When my husband and I travel, we are usually in such a hurry to get from Point A to Point B that we take the fastest route possible. Once, however, we found ourselves stuck in a traffic jam and decided to venture off the freeway. Much to my husband’s dismay, this choice took us on a lengthy detour. We ended up driving through a little town near Walton’s Mountain, Virginia. Several gift shops and restaurants later, we were back on the freeway. We didn’t reach our destination as quickly as we had hoped, but every year at Christmas when I hang my shotgun shell ornament from Walton’s Mountain on the tree, I fondly remember that unintentional visit. I had traveled that route many times, never realizing what I was missing by not taking time to get better acquainted with my surroundings.

That detour often reminds me of the use of genre study in teaching writing—it requires an intentional detour from the main highway of the language-arts curriculum. Instead of teaching writing by introducing different genres as if they were signs flying by on a freeway, a genre study is like a guided tour through a town with a local guide who knows the unique and hidden treasures of the place. A genre study does take a bit more time, but students who have taken this journey with their teachers become intimately familiar with a genre and eagerly share what they learn. They are also more willing to venture deeply into other genres and to arrive at the ultimate destination of becoming better writers.

What’s a Genre Study?

In her book, Thinking Through Genre, Heather Lattimer describes a genre study as a deep investigation of a certain genre: biography, poetry, memoirs, essays, editorials, nonfiction, etc. During such a project, students read books, magazine articles, and other samples of that genre. They study different authors’ styles and analyze features that are unique to the genre. After this immersion, students write original pieces in that genre using the skills they have acquired. The ultimate goal is for students to develop habits of reading and writing that enable them to master writing in many different genres.

Many teachers have journeyed into genre studies unawares. For instance, do the words “Poetry Unit” sound familiar? Without calling it a genre study of poetry, many teachers have at some point immersed students in the reading of poems, helped them analyze the features of poetry, and encouraged them to write poetry. Those are the basic elements of genre study. This method works well for teaching poetry; in fact, it’s hard to imagine teaching poetry any other way. This formula provides a successful model for teaching and exploring all genres from letter writing to nonfiction.

Lattimer recommends four to eight weeks for each genre study. However, not all genres require much time. A genre study of thank-you notes with 1st graders may not take as long as a biography study with 3rd graders or a literary nonfiction study with 6th graders. Of course, genre study is not limited to use at the elementary level.

Packing for the Trip

Taking a genre study journey, like any trip, requires preparation. In Study Driven, Katie Wood Ray provides guidance on conducting a genre study. The journey begins with gathering a large number of engaging texts that are representative of the genre and are full of writing craft. Instead of using one or two full-length books as examples, use excerpts from longer books as well as quality children’s picture books from the genre. Libraries are full of picture books in nearly every genre from memoir and biographies to persuasive essays and folklore. A variety of genres may also be found in newspapers and magazines.
Fitting a Genre Journey Into the Curriculum

Because genre studies involve reading and writing, they fit well into any language-arts curriculum. Kindergarten through 6th-grade teachers in the North American Division use the *Pathways* language-arts curriculum, which builds each month’s lessons on a theme book. The supplemental reading list provided with each *Pathways* unit contains selected genre-related texts. The Helen Keller unit for the 3rd grade, for example, lists biographies of Helen Keller.

Once reading materials have been collected, introduce students to the genre through read-alouds. During this introductory phase of the genre journey, share examples with the students and invite them to search for writing in the given genre to share with the class. Set guidelines and inform students of requirements and deadlines for the study so that they know what you expect and when the assignments are due.

**On the Genre Journey**

The next phase of the journey is to immerse the class in the collected materials through a variety of reading experiences: read-aloud, reading with a partner, reading homework, and choral readings. Guide students through discussions to discover what topics writers tackle with the particular genre, as well as the work writers must do before they begin writing—observing, questioning, and researching. Help students to look for examples of each writer’s craft by asking, “What makes this good writing that readers enjoy?” As students read to answer these questions, they learn to identify works in the genre and to understand the work necessary to write compelling prose.

The next stretch of the journey involves a close study of the genre. With teacher guidance, students compile a list of the features they have noticed during their readings. They look more closely at some of the texts they have already read. These student “findings” become tools the teacher can use to help students differentiate between the specific content of the genre and the writer’s craft. Students develop higher-level thinking skills as they analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the readings in order to improve their own writing.

