

Exclusive Engagement Now Playing: The Genre of a Book Trailer

Sandy Hayes

*Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. They are environments for learning. They are locations within which meaning is constructed. Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar. ~ Charles Bazerman, *The Life of Genre, the Life in the Classrooms*¹*

Since the 1960s English/Language Arts classroom have stretched the traditional canon to include such forms of popular culture as movies, television, music lyrics, and advertising as well as the “lesser” genres of science fiction, horror, and young adult literature. In the last decade digital tools have allowed students to go beyond being “readers” of pop culture to being producers and publishers of their own works in a widening array of contemporary genres: spoken word poetry, street fiction, graphic novels, blogs, fanfic, digital gaming, Wikipedia entries, and mashups.

Since 2002 when Circle of Seven Productions created the first book trailers for the publishing industry, this genre, which emulates the conventions of movie trailers, has taken off. At this writing, Scholastic listed 82 book trailers on its website, and there were over 55,600 book trailers posted on YouTube by publishers and by students as a contest entry, as classroom work, or as a self-sponsored activity. As Bazerman pointed out, genre is a “[location] within which meaning is constructed. . . and the [guidepost] we use to explore the unfamiliar.” Student work in the YouTube productions shows that they have internalized a variety of conventions of the movie trailer genre, but they may need guideposts to strengthen the quality of their work. We can encourage them to stretch by helping them analyze elements of high quality guiding models.

Coming Soon to a Classroom Near You

Movie trailers generally introduce characters, characterizations, conflict, and plot through the use of action or dialogue clips, text, and voice-overs. They may also give setting information (through the visuals or text), overviews of themes, and references to the studio, to awards earned, and to other movies. Trailers often end with some kind of hook such as a question or a cliffhanger to entice the audience to see the movie. More sophisticated trailers may be enhanced by visual or sound effects or music to create a mood or to punctuate an idea. By identifying and critiquing techniques used in examples, students can make explicit their background knowledge of this genre, using these insights to make deliberate decisions about content, technique, and intent as they produce their own.

As students view mentor trailers, they should observe

- How were words (dialog, voice-over, text) used? What information about the story was given? Was there word play or clever turns of phrase?
- What do you think the story is about? Was there enough information without giving away twists or the ending?
- Was the pacing effective? Did some parts drag or seem too brief?

- What was the mood? How was the mood created? Was it effective?
- If images were used, did every image have a purpose? Did the image fit the general tone or “feel” of the trailer?
- How did sound effects, music, and transitions or other visual effects add to or detract from the production?
- If there were voice-overs, was it clear whether it was a narrator or a character speaking?
- Did this trailer make you want to see the movie or read the book?

It may be helpful to show some YouTube book trailers that are less effective: videos that are summaries, book talks, or kids just having fun. This shouldn’t be a judgment on the makers, but rather a discussion clarifying the purpose and expectations of this project and on how the example videos met a different purpose.

Students are now ready to plan their trailer and begin their script by considering:

- Conflict, plot, characters, setting, theme. What will be emphasized?
- What will be touched on? What will engage the viewer without revealing surprises or the ending?
- Will dialog be used? Voice-over? Text?
- What visuals would be most appropriate?
- What kind of mood is appropriate for the book? How will it be created?
- Will music or sound effects be important? Why? What type?
- What kinds of techniques could be used for the opening? Which would be most effective? Why?
- How will the trailer end? How will the trailer motivate viewers to read the book?

Lights, Camera, Action

Working in groups of 2-3 may help students articulate and defend their decisions on focus, effect, and supporting examples as they discuss questions like those above.

As students create their scripts, they should include “stage directions” on tone of voice and sound effects. They should periodically read the scripts aloud so that their trailer runs between 30 seconds and 2 minutes. If visuals are used, students should use a storyboard template, roughing in the visuals, whether still, text, or video, and writing the script for that segment next to the image.

The simplest and least time-consuming trailers to produce are audio trailers. Depending on the tech experience of the students, access to multiple quiet areas for recording, and on how much reliable equipment is available the audio trailers with simple music and minimal sound effects can take as little as three class periods. Always, though, plan for additional independent time for the groups with members absent, groups that experienced some glitches, or groups that had a more elaborate vision. Students can record their script and add background music or sound effects with an mp3 voice recorder, an iPhone, or on a computer with a USB microphone and GarageBand, Audacity, or QuickTime Pro. Without the distraction and complication of visuals, audio trailers focus the emphasis on the quality of the writing. Dialog and narration must be used or the trailer is basically a book talk. The writers may need to apply their understanding of the work to create dialog that is true to the story, as in this example by Ryan, Kristen, and Ashley of “Lady or the Tiger,” a story that has no dialog.

Narrator: In the very olden time there once lived a king.

...

King (haughtily): For your crimes, you shall pay!
Who’s to say that it’s unfair? For did you not choose your fate yourself?

Narrator: When a man, a commoner by birth, dared to love the princess. . .

