even feel like work. I love my topic. Today our assignment was to make either an activity book or a restaurant placemat for kids' games and puzzles about our topics. Ferret Guy made a maze and some word searches and some fake pet want ads. Toilet Paper girl had facts about how much tp we use in a year. Gross. One girl found pictures of the most famous rollercoasters for a matching game. I asked if I could make a touch and feel children's book for gymnastics and have the leotard fabric and the mat foam and chalk and all. She said yes. I wonder if she'll say no to *any* ideas I suggest for this project!<sup>7</sup>

*December 14, 2007*

Besides this writing thing, the other thing we do is independent reading. Now we need to *combine* the two. It's called "fan fiction." My book has *nothing* to do with gymnastics and I couldn't *possibly* make a connection. She says to write in the "style" of the author. She says to insert another idea, like writing chapter 15 ½ or "the lost ending." I don't know what to do. None of the characters in my book are into gymnastics. Am I supposed to create a new character? Or just have her suddenly do a backflip and discover her hidden talent? Maybe Frodo is going to grab a PopTart out of his satchel in between bloody battles. Lovestruck teens in Sarah Dessen's book might get attacked by Sasquatch. Brian finds a hockey stick in the woods and it helps him survive in the wild (alongside the hatchet, of course). IT'S SO WEIRD.<sup>8</sup>

---

ed him. It is a great example of how honoring the student's interests yields exceptional work.)

7 Two words: student choice. In her classic essay from 1983, "Writing and Reading from the Inside Out," Nancie Atwell (Newkirk & Kent 130) stresses the importance of creating a literate environment. When students make decisions about their own writing, they begin to define themselves as writers. Atwell writes, "By *literate* environment I mean a place where people read, write, and talk about reading and writing; where everybody can be student and teacher; where everybody can come inside."

8 The demands of multigenre writing stretch writers' minds to new possibilities in the same way that the rhyme and meter of a sonnet bring a poet to



December 15, 2007

I started my fan fiction. It was actually really fun. I didn't have to think up the details because my book gave me so many good ideas. I liked imitating my author's voice. It made me feel like a real writer.

### **How Hard is Writing? A Cinematic Answer**

In the movie, "A River Runs Through It," a young boy painstakingly writes an essay. He nervously hands it to his father who, in the serious silence of a sacred study, reads it solemnly. "Fine," the father says. "Now cut it in half."

Back to his writing, the boy obediently begins again. Clearly, this hadn't been the first pronouncement as such by his father. The boy made it half the length.

A second visit to the father yields a somewhat better response. A barely perceptible nod, perhaps. Even a smile? Now the answer: "Better. Now cut it in half." Write. Revise. Repeat.

Is this what writing is? Is it that painful, that repetitive, that unrewarding? Is it that difficult? I'd like to keep it as a secret to students, so it doesn't take their hope away, but I think good writing really *is* that hard. Good writing is still about E.B. White's first rule in the infamous *Elements of Style*: "Be clear."<sup>9</sup>

---

a word s/he might never have found. In the article "What the Fic?", authors Cheryl Truman and Heather Chapman (2006) explore a genre of increasing popularity: Fan Fiction. It is a reader's way to become a writer. Readers of an already published work write new chapters, alternate endings, and create plot possibilities through generating new writing based on the book. Fan fiction allows students to become interpreters, imitators, and composers.

9 Multigenre writing is not a way to get away from conventions. All writing must communicate with precision and clarity. Multigenre writing is flexible, but not arbitrary. In "The Craft of Writing: Breaking Conventions," Cornelia Paraskevas (2004) writes, "Instead of seeing conventions as absolute rules, we should see them as ways writers help readers make meaning. ...instead of seeing unconventional use as an error, we can see it as rhetorical, as intent to craft language and text" (Paraskevas 2004). Students learn that writing is made up of a series of decisions, that language can be manipulated, and that the "rules"—even grammar rules—can work to the writer's advantage.

