

GENRE QUESTIONS

What Kind of Writing is This Passage?

We read different types, or genres, of writing differently. For instance, we read a newspaper much differently than we read a novel. Likewise, a love letter affects us differently than reading a text book. Authors, including scriptural authors, use different kinds of writing to produce different effects in their reading audience.

The most fundamental division in types of writing is between prose and poetry. *Prose* is, effectively, straightforward writing that is reflective of how people speak. *Poetry*, on the other hand, is the creative use of language in which words are chosen and arranged create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm. Often, however, scriptural writing is mixed, with otherwise prosaic passages including poetic elements.

Genres are characterized by style, form, and content. Below is a helpful, but not all inclusive, list by Professor Felix Just of Loyola Marymount University of the many smaller genres found in the New Testament:

- **Gospels - proclamations of the “good news” about Jesus intended to establish and/or strengthen people’s faith in him**
 - **quasi-biographical, semi-historical portraits of the life, teachings, and actions of Jesus (Mark, Matt, Luke, John)]**
- Real letters - written to specific individuals or communities
 - “ccasional in nature,” addressing practical and theological issues relevant to particular communities (Paul’s)
- Church Orders or “Pastoral Epistles”
 - regulatory letters, collections of instructions for the practical organization of religious communities (1 Tim, Titus)
- Testament
 - a document that gives a dying person’s last wishes and instructions for his/her successors (2 Tim & 2 Peter)
- Homily/Sermon
 - an exegetical sermon that cites and interprets older biblical texts in reference to Jesus (Heb)
- Wisdom Collection
 - a collection of general instructions on how to live an ethical Christian life well (James)
- Epistles/Encyclicals - more stylized literary works in letter format
 - “circular letters” intended for broader audiences (1 & 2 Peter; perhaps Colossians and Ephesians foreshadow)
- Acts - a narrative historical account about the beginnings and the growth of early Christianity
 - not a complete history of the early Church, since it focuses only on the actions of a few missionary leaders (Acts)
- Apocalypse - a vividly symbolic narrative that “reveals” God’s views about a historical crisis
 - provides encouragement for a difficult present and hope for a better future (Rev)

The gospels contained material from a number of subgenres, including the following:

- Narrative
 - introductions and prologues
 - genealogies
 - transition and summary narratives (at the beginnings and ends of narrative sections)
 - miracle/healing stories
 - call stories
 - “conflict” or “controversy narratives”
 - vision and dream reports
 - apocalyptic visions
 - prophecies (described)

- Discourse
 - parables
 - short individual sayings or proverbs
 - teaching saying
 - [*chreiai* – a short saying or anecdote used to illustrate an element of the personality of the subject of a biography]
 - allegories
 - hymns and prayers (often poetic)
 - canticle
 - laws and legal interpretations
 - formula quotations
 - longer speeches, discourses or monologues, etc.
 - sermons
 - prophecies (quoted)
 - passion predictions

- Mixed genres include dramatic episodes and longer narratives that contain extended dialogues and “pronouncement stories”
 - “correction narrative” (misunderstood teaching and correction; often coupled with passion predictions)
 - dramatic episodes, including self-contained units such as the following:
 - passion narratives
 - resurrection narratives
 - commission narratives