What is a genre?

A genre is a conventional response to a rhetorical situation that occurs fairly often. Conventional does not necessarily mean boring. Instead, it means a recognizable pattern for providing specific kinds of information for an identifiable audience demanded by circumstances that come up again and again.

For example, new movies open almost every week. Movie makers pay for advertising to entice viewers to see their movies.

Genres have a purpose. While consumers may learn about a movie from the ads, they know they are getting a sales pitch with that information, so they look for an outside source of information before they spend their money. Movie reviews provide viewers with enough information about the content and quality of a film to help them make a decision, without ruining it for them by giving away the ending. Movie reviews are the conventional response to the rhetorical situation of a new film opening.

Genres have a pattern. The movie review is conventional because it follows certain conventions, or recognized and accepted ways of giving readers information. This is called a move pattern.

Here are the moves associated with that genre:
1. Name of the movie, director, leading actors, Sometimes, the opening also includes the names of people and companies associated with the film if that information seems important to the reader: screenwriter, animators, special effects, or other important aspects of the film. This information is always included in the opening lines or at the top of the review.
2. Graphic design elements---usually, movie reviews include some kind of art or graphic taken from the film itself to call attention to the review and draw readers into it.
3. A brief, summary evaluation of some aspect of the film. Movie review are supposed to evaluate a film for potential reviewers---that is the purpose of the genre—so an evaluation is included in the first paragraph or two.
4. A brief plot synopsis. This is included not to explain the story to the readers, but to provide context for the rest of the evaluation.
5. Evaluations of other aspects of the film follow—quality of acting, quality of screenwriting, quality of cinematography, quality of soundtrack, quality of pacing, etc.

6. The movie review concludes with an evaluation of who might like the movie, who might not, and a summary of its strengths and weaknesses.

Language: Since a genre responds to people reading for a specific purpose, each genre uses language specific to that genre. Movie reviews respond to people seeking entertainment; they use language that is casual and relaxed for most commercial movies. Reviews of films that appeal to an audience seeking a more aesthetic or intellectual experience use language that uses a more formal tone and sophisticated vocabulary.

Design: A genre also responds to the place it appears. The layout, artwork, and appearance of a movie review responds to the place it appears. Movie reviews written for websites often use a standard symbol set to give the readers a quick way to determine how the reviewer evaluated the movie: 3 stars, two thumbs, smiley faces, etc. Movie review written for a newspaper may look different, and those written to be heard on radio or seen on TV might use sounds rather than symbols to convey that evaluation.

Genres are useful. Writers and readers both use genres because of the cognitive and social work they accomplish.

For writers, using the patterns of a genre accepted by readers for accomplishing their purposes allows them to establish a working relationship with readers. When writers do not use the genre usually accepted by readers—and there are no rules, only choices—they risk alienating an audience. For example, if a film reviewer departs from the genre convention that keeps key plot points, especially the ending, a secret, readers may find the film spoiled for them. On a number of movie review sites, if a reviewer does just that, the editors mark their review with a warning label---spoilers!

But familiarity with genres can also make life easier for writers. Genres also provide the writer with general organizational patterns that can help them arrange what they say and when they say it.

For readers, genres help organize information so that they can more easily make sense of what they are about to read. To use a different example, a biologist reading a report on new research knows that the discussion of what the writers think is significant is going to be at the end of the article. Readers save themselves time by skimming the introduction, glancing at the methods section, and going straight to the last couple of pages. If the writer of the report has not followed the genre conventions, the reader may simply dismiss the research. To those readers, if it takes too long to find the claims, they suspect the writer does not know the field very well because they did not know enough to follow the accepted path.

Genres create expectations. Familiarity with genres also makes life easier for readers. If they have a general idea about how research reports work, they can read them faster and make sense of the information in them more quickly.

Think of it this way. If you open the packaging on a kit for a coffee table, and you pull out the assembly instructions, you expect to get step-by-step instructions, including pictures, of how to put the table together.

You have expectations. The writer should fulfill them.

If you open the instruction guide, and find an essay on the history of coffee tables in interior decorating, you are likely to be both confused and angry.

Genres analysis can help writers. If you need to write a document you have never had to write before, it can be very useful to analyze others of its kind before you begin your work. For example, when your chemistry professor assigns a lab report, she or he is likely to give you a sample of a lab report to follow. The professor does that to provide you with a model, a sample you can analyze to understand the writing task before you. Using the questions you use to understand a rhetorical situation can help you understand how a genre responds to it. These questions can help you analyze any genre:

- What is the purpose of this document?
- Who is it written for and why would they want to read it?
- What is the event or occasion that requires a response?
- What kind of response does it require—an argument, an explanation, a description?
- How is that response organized—chronologically, in topical sections, in order of importance?
- What kind of language does the writer use, and does it change within the document?
- What are the design and layout features of this document?