Factsheet

Identify text types

Basics

Identifying text types is an everyday skill. You probably do it many times a day without thinking about it. For example, if your friend is using her laptop, you can probably glance at the screen for less than a second and work out what kind of website she is visiting. Knowing what type, or *genre*, a text is, also helps you to respond to it in the right way – and again, you usually do this without thinking about it. For example, if a friend sends you a text message, you will probably write a quick, informal response; but if your lecturer sends you an email, your response will be quite different.

Sometimes this skill is very useful. For example, you might get an email from your bank asking for some details. If you remember that other emails from your bank were different – for example, they had a different design, or they didn't ask you for personal details – you might be able to work out that this email is *not* from your bank – it's from someone who wants to steal from you!

The academic context

There are many academic applications of the skill. Some subjects, especially in the humanities, require you to do your own research, which might involve assessing a wide variety of text types. Some courses set tasks involving assessing different kinds of text, and exams may also require you to read from a variety of sources.

Key features

Often when you read, you know – or think you know – what sort of text it is. At other times, you might be unsure, or not know important background information. Either way, there are always clues that you will notice very quickly to confirm or change your expectations. You will get better at identifying texts by understanding and consciously using these clues. Here are some key areas.

Length and scope

- How long is the text?
- Is it part of a larger whole – a series of books, or a long chain of emails, for example?

Layout

- Is the layout simple or complex?
- Is the text divided into paragraphs, sections or chapters?
- Are there titles, headings and subheadings?
- Are there any photographs, illustrations or diagrams?
- Is the structure and purpose of the text obvious from the layout, or is it hidden?

Style and register

- Is the text formal or informal?
- Are the grammar and vocabulary simple or complex?
- What is the writing style, or overall tone? For example, is it factual, argumentative or poetic?
- Does the text include recognizable phrases – *Once upon a time* in a fairy story, or *Yours sincerely* in a formal letter, for example?

Purpose

- What does the text aim to do? A text might aim to:
  - amuse – make the reader laugh or see something in a new way
  - inform – tell the reader about something for the first time
  - explain – say how or why something happens
  - describe – say what something looks, feels, sounds or tastes like
  - give instructions – tell the reader how to do something
  - give advice, warnings or recommendations – tell the reader she should or shouldn't do something
  - persuade – encourage the reader to change her opinion
- What is your purpose in reading the text? Your purpose could be similar to the writer's (for example, if you are following instructions to make a cake) or quite different (for example, if you are looking for weaknesses in a writer's argument).

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Ways of reading

We naturally read different types of text in different ways, without even thinking about it. (For example, if you receive an email telling you your exam results, you probably don't read every word.) Again, you will become a better reader by trying to understand these strategies and make conscious decisions about when to use them. For example, you might:

- read the headings and subheadings first
- skim-read to get a general understanding
- read closely to understand details or follow instructions precisely
- read different parts of the text at different speeds
- decide to look up – or not look up – unfamiliar words and phrases in a dictionary
- clearly distinguish facts from the writer's opinion
- decide if you agree or disagree with something
- read between the lines – understand what the writer means when she doesn't actually say it

Challenges / difficulties

It is difficult to change your way of reading, especially with difficult texts. Your brain often has automatic responses to texts, and learning to focus on key details without worrying about what you don't understand can be a challenge.

How can I develop this skill?

The best way is to read as much as possible. Read all sorts of different texts. Try to notice features of language and layout that are typical of each.

Learning outcome

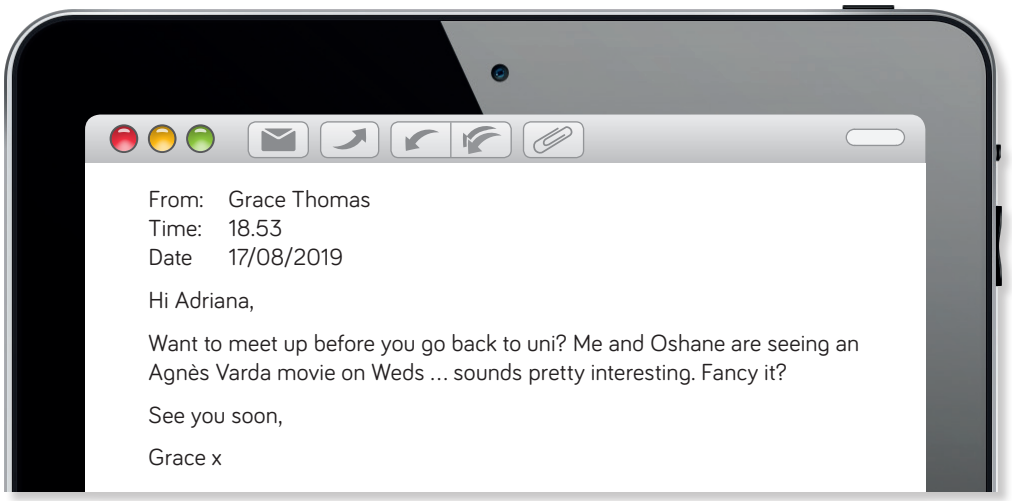
If you can learn to recognize text types quickly, you will know what to expect from a text, read it with more purpose and gain a greater understanding of it. You will also become more confident in your written and spoken responses to texts.

Theory to practice

Look at the examples of typical text types and read the notes about some of the important features.

1 **Email**

- Notice the layout and the use of typical informal phrases, abbreviations and occasional incorrect grammar.



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2 Fiction

- Notice the descriptive language and the use of the past tense.

Dubliners — *James Joyce*

Mr James Duffy lived in Chapelizod because he wished to live as far as possible from the city of which he was a citizen and because he found all the other suburbs of Dublin mean, modern and pretentious. He lived in an old sombre house, and from his windows he could look into the disused distillery or upwards along the shallow river on which Dublin is built.

3 Newspaper report

- Notice the large headline, the factual style and the use of passive forms.

Bus blast kills six

M. N. Singh *in Central Sulawesi*

Six people were killed and three others injured in a bus explosion in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia yesterday. The explosion took place in the city of Poso at 9.15 a.m. Police confirmed an IED (improvised explosive device) was used.

4 Academic article from a science journal

- Notice the complex academic style, the scientific keywords and phrases, and the use of the superscript (small) numbers to give references.

Reproduction technology is resulting in an increasing number of multiple births.[1] The increased availability of fertility drugs[2] and the practice of replacing two or more embryos in the uterus during IVF treatment[3] means there is a greater likelihood of producing twins or triplets.

Ways to get more practice

- Try to gain a greater understanding of the differences in style between academic text types – articles, reports, summaries, reviews, monographs, etc.
- Keep lists of formal and informal vocabulary that you can use in different text types.

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