

# The Official Letter as a Junction of Three Genres

Bat-Zion Yemini

Teaching academic literacy in college requires the students to distinguish between different genres. During the course the students practice writing the different genres and learn to use three of them. According to Aristotle's classification of discourse, there are four genres: narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative. Other discourse taxonomies, which have been proposed by discourse analysts based on the purpose and form of writing (see, e.g., Brewer, 1980; Kinneavy, 1980)<sup>1</sup>, have for the most part proved incomplete and lacking internal coherence. Nevertheless, most researchers recognize four main discourse genres, which are usually labeled: expository, argumentative, narrative-descriptive, and instrumental. This paper focuses on teaching the official letter in the classroom, both the method and the process. It demonstrates how school and university students can be taught to distinguish between three of the above discourse genres, namely, expository, argumentative, and instrumental, through instruction in writing an official letter.

## 1. The Official Letter – The method

In our opinion, the optimal time to teach how to write an official letter is between teaching the paragraph and the article. At first we suggest teaching the following three patterns of paragraph organization:

1. Informative paragraph, e.g. the causes of unemployment.
2. Argumentative paragraph, e.g. TV reality programs – arguments in favor or against.
3. Pro/con paragraph, e.g. TV reality programs – arguments in favor and against.

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<sup>1</sup> Brewer, W.F. (1980). "Literary Theory, Rhetoric and Stylistics: Implications for Psychology", in Spiro, R. Bruce, B.C. & Brewer, W.F. (eds), *Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension*, p. 221-244.  
Kinneavy, J. L. (1980). *A Theory of Discourse*, N. Y. & London: Norton.

During this time the students practice writing these three kinds of paragraph and learn to distinguish between them. In the next stage, before teaching the three types of articles (information article, argumentative article, and the pro/con article), we teach the official letter. There are three main reasons for organizing the instruction this way: to show the students how to integrate a number of genres, to clarify the differences between the genres, and to teach the writing of a longer text, containing three paragraphs.

As a rule, an official letter is sent to an institution or an office for the purpose of correcting a misconception, voicing a complaint, or drawing attention to some deficiency. This type of document is comprised of three main parts: In the first part, the writer provides background information and states the reason for writing the letter. The best way to accomplish this is by using the expository genre, which is characterized by accuracy, pertinence, and objectivity. The purpose of the second part is to convince the addressee that the existing situation cannot be left as is, and that steps must be taken to correct it. The writer must resort to the argumentative genre, which is characterized by tendentiousness, subjectivity, and the use of rhetorical devices. The third part, which essentially constitutes the purpose of the entire letter, is instructive. The writer strives to achieve the desired change by resorting to the instrumental genre, characterized by the use of modal structures, as well as by accuracy, objectivity, and purposefulness, with an emphasis on practicality and clear communication. In summary, three main genres are used in the writing of an official letter: expository, argumentative, and instrumental. In following I present each of the three genres and analyze it.

### **1.1 Each genre, its function and distinguishing features**

According to Jakobson (1961)<sup>2</sup>, the expository genre uses the referential function. In this genre the writer informs, describes, or explains the case or the issue. Its typical features are

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<sup>2</sup> Jakobson R. (1961). "Linguistics and poetics", in T.Sebeok (ed.), *Style in Language*, Cambridge: Mass, p. 350-377.

accuracy, pertinence, and objectivity. It uses different types of texts: autobiography, biography, practical description, essay, scientific study, informational report, and media article. The main function of the argumentative genre is to convince readers to embrace a particular point of view. Its typical features are tendentiousness, subjectivity, and the use of rhetorical devices. It is used in advertisements, editorials, persuasive essays, political cartoons, pro/con argumentation, and reviews (Shilo, 2002, 2005).<sup>3</sup> Finally, the practical genre is written in order to advance the interest of the addresser or the addressee. Its typical features are: the use of modal structures, accuracy, objectivity, purposefulness, practicality, and clear communication (Sarel, 1990).<sup>4</sup> The practical genre is used in questionnaires, reports, prospectuses, guidance and instruction papers, recipes, etc. (Aouladomar, unknown date).<sup>5</sup>