The last stretch of the journey has students writing original pieces in the genre using the knowledge they have gained along the paths they traveled. Students thus develop the skills to write under the influence of the professional authors whose works have inspired them thus far.

**Common Literary Genres for *Pathways* Themes**

The literary themes associated with the North American Division’s *Pathways* curriculum correlate readily with genre studies. Some genres, such as poetry, expository reports, or literary nonfiction could be used with almost any of the themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pathways Theme</th>
<th>Possible Genre Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heroes</strong></td>
<td>Biographies Short stories Plays Humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My World and Others</strong></td>
<td>Alphabet books Literary nonfiction Travel brochures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living Things</strong></td>
<td>Question-and-answer books Photo essays Literary nonfiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spiritual Journey</strong></td>
<td>Memoirs Essays Innovations on writing the Psalms Parables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friends and Family</strong></td>
<td>Friendly letters Thank-you notes Invitations Wordless picture books Short stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Environment</strong></td>
<td>Business letter Opinion editorials Advice writing Feature articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Feelings and Growth</strong></td>
<td>Memoirs Autobiographies Opinion editorials Advice writing Realistic fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yesterday</strong></td>
<td>Historical fiction Reader’s theater Memoirs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Issues and Culture</strong></td>
<td>Dramas Contemporary realistic fiction Allegories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
other admirable historical figures such as Eleanor Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, and Louis Braille. Assignments include writing a biography report on a famous person, making a timeline of important events in the students’ lives, and maintaining a biography reader’s log. Thus, this unit lends itself well to a biography genre study.  

Pathways exposes students to several genres and equips them with the reading strategies that they will need in order to navigate different genres. The Pathways compilers recognized that students who have been exposed to excellent reading material will become good writers. The month-long immersion pattern of the Pathways units makes them readily adaptable to genre studies.

**One Success Story**

Brandon was a typical 8-year-old in Beth Tucker’s 3rd-grade class. He enjoyed sports and treasured his time with friends, but Brandon hated school. When asked which school subject was his favorite, he would grin and say, “Recess.” He especially hated reading and writing, and had struggled with these subjects from the time he enrolled in school. No matter how hard he tried, he never seemed to be at the same level as the rest of the class. Beth knew that without intensive intervention, Brandon would probably never enjoy language arts and would not participate more than absolutely necessary.

As the weeks went by, Beth’s determination to help Brandon succeed strengthened. She tried appealing to his interests, using non-threatening guided reading, read-alouds, and book talks. She thought she’d tried everything until she discovered genre studies in Lucy Calkins’ book *The Art of Teaching Writing*. Calkins’ suggestion gave her hope: “We find that when an entire class inquires into a genre, it is life giving. It opens doors and leaves a lot of room for variety and choice, while also allowing the classroom community to inquire deeply into something together.”

That was exactly what Beth had been seeking—something to inspire Brandon now and throughout his life. She prepared for her class to embark on a biography genre journey by packing her car’s trunk full of biographies from the public library. As Beth hauled the books into the classroom, she was greeted with a chorus of moans and groans. She patiently smiled and piled the books neatly next to the classroom library. Then she turned to the class and announced, “We are changing the way we do Reading Workshop.” Scowls and groans were replaced by curious faces and listening ears.

As Beth began to introduce the books, her students recognized the names of famous Americans and began asking if they could read the books. Beth was so excited that she and the students dove right into one of the books.

As Beth read several of the books aloud, she stopped to talk about each author’s craft. What kinds of words did he or she use? What is the tone of the book? The students began to ask questions about the purpose of the book. They discussed how readers have to alter their reading style for different books, and coined their own phrase, “reader’s craft.”

Each day, Beth immersed her students in quality biographical writing. The students had grand conversations about the books they were reading. Beth found herself stepping back and learning from her students. She was captivated by how well they analyzed the books and how quickly they began to understand how to read them. The students also discovered that the structure differed from book to book.

As the unit progressed, Beth noticed that Brandon became more and more interested in the class conversations. Because the rest of the students were excited about what they were discovering, this aroused his curiosity. Brandon not only became engