Writing Genres:
Why we write the way we do.

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Thesis: As we think, so we write.

Genres are classes of text. They function as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors.

Todorov and Berrong, 1976, p. 163

Relevance of genres to education.

- ❖ Students learn different genres and text forms.

- ❖ They learn the distinction between factual and fictional texts, and various ways of writing them.

- ❖ They learn to write for the reader: to write a genre as the reader expects.

Ontario Education (2005)

Relevance of genres to us all.

- We expect science fiction to be set in the future and have futuristic ideas and technologies.

- We expect realism to centre on people who are life-like, and who struggle with real-world situations.

- Each genre carries a unique set of expectations.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre_studies

Where did 'academic writing' begin?

What do we know about reader expectations and models of writing for this genre?

It started with 'commonplace books',
a kind of personal encyclopaedia.

Centuries ago, people used a commonplace book to write notes as they read. The notes were often organised as rhetorical topics (such as metaphors and similes) or moral topics (like drunkenness and swearing).

Eichhorn, 2008, p. 5

In the 1500s, Disiderius Erasmus used a commonplace book to "**collect a vast supply of words** from good authors".

"It will not be sufficient to prepare an abundant store of such words unless you have them not only at the ready but also in full view."
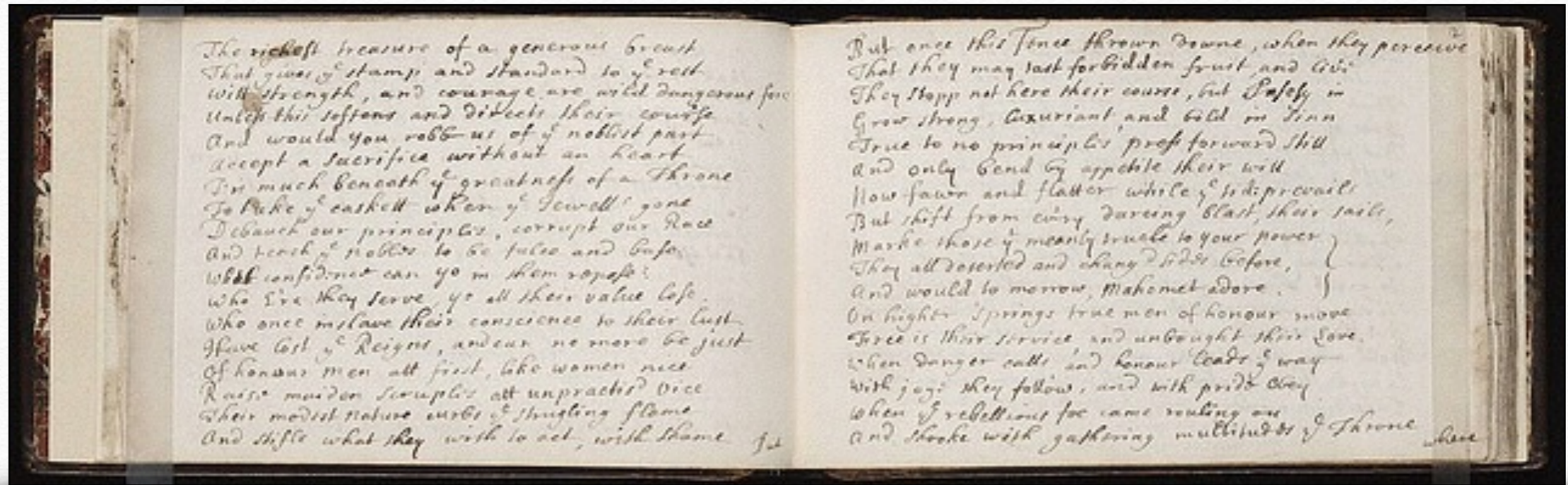
Eichhorn, 2008, p. 5

This commonplace book originates from Oxford, England, and has bawdy and satirical poems, medical cookery, household recipes, and angling details.

This example was owned by a gentleman living in Jamaica, 1817-1818.

Evidently, commonplace books were still in use in the 19th century.

Image Source

The significance of the commonplace book is that it laid the foundations for 'author-centred' genres like the diary. It also has links to the essay genre.

Eichhorn, 2008, p. 5

In the 1500-1600s, many **essays** and **treatises** were authored by Francis Bacon, Michel de Montaigne, Rene Descartes, John Locke, and others.

Bacon

Descartes

Locke

Image Source

Image Source

Image Source

Treatises were texts usually on one topic.

Definitions of treatise:

❖ A book or writing which treats of some particular subject

❖ A story, tale, narrative (spoken or written)

❖ A descriptive treatment, description, account (of something).

Oxford English Dictionary

Essays were exploratory texts.

French verb *'essayer'*: to try or attempt.

Essays of that time were not in a form that we'd recognise as essays today; ideas were not organised to be a linear sequence and argument was not necessarily present.

Essays were written over many years and iterations made to texts many times as the writer's philosophy changed.
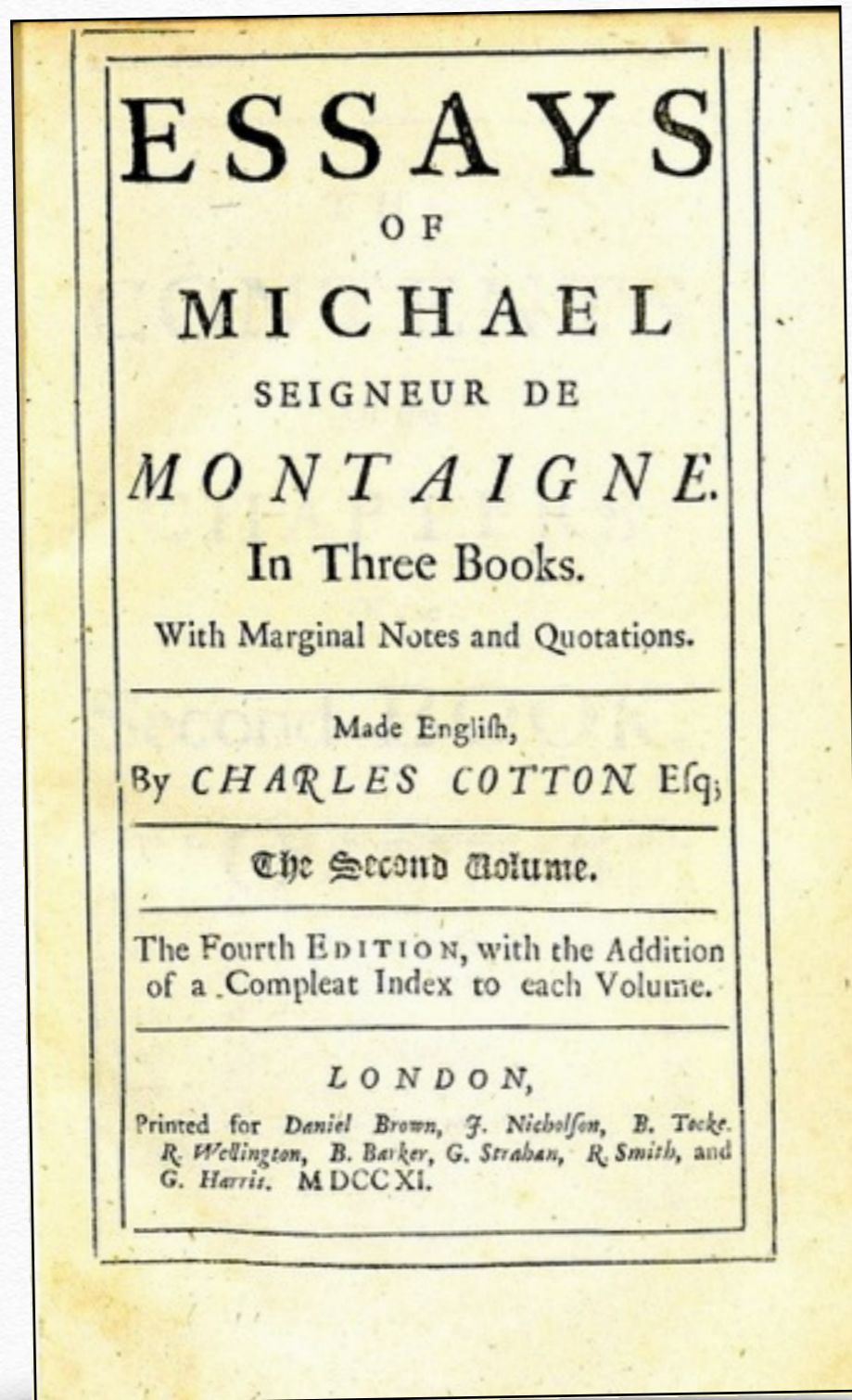
de Montaigne

MONTAIGNE.

Image Source

Michel de Montaigne, a Mayor of Bordeaux, was possibly the first writer to **publish an essay**.

He actually published 107 essays as two volumes in 1580.

Montaigne reprinted his essays several times up until 1591. (Project Gutenberg)

His work was still being printed in the 1700s. This image is of a cover of Volume II published in London in 1711 (note the English translation).

Image Source

The essay genre was distinctively author-centred.

"It told its readers, with unexampled frankness, what its writer's opinion was about men and things, and threw what must have been a strange kind of new light on many matters but darkly understood. Above all, the essayist uncased himself, and made his intellectual and physical organism public property. He took the world into his confidence on all subjects. His essays were a sort of literary anatomy, where we get a diagnosis of the writer's mind, made by himself at different levels and under a large variety of operating influences" (Hazlett, 1877).

Project Gutenberg

The form of the essay.

The text was often structured around **headings** that were in use in commonplace books. Bacon, for example, offered essays on truth, death, love, revenge, praise, and gardens - the same headings that frequently appeared in commonplace books of the period.

Eichhorn, 2008, p. 6

Michel de Montaigne's essays were ordered into **chapters**. They covered topics such as knowledge, education, love, the body, death, politics, the nature and power of custom, and the colonisation of the New World.

Edelman, date unknown

Essays adopted conventions of the new technology of printed books, such as "aids to find one's way around a text". These aids included a table of contents, subject headings, and Arabic numerals for pagination.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuscript_culture

The 16th century essay promoted philosophy. It often provided definitions of words.

Example:

John Locke's philosophy of
Sensation, Remembrance, Contemplation
& Modes of Thinking,
1689

"When the mind turns its view inwards upon itself, and contemplates its own actions, THINKING is the first that occurs.

The perception or thought which actually accompanies, and is annexed to, any impression on the body, made by an external object, we call SENSATION:

The same idea, when it again recurs without the operation of the like object on the external sensory, is REMEMBRANCE."

Locke, J. (1689). *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, Volume I. Book 2, Chapter XIX, section 1.*

If it be sought after by the mind, and with pain and endeavour found, and brought again in view, it is RECOLLECTION:

If it be held there long under attentive consideration, it is CONTEMPLATION:

When ideas float in our mind without any reflection or regard of the understanding, it is that which the French call REVERIE."

Locke, J. (1689). *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, Volume I. Book 2, Chapter XIX, section 1.*

"When the ideas that offer themselves (for, as I have observed in another place, whilst we are awake, there will always be a train of ideas succeeding one another in our minds) are taken notice of, and, as it were, registered in the memory, it is ATTENTION:

When the mind with great earnestness, and of choice, fixes its view on any idea, considers it on all sides, and will not be called off by the ordinary solicitation of other ideas, it is that we call INTENTION or STUDY."

Locke, J. (1689). *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding, Volume I. Book 2, Chapter XIX, section 1.*

Apart from essays and treatises, texts also appeared in the form of:

- ❖ letters
- ❖ theses
- ❖ allegories
- ❖ commentaries.

Banks claimed that these genres have conditioned and become the basis of academic writing and assessment in higher education (2015).

'Letters' had an important role in the dissemination of philosophical and scientific thought.

Postal services were primarily used for diplomatic purposes, but in the 17th century became a means of sharing intellectual endeavours and the comments, evaluations and judgements associated with critical thought.

Jean-Claude Guedon, in Barton, 2005, p. 41

A network of intellectuals called the '**Republic of Letters**' formed in France. The Republic also recruited members from Britain, other parts of Europe and America.

To connect as a distance community, the members had to share their ideas and research interests by letter.

http://www.wikipedia.org

France's 'Republic of Letters' laid the groundwork for the inception of a 'Royal Society' in Britain in 1665.

https://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/

As the community of scholars grew larger, private letter writing became too cumbersome, and another mode of communication was needed.