## **1.2 Writing directions**

In Part 1, using the expository genre, the writer provides background information and states the reason for writing the letter. This part of the letter is usually about what happened in the past: the incident, episode or problem is discussed as well as its impact, including damages and other consequences. In part 2, the argumentative genre, the writer attempts to convince the addressee that the existing situation cannot be left as is and that steps must be taken to correct it. The present tense is optimal for this purpose, to motivate the addressee, both logically and emotionally. The writer gives his opinion about the episode and attempts to evoke in the addressee a sense of unease. This, he hopes, will prompt the addressee to take steps to correct the situation. Part 3, the instrumental genre requires, the writer to offer

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<sup>3</sup> Shilo, G. (2002). "Linguistic, Structural and Rhetorical Tools for the Interpretation of Argumentative Text", *Helkat-Lashon* p. 33-34.

Shilo, G. (2005). "Logical-Structural Mistakes in Hebrew Writing", *Helkat-Lashon* 36, p. 165-189.

<sup>4</sup> Sarel, T. (1990). "Communicative aspect in teaching writing: The official letter", *Helkat-Lashon* 2, p. 37-43.

<sup>5</sup> Aouladomar, F. "A Preliminary Analysis of the Discursive and Rhetorical Structure of Procedural Texts". Retrieved 15.1.13 from <http://w3.erss.univ-tlse2.fr/sem05/proceedings-final/16-Aouladomar.pdf>

suggestions about the steps that must be taken, as well as guidelines on how to proceed.

The future tense is optimal for this purpose. In summary:

- a. expository genre - information - past tense
- b. argumentative genre - opinion - present tense
- c. instrumental genre - message - future tense

### **1.3 The students' difficulties and their solutions**

In teaching the official letter we have encountered a number of problems: First, the students find it difficult to distinguish between the information (the first) and the opinion (the second) parts of the letter. Second, the students cannot come up with arguments to convince the addressee to act in order to correct the situation, and finally, the students tend to state their requests in the second part of the letter instead of the third part.

We suggest instructing the students to proceed as follows: to report in part 1 all the facts that happened in the past and their outcomes, including damages and other consequences. In part 2, they should include citations from legal documents, which show that the episode being discussed constitutes a crime or breach of law. In addition, the matter at hand should be compared to the situation in other places. This will show that the episode discussed constitutes a deviation from the norm. Furthermore, the writer must remind the addressee of his duties and responsibilities toward the people who were impacted by the episode and warn the addressee that he will be held accountable for any further damage (Perelman, 1982).<sup>6</sup> In the end, in part 3, the writer should use modal forms such as *you must*, *you should*, *you ought to* where the suggestion for correcting the situation are laid out. Before presenting a sample letter we explain that we suggest these strategies be used after the sender has failed in the past, i.e, the recipient did not solve the problem.

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<sup>6</sup> Perelman, Ch. (1982). *The realm of rhetoric*, Kluback, W. (trans), Notre Dame : University of Notre Dame Press.

## 1.4 The sample letter:

Roy Flor  
Gordon St. 24  
Haifa

8.4.13

Jonathan Amir  
Manager, Sanitation Department  
The Municipality of Haifa

Dear Mr. Amir,

### **Part 1:**

On March 12, 2013, while walking along Kaplan Street, I stumbled on a stone protruding from a broken sidewalk and hurt my foot. I called the Municipality, described the incident in great detail to the clerk who answered the phone, and requested that the sidewalk be repaired immediately in order to prevent similar accidents in the future.

Yesterday, I happened to pass the same place, and to my consternation, the sidewalk was still in a state of disrepair! Nothing had been done since I reported the incident, and the pedestrians who walk along the street are still at risk of sustaining a serious injury.

### **Part 2:**

It is with reluctance that I remind you of your public duty as a representative of the city residents. When we voted for your political party two years ago, we believed that you would take care of our needs. We trusted you and were sure that you were concerned about our safety and security. Don't let us think that this was a mistake! If the sidewalk is not repaired promptly and the hazard is not removed, you will be responsible for the next accident!

