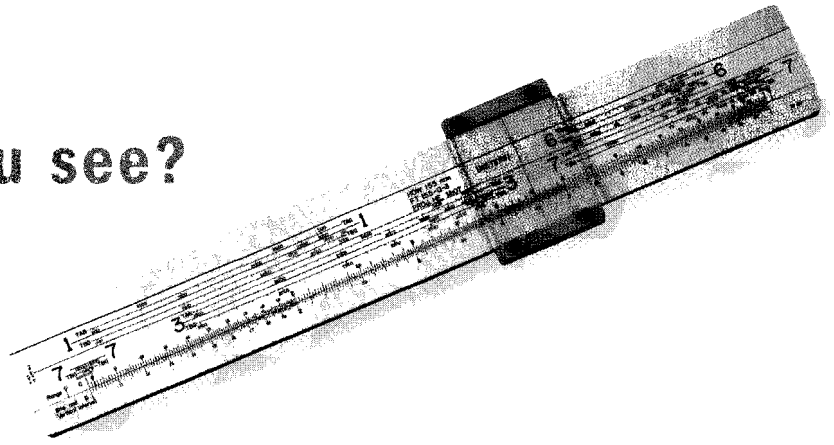


What do you see?

If someone handed you a slide rule today to figure out your taxes or do the calculations for a math test, you might feel confused and disoriented. What is this contraption, with its tiny numbers and parallel scales?



What's it for? How does it operate? The moving ruler and clear plastic slides might tempt you to experiment with it, but you'd need plenty of assistance before you'd know how to read this unfamiliar text, which was common in American high schools prior to the invention of the pocket calculator.

A feeling of disorientation (or wonder) is actually a good place to begin your encounter with any new text—verbal, visual, aural, tactile. An intriguing text should attract your attention and provoke questions.

- What do you focus on in the work? Your reading begins with a spark of interest. Can you identify what caused it—what the **focal point** of the work might be?
- What kind of work is it? When we meet a dog, most of us immediately try to identify its breed or mix in order to appreciate its looks, temperament, and characteristics. We do the same with texts we encounter, substituting **genre** for *breed*. Genres are expressed through conventions—the features and structures that make them what they are.
- How does this work differ from others like it? Works routinely bend **conventions** and cross boundaries. That's what makes many contemporary texts so intriguing and provoking. They have been reinvented by the infusion of electronic technologies.
- What is the work's **medium**? Different media convey different kinds of information and make different kinds of demands.

FIND FOCAL POINTS Writers, artists, designers, architects, and even musicians know how important it is to focus their work. To be a good reader, you need to notice how they do it. If you've ever written a paper with a thesis statement or a paragraph with a topic sentence, you are familiar with one simple device for focusing with words: a sentence or two that clearly announce what the writer intends to discuss.

But there are dozens of other techniques for focusing attention. On a printed page, a big headline, an underscored heading, boldfaced or italic type, or a four-color photo might entice your eye. In a photograph, an artist might use light and shadow to seduce your gaze, whereas a painter might align objects to create a subtle focal point, moving you almost subconsciously in a specific direction. On a Web page, you might first encounter a striking graphic or a tempting menu of options to engage your attention.

So you can easily begin your encounters with texts by noting where you look first and then asking *why*. But be prepared, too, to be puzzled or deliberately thrown off balance. Many texts will resist your efforts to understand them at a glance, to pluck out the heart of their mysteries.

IDENTIFY THE GENRE After you've first encountered a text, you'll likely ask—consciously or not—what it resembles or into what genres it fits. A genre is simply a category we use to name and identify a text with consistent and familiar features. Without much effort, you could enumerate the features of the letter; you could also explain the differences between subgenres such as the business letter and the personal letter. And you could likely identify many other types of letters, each with distinctive features or missions: job application letters, letters to the editor, “Dear John” letters, and so on.

Genres can seem relatively stable, but their boundaries are rarely fixed. For instance, you likely know what a novel is: Let's say it's *a prose tale told at some length involving characters whose lives engage you*. When you pick up a novel and consider reading it, you'll likely study the dust jacket, perhaps looking for the signals that will slot it into a favored category or subgenre—mystery, romance, historical fiction, cyberpunk novel. But some novels will resist categorization or tell their stories in unanticipated ways or media.

EXAMINE CONVENTIONS Once you've identified the genre or subgenre of a text, you then know how to read some of its features: In a romance novel, you'll expect to find a tale of passionate lovers set in exotic locales. And because you have these generic expectations, you can also appreciate when a writer or artist defies or parodies conventions.

The fun starts when texts start bending conventions and forming new ones. Not infrequently, new genres borrow

Cover art for a series
romance novel





Still from an early silent film

their wardrobes from older ones. Very old movies, for instance, sometimes look like stage plays because that's how early filmmakers imagined stories should be told visually. Pioneer screenwriters also drew upon novels and plays for their scripts, again using well-established conventions to help invent new ones. Today, creators of video games sometimes take their inspiration from movies—and, amazingly, vice versa. Indeed, the electronic revolution of the past few decades has spawned many fresh ways of sharing words and images, some of which have quickly evolved conventions of their own. E-mail, for example, might be categorized as a subgenre of the letter, and carries forward conventions like senders and recipients, but adds new ones like emoticons.

So in encountering a text, old or new, you want to ask questions about what the thing *is*. You may have to do some research to find out. In a museum, you'll find signs and guidebooks to help you appreciate artifacts you may not recognize. Libraries are full of reference tools that can introduce you to everything from epic poems to classic movies. But for many texts and objects, you may have to define genres on the fly, thinking critically about their shape, asking yourself what they resemble and how they work.

BEYOND WORDS

*reading and writing
in a visual age*

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