So began the academic journals.

In the period 1665-1700, academic writing moved from Latin to vernacular languages (local languages of Europe, Britain and America). Academic journals appeared in France and England in 1665.

Banks (2015)

France's *Journal des Sçavans* was the first **scientific journal** in the Western world, published for the first time on 5 January 1665.

It "sought to make known all that is new in the Republic of Letters".

Dobre (2011)

Philosophical Transactions was first published by Britain's Royal Society on 6 March 1665.

Philosophical Transactions, 1665

Giving some Accompt of the
Present Undertakings, Studies and Labours
of the Ingenious in Many Considerable
Parts of the World.

https://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/

Philosophical Transactions is the oldest scientific journal in the Western world, having been in continuous publication for 350 years.

Royal Society 350 year exhibition catalogue

17th century journals often had reviews of books and letters that had reported scientific experiments of the day.

Dobre (2011)

Meanwhile, the other literate members of society surrounded themselves with theology and mythology.

The monasteries and universities were hard at work printing Latin theological books adorned with elaborate illuminations.

Example of an illuminated manuscript from 1412 belonging to Furness Abbey, Cumbria, United Kingdom.

Source: The National Archives UK, ref DL 42/3

Photographs of 'Gutenberg bibles' dating to 1455 are retained at Morgan Library and Museum in New York.

The link below is for a page of Genesis Chapter 1 from *Biblia Latina*, printed by Johann Gutenberg and Johann Fust, circa 1455.

http://www.themorgan.org/collections/works/gutenberg/page/6

Apart from theology, the monasteries printed other popular books known as **'herbals'** (books of herbal remedies) and **'bestiaries'** (books of animal stories).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuscript_culture

"Bestiaries were collections of animal stories that combined zoology, myths and legends. They were highly visual. Great attention was given to bizarre, exotic, and monstrous creatures."

White (1960)

http://digital.library.wisc.edu/1711.dl/HistSciTech.Bestiary

Example Bestiary

> a pard, which produces this third kind of animal. Thus Pliny says in his *Natural History* that the lion lies with the female pard, or the pard with the lioness, and in either case there are created inferior offspring, like the Mule and the Hinny.
>
> There is an animal called a PANTHER which has a truly variegated colour, and it is most beautiful and excessively kind. Physiologus says that the only animal which it considers as an enemy is the Dragon.
>
> When a Panther has dined and is full up, it hides away in its own den and goes to sleep. After three days it wakes up again and emits a loud belch,[1] and there comes a very sweet smell from its mouth, like the smell of all-spice. When the other animals have heard the noise, they follow wherever it goes, because of the sweetness of
>
> [1] 'On the third day when he wakes, a lofty, sweet, ringing sound comes from his mouth, and with the song a most delightful stream of sweet-smelling breath, more grateful than all the blooms of herbs and blossoms of the trees'. The Panther, in the *Exeter Book*, trans. Stopford Brooke.
> In 1656 a (sweet-smelling?) drug called Panther was selling at £2 the pound.
>
> 14
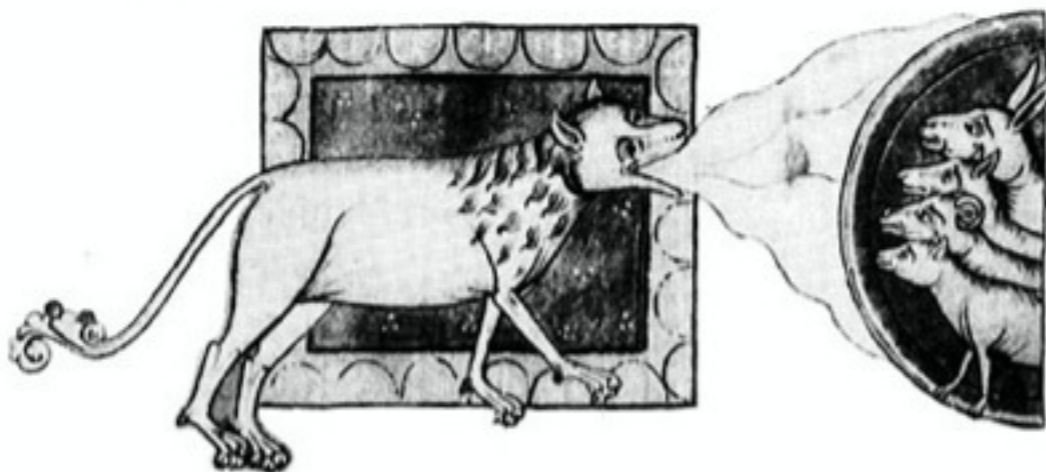
Page 14 of White's 1960 English translation of the **twelfth century** 'Book of Beasts'.

This page describes the panther.

"There is an animal called a panther which has a truly variegated colour, and it is most beautiful and excessively kind.

When a panther has dined and is full up, it hides away in its own den and goes to sleep. After three days it wakes up again and emits a loud belch, and there comes a very sweet smell from its mouth, like the smell of all-spice."

From White's translation of a twelfth century Book of Beasts (1960)

A large and impressive bestiary from 1642 can be viewed at http://amshistorica.unibo.it/127.

It is written in Latin, is well preserved, and contains many drawings of mythical and deformed figures, including feathered humans.

http://amshistorica.unibo.it/127

Philosophers and scientists were 'free thinkers', while others in society held fast to theology and folklore.

The scientists forced a separation of their genre from literary genres.

The Royal Society in Britain forced literary genres into being because poets were no longer writing about **things** (as encyclopedists did) **or words** (expertise philosophers laid claim to).

What was the poet's 'profession' then?

Ian Lancashire cited in Peters, 2008, p. 819

So came the playwrights like William Shakespeare.

Image of a Table of Contents from Shakespeare's 1623 folio-edition showing the generic division of his plays.

Image Source

Everyday people wrote verse and prose.

In 18th-century France, for example, friends would exchange attempts at writing verse and prose, often as part of their habit of letter-writing.

Martin (1992)

Fiction didn't gain recognition as a branch of literature until the latter part of the 18th century, "competing as it did with religious works on the one hand and the 'official' literary genres, such as verse and drama, on the other".

Martin (1992)

So, the period of the 1500s to 1700s saw:

- The emergence of critical thinking.

- Scientific and philosophical writing in vernacular languages (French, Dutch, English).

- An intellectual community whose members communicated through essays, treatises and letters.

- The emergence of scientific journals.

- The separation of science from mythology, theology, verse, drama and prose.

Progressively, scientific thinking created a social wedge.

In England, Robert Boyle stimulated scientific and political thought. He was followed by Isaac Newton and other contemporaries of the Royal Society. These thinkers argued for statements to be "verified by facts as determined by experiment".

https://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/

The Royal Society's motto 'Nullius in verba' roughly translates as '**take nobody's word for it**'.

https://royalsociety.org/about-us/history/

Scientists and philosophers throughout the Western world sought government and church acceptance of tolerance, science and scepticism.

Belief systems were polarised as 'think for yourself' or 'think as you're told'.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment

With the rapid development of printing and book trades, new ideas and beliefs spread widely throughout Europe. There was an increase in literacy too, and the 'Age of Enlightenment' arrived.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Age_of_Enlightenment

In retrospect we say that "philosophers and scientists of the late Renaissance period used the medium of print to refashion the medieval organization and expression of knowledge."

Bolter (2001)

Going back to the point that all genres function as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and 'models of writing' for authors …

The philosophical and scientific thinkers of the Renaissance era created the foundations of our modern day academic and scientific genres.

They created a reader expectation of an objective voice and a writing model of an argument verified by empirical evidence.

Today, the **pedagogical essay** replaces the literary characteristics of the 16th century essay with logical and factual treatment of a topic using an objective voice.

Peters, 2008, p. 825

The pedagogical essay has been adopted worldwide for assessment of students (Peters, 2008, p. 825).

It's the essay genre we know and use today.

How else has historical writing influenced modern writing?

Bestiaries have influenced the development of allegory and symbolism in literature.

The commonplace book transformed into a personal diary and today is transforming again into a digital portable archive.

Genres are founded in historical precedents. They evolve as **beliefs** change and people and communities need to express those **beliefs**.

Media and technology advancements may alter the look and feel of genres, but the underlying basis of genre stays the same. As we **think**, so we write.

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