### **Part 3:**

I am asking you again to have the sidewalk repaired immediately, before it is too late.

Yours sincerely,

Roy Flor

## 1.5 Structure and content - analysis

Now we take another look at this letter and analyze it. Part 1 describes the details of the incident – it tells the story. It is written entirely in the past tense. The writer can add here that he had been taken to the hospital and charged a lot of money, etc. All the events that happened in the past are included in this part. In part 2, the sender's goal is to cause the addressee to feel uncomfortable, to embarrass him. “If you don't play your part as expected, you may lose my sympathy/support and your career may be endangered.” This

will cause the recipient to be afraid of losing his job and will ensure that he will act immediately to satisfy the sender. Section 2 is the most important part of the letter: it may be effective in leading to a solution. I usually tell my students: If we fail to convince the recipient, we can't be sure that he will act without delay. Part 3 is practical. The writer should be assertive and state his request as clearly as possible. That is why this part should be short and contain only the essentials.

So far, we have focused on the content of the official letter, but actually every text has four aspects: 1.content 2.structure 3.language and style 4.wording, spelling, punctuation. The format of the official letter is well known. In the first step, we should present the format to the class and ask the students to write their letters according to it.

## **2. The teaching process**

### **2.1 Peer learning**

‘Peer learning’ is a form of cooperative learning that enhances the value of student-student interaction and results in various advantageous learning outcomes (Christudason, 2003).<sup>7</sup> First, the students write their letter at home. During the next lesson the students work in pairs; they exchange letters and perform **peer checking** according to the worksheet that we distributed in advance. In the next stage, after getting their peer review, the students rewrite their text and improve it (Elbow & Belanoff, 1995).<sup>8</sup> This method encourages written and spoken dialogue between the writer and the reader (Lillis 2003, Beach and Fridriech 2005).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Christudason A. (2003), Retrieved 18.5.13 from <http://www.cdtl.nus.edu.sg/success/sl37.htm>

<sup>8</sup> Elbow, P. & Belanoff, P. (1995). *A Community of Writers*, New-York: McGraw-hill.

<sup>9</sup> Lillis T. (2003). "Student Writing as 'Academic Literacies'": Drawing on Bakhtin to Move from Critique to Design. *Language and Education* 17 (3), p. 192-207.

Beach R. and Fridriech T. (2005). "Response to Writing", in Charles A. M., Steve G. and Jill F. (eds.) *Handbook of Writing Research*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, p. 222-234.

## **2.2 The worksheet**

Please read your peer's letter and answer the following questions:

### **Structure**

1. Did the writer use the correct format in writing his letter?

Don't forget to check all the details.

### **Structure and content**

2. Please mark the three parts of the official letter:

The information part

The argumentative part

The practical part

3. Does the information part include only the details of the incident/episode/problem?

4. What is the main tense in this part? If it's incorrect, write a comment to your peer.

5. Is the argumentative part convincing enough to motive the addressee to take action?

6. Was it written mainly in the present tense?

7. How many reasons are included in this part? Elaborate on them briefly.

If there are consequences or damages that occurred in the past, note them.

8. After reading part 2, can the addressee be convinced to act?

9. Does the practical part include evidence of incidents in the past?

You should instruct your peer to delete this information, which does not belong here.

10. Please mark the modal forms in part 3.

11. Is the practical part written concisely and to the point?

### **Language and style**

12. Check the language: Is it formal?

13. If you find errors in language and style, correct them.

### **Wording, spelling, punctuation**

14. If there are mistakes in these areas, correct them.

Please give your friend the **peer review**, and rewrite your letter after reading the review that you have received.

In the next stage the students read their letter in the classroom, and their friends evaluate them.<sup>10</sup> To complete the teaching of the official letter the teacher can add an interesting and effective exercise. The teacher may distribute a number of official letters that have been sent to institutions in the past, and ask the students to analyze them, and to correct them if they were not written according to the principles that we have described here.

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<sup>10</sup> Goldberg, D. (1996). "Model for Teaching Academic Writing Skills", *Helkat Lashon* 23, p. 181-204.