Princess (urgently): Go! Go! For my father is coming.

Narrator: Will their love end happy?

Princess (pleading): But, Father, I love him.

King (scornfully): Love? You are but a child. He will

pay for this treachery, for none escape the judgment of the king's court!

Narrator: Two doors. One. . . a beast. The other. . . a maiden of noble birth to which he will be married. She has the choice. Shall she surrender her love to another woman? Or have him be killed? Which is stronger – Love or Jealousy? A short story by Frank R. Stockton, *Lady or the Tiger?*

(This audio trailer with artwork, dialog, and dramatic music can be found at www.mcte.org/journal/mej09/trailers.html)

Voice-overs or narration can be an important feature of the script. The voice-over can deliver the lead-in, summarize action, state background information about setting, time period, theme, or characters, provide a bridge between segments of the trailer, give author or award information, or bring the trailer to a close. Printed text can also be used in these ways. Voice-over artists are such an established convention of movie trailers that audiences recognize many of the voices without knowing the artist. The Geico commercials finally let us meet Don (“*In a world where. . .*”) LaFontaine, one of the most recognized voices in the industry. Included in the resources below are some entertaining videos that give a behind-the-scenes view of voice-over artists.

Another simple option for composing book trailers if you are on a short time-frame is a slideshow of text with appropriate music or narration. Students who have finished this basic project early can extend their work by adding appropriate still images, either photographs taken by students or images found on the internet or scanned from print. To reduce the extra class time needed, they could create or search for images outside of class. Some options for creating slideshows or movies include iMovie, Movie Maker, Photoshow, PowerPoint, or iPhoto.

Using student-produced video footage presents complications in creating realistic settings, costumes, characterization, and action. If live action is chosen, some of these problems can be minimized by using extreme close-ups, fade-outs, voice-overs, and black or unlit backgrounds. Students may also choose to

film at suitable locations they have access to outside of school. For more advanced filmmakers, the *Sherlock Holmes* trailer listed below creatively uses still images of realistic backgrounds, records the actors in blue screen style, and inserts them into the setting.

Roll the Credits

Before students begin to look for images, music, and sound effects, they will likely need instruction in copyright and fair use. Extensive new material, cited below, published in 2008 by media literacy scholars at Temple University has taken a radically new approach toward this issue. This *Code of Best Practices for Fair Use in Media Literacy Education*, as well as the supporting material also listed below, are meant to “offer guidance, not guidelines” to classroom teachers, who, ultimately “are the ones who really have to decide what they think is fair and reasonable.” The commonly quoted “10% rule” and “30 second rule” are not, in fact, law. Instead, fair use is determined by situations where the user adds value to, transforms, or repurposes material for a use different from what was originally intended, or modifies existing media content, or places it in a new context. The work can be published digitally if it meets this transformativeness standard. The original works should be credited.

Another option is to search for material that is published under Creative Commons licenses (<http://search.creativecommons.org>). The license for each work determines its acceptable use and the appropriate citation needed for that work.

And the Nominees Are. . .

Technology-based projects, more than most other class projects, are vulnerable to Murphy's Law: Anything that can go wrong will, and at the worst possible time. It is a good idea to establish ahead of time the essential skills you will assess. The basic skills of this project can be assessed from the script. In the worst case scenario, all else can be a process or participation grade. If students are creating their trailers in small groups, it is also a good idea to plan for individual accountability. This could

be an appraisal of what the student learned or of the group's process, decision-making, and collaboration. Or it could be a reflection on what the student would change or add if there had been more time and how those changes would improve the trailer. Or the student might write a second script for a trailer on a different book.

To help students self-assess their work as well as evaluate the work of classmates, they might consider to what extent

- The trailer's opening captured the audience's attention
- The information was true to the book without giving away the plot
- Enough information about the book was given to enable the audience members to decide if they are interested in reading it
- The trailer established an appropriate mood or tone
- The pacing of the trailer fit the story line, neither too rushed nor too slow
- The transitions between the ideas were smooth.
- The sequence of information was logical
- The multi-media components enhanced the script
- The trailer was original and creative

Each year the motion picture industry presents Golden Trailer Awards to recognize creativity and craftsmanship in that year's movie trailers. This classroom project wouldn't be complete without a red carpet showcase of the projects. Categories for awards could be created, and trailers judged by an outside panel, by ratings of online viewers, or by class vote. As my students munch popcorn and watch the trailers of their classmates, we discuss what we liked about each one. These discussions always surprise me with the insights, often very subtle insights, the students show about effect and effectiveness. Students fill out ballots for categories such as Best Voiceover, Best Sound Effects/Music, Most Creative, and Best Information about the story/book. They also vote for the People's Choice, the trailer that was their favorite. I confer certificates to rounds of applause,

and the award-winning trailers from each class are shown to all classes the next day and are posted on my class website.

In a world where students are confronted with the challenges of taming new and strange genres, where their opportunities for interaction with each other and the world increase, where their bold, creative spirit will astound their teacher, this experience could very well be a heart-warming affirmation of their learning, a triumphant example of the can-do spirit of student engagement, and the white-knuckle thrill-ride of the year.