**A Teacher's Instructions about Multigenre Expectations, Outlined<sup>10</sup>**

- I. Pick a topic
  - a. you have to like it for at least 4 weeks
  - b. no switching
- II. Research
  - a. don't plagiarize
  - b. keep track of resources
  - c. find a ton of things
    - i. don't use them all at once
- III. Write an introduction of the topic from its point of view
  - a. ignore how strange this feels and just do it
    - i. it's kind of funny, actually
- IV. Pay attention to the elements of persuasion! (We'll have specific lessons in class):
  - a. figure out what is debatable about your topic
    - i. it can't just be why wakeboarding's cool
    - i. it can't just compare one Poptart to another
    - i. it has to be research-based, not opinion-based
- V. Show both sides of the issue
- VI. Look up Aristotle and logos, ethos, and pathos and figure out how to put them into your paper.
  - a. logos = facts. That's easy.
  - b. pathos = emotions. That's easy. Get your reader to *care*.
  - c. ethos = credibility. This is harder, but you'll get it. Convince your reader that you're an expert, and the very best person in the room to write your paper because:

---

10 Traditional academic writing often starts with an outline, particularly expository "essay" forms. In "Rewriting the Essay: After Almost Five Centuries, a Familiar Genre Stands at a Crossroads," Julia Keller (2001) explores how the essay has transformed from a purely academic form to a genre of its own. The multigenre approach to classic forms like the essay encourages students to go beyond the outline and explore the different ways of communicating.

- i. you know your stuff
  - i. you've done your homework
  - i. you won't lie.
- VII. Write a real persuasion paper and see what happens.
  - a. I know it feels like "real writing" that we weren't going to do, but stick with it.
    - i. formal writing is a genre too
    - i. it's the type of writing you'll need to master for other classes and for college
    - i. it'll be fine. You're all experts

### **Student Conversation After Persuasion Assignment Outline Day**

S1: I knew there'd be a catch.

S2: I don't want to write a real paper.

S1: Maybe it'll be easier because we already wrote so much. I have tons of research.

S2: I wonder if I can use some stories and cool stuff I found when I researched.

S1: She'll say yes. She always says yes.

S2: That makes it harder.

S1: Ask her how to do it.

S2: She'll say what she always says: "However you want."

S1: Just give me a rubric or something.<sup>11</sup>

---

11 In her article, "Learning to Let Them Learn: Yielding Power to Students in a Literacy Methods Course," Cynthia McCallister noted, "Don't do the walking for your students; they need to learn to walk for themselves." (286) There is a delicate balance between giving students power of decision and giving them direction. I give as much power of decision to the students as I can, hoping that the freedom helps them move from anxiety to a sense of power with their creative choices.

## Obituary: Write about something that has “died” in relation to your topic

### The Death of the Essay About 1500 – about 2000

*(d.o.b. debatable, though most concur that the death has definitely occurred)*

Age 500+ years, originally of France, borne of Michel de Montaigne. The name, meaning “trials,” reflects its past up until its somewhat predictable death. Some remember it as meditative and prescriptive. The essay was preceded in death by many supporters, including Joseph Addison, William Haslitt, Jonathan Swift. The essay is survived by Patricia Hampl, Thomas Lynch, Annie Dillard, Joan Didion. In recent years, its identity was shaken by such writers as David Sedaris, Anne Lamott and Ander Monson. Critics such as Julia Keller (2001) suggest the demise comes from inattention to the essay’s core of being: “its stately grace and earnest reflection... they are serious and thoughtful explorations of works of literature or aspects of the human condition.” Still, Michael Steinberg and others support the death of the essay in favor of a different definition of the truth which had always held the essay’s esteem: “This has nothing to do with literal truth... whether it’s literally true or not makes no difference to the reader” (as cited in Keller, 2001). A compromise is given by University of Chicago professor W. Mitchell: “The essay is a mixed genre—poetic, rhetorical, personal, argumentative. I think of writing as an extension of thinking” (as cited in Keller, 2001). At the sad news of the loss of the essay, popular essayist Patricia Hampl still holds hope: “There is a bedrock of delight, I think, in the personal essayist. I don’t mean cheerfulness. I mean the delight of the appetite” (as cited in Keller, 2001). Services will be delayed until the death of the essay is confirmed.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Oddly, the obituary is a fun form to explore. In “Giving Life to Tales of Death, but Sticking to Nonfiction,” Thomas Gorman (2002) discusses the craft of the obituary and its uniquely simple power of communication. This entry also highlights Keller’s (2001) concerns about the essay as a dying (or dead) form. When I see how well the obituary form communicates part of my research, I cannot imagine a better genre to use.

### **What Does it Take? A Multigenre Recipe**

1 solid and interesting topic

Several hours of research on history of topic

Variety of stories, anecdotes, poems, ideas, images

equal measures of:

logos

ethos

pathos

At least one controversy

Solid knowledge of different perspectives

Mix the following together and create several different pieces from the results. Use each “dish” to present different facts, ideas, and reflections about the topic. Repetition causes premature spoiling. Serve with enthusiasm.<sup>12</sup>

---

12 Tom Romano (2000) and Melinda Putz (2006) both assert that a key to success (and to meaningful assessment) is not in the quantity of genres used, but in students’ appropriate and effective use of particular genres. Putz (2006) writes, “I want to learn something new from each piece in the paper.” This is the key to a good multigenre “recipe.”

## A Teacher's Attempt at Assessing: Let the Students Decide

### *Multigenre Project Menu*

Choose from the following menu to create your own portfolio for assessment. Put in your desired point value for each week's choices. No point value can be less than 5% or more than 30% of your grade. Make your best work count!

Requirement	Your Choices	Percentage
Week one: either the biography, the acceptance speech, vital stats form, FAQ sheet, or the campaign sheet		
Week two: either the games and activities book/placemat, the "two sides of an issue" debate, or the newspaper advice column		
Week three: either the fan fiction, the obituary, or the advertisement		
Week four: all students must hand in their persuasion paper		
Options: hand in 3 other items from any category or the in class activities, such as poetry, art work, web pages, playing cards, or the related "package"		
		100%

13

## Labyrinthine Conclusions—A Teacher's Reflections

If someone asked me to name how multigenre writing can positively affect student learning (and someone probably will ask me this some day), I would say that I hope students

---

13 And to the burning question: "How should I grade these?" I answer what I so often did to students: "However you want." Every situation is different. I created a chart similar to this one so that students could create a final portfolio that would represent several genres, highlight their best work, and give the best work the most credit. Assessment should emphasize these most important elements of the multigenre project: students become writers of many pages and multiple genres; students become willing to experiment with word and form; students create projects representing their own topics and interests; students identify themselves as writers.

would learn that words are theirs to use to communicate what's important to them, and that there is a way to say anything they need to say—at least one way—and that even if it's a way nobody has ever tried before, it can be the best way for them, at that moment, from that exact place and time and perspective, and I would mention that multigenre writing assures each student that her unique way of seeing things *matters*, and that the way he sees something fitting into the world affects the world and that is enough to make it important and meaningful and real, because even this genre of the labyrinthine sentence is the right way to write this, because multigenre writing opens up neverending possibilities of expression, and even if I use up every word and every punctuation mark I can think of, the sentence cannot be long enough to represent what I think the possibilities are. Never. Ending. And that's exciting.

## References

- Gillespie, Joanne. (2005). It would be fun to do again: Multigenre responses to literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 48 (8.5), 678-684.
- Gorman, Tom. (2002, June 2). Giving life to tales of death, but sticking to nonfiction. *Los Angeles Times*, p. A20. Retrieved November 26, 2007.
- Keller, Julia. (2001, September 19). Rewriting the essay: After almost five centuries, a familiar genre stands at the crossroads. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved November 26, 2007.
- McCallister, Cynthia. (2002). Learning to let them learn: Yielding power to students in a literacy methods course. *English Education* 34(4), 281-301.
- Minnesota Department of Education (2003). Minnesota academic standards: Language arts K-12. May 19, 2003.

Retrieved August 29, 2008 from <http://www.education.state.mn.us/mdeprod/groups/Standards/documents/LawStatute/000269.pdf>.

Newkirk, Thomas and Kent, Richard. (Eds.). (2007). *Teaching the neglected "r": Rethinking writing instruction in secondary classrooms*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Putz, Melinda. (2006). *A teacher's guide to the multigenre research project*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Ondaatje, Michael. (1970). *The collected works of Billy the Kid*. New York: Norton.

Paraskevas, Cornelia. (2004). The craft of writing: Breaking conventions. *English Journal*, 94(4), 41-46.

Romano, Tom. (2000). *Blending genre, altering style*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.

Strunk, William and White, E.B. illustrated by Maira Kalman (2005). *The elements of style*. New York, Penguin.

Truman, Cheryl and Chapman, Heather. (2006, September 26). What the fic? *Lexington Herald-Leader*. Retrieved November 26, 2007.

Welch, Dave. (2000). Michael Ondaatje's cubist civil war. 23 May 2000. Powells.com Interviews. Retrieved on August 1, 2008 from <http://www.powells.com/authors/ondaatje.html>.