References

(All resources were retrieved from the sources below in July 2009)

Some People's Choice short story trailers from my classroom

www.mcte.org/journal/mej09/trailers.html

Storyboarding resources

Interesting thirteen-minute video on professional movie storyboards with examples from classic Disney movies. <http://vodpod.com/watch/1318003-finding-lady-the-art-of-storyboarding>

Simple template in pdf: www.mcte.org/journal/mej09/StoryboardTemplate.pdf

Mentor texts (movie trailers)

The Greatest Game Ever Played (2005): This is one of the most multi-dimensional trailers I've found. Techniques: use of dialog clips for conflict/plot preview and characterization, voice-over as bridge, introduction of themes, information on studio and other works. Search for this trailer and more at www.apple.com/trailers (will play in large screen through iTunes). You may want to use trailers from current movies that most students have seen. Selecting mentor trailers for yourself will help you clarify techniques you want the stu-

dents to notice.

Goldfinger (1964): Techniques: character introductions, plot clips, word play, voice-over, studio and actor information. Fun trailer to use for contrasting styles and technology of movie and movie trailer production between 1964 and today. www.spout.com/films/Goldfinger/13723/2134/trailers.aspx

Student-produced slideshow trailers

A Great and Terrible Beauty by Libba Bray – Techniques: excellent use of text, still photos with Ken Burns effect, and dramatic music www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivXJSAUVwgE&NR=1

Bringing the Boy Home by N. A. Nelson – Techniques: still pictures, text, music. <http://vids.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=vids.individual&VideoID=31464410>

Hoot by Carl Hiassen – Techniques: still pictures, text, music, statements of themes. www.youtube.com/watch?v=qW2kb2baV-8

Student-produced trailers with video and advanced techniques

Sherlock Holmes by Arthur Conan Doyle – Very sophisticated. Techniques: short “blue screen” video clips against period backgrounds, effective costumes, dialog, music, sound effects. www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5d5mFMD4QE

Unwind by Neil Schusterman – Student-created video. Techniques: still shots with dramatic effects, text, music. <http://voicethread.com/#q+book+trailer.b526363.i2814696>

City of Bones by Cassandra Clare – Techniques: fan-created artwork, special effects, text, music. <http://voicethread.com/#q+book+trailer.b452234.i2408884>

Kipling's Choice by Geert Spillebeen – Techniques: stop-action

animation, text, still images, Ken Burns effect, music. <http://voicethread.com/#q+book+trailer.b454858.i2419619>

Found by Margaret Peterson Haddix – Techniques: still pictures, video, text, music, sound effects. www.youtube.com/watch?v=swRTZpnsXgY

Book trailer contest examples

Kirkus Teen Book Video Awards (sponsored by Random House):

2008: www.kirkusreviews.com/kirkusreviews/book_video/index.jsp

2007: *Love, Stargirl* – www.youtube.com/watch?v=95s8G1KY40o&feature=related; *The Secrets of the Immortal Nicholas Flamel: The Alchemyst* – www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7Q_DAZMHdU

2006: *The Book Thief* – www.youtube.com/watch?v=95s8G1KY40o&feature=related; *A Great and Terrible Beauty* – www.youtube.com/watch?v=L93HOOy-lSc&feature=related

Winners of Laurie Halse Anderson's contest on the book *Speak*: <http://halseanderson.livejournal.com/tag/book+trailer+contest>

Voice-over artists

Legendary Movie Voice (CBS Early Show): www.youtube.com/watch?v=zhg0HtLMEIU

5 Guys in a Limo: Humorous video, written in voice-over clichés, of Don LaFontaine and four other best-recognized voice-over artists on their way to an award ceremony. www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQRtuxdfQHw

Some of the voice-overs Don LaFontaine generously donated for student projects: www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3Ynpt6eYYM; www.youtube.com/

watch?v=sbkcuIxQyhw;www.youtube.com/watch?v=v____fVQhDYPE

Memorial tribute to Don LaFontaine : www.ireport.com/docs/DOC-76266

Copyright and attribution resources

Code of Best Practices in Fair Use for Online Video. http://www.centerforsocialmedia.org/resources/publications/fair_use_in_online_video

Videos, case studies, lesson plans, podcast on Code of Best Practices for Fair Use in Media Literacy Education. <http://mediaeducationlab.com/code-best-practices-fair-use-media-literacy-education>

From the blog of Doug Johnson, media specialist, Mankato Public Schools. <http://doug-johnson.squarespace.com/blue-skunk-blog/2008/11/12/teasers-from-best-practices-in-fair-use.html>

Creative Commons license descriptions: <http://creativecommons.org/about/licenses>

Videos on Creative Commons that can be used with students <http://creativecommons.org/videos>

Excellent source for music licensed under Creative Commons: <http://ccmixter.org/view/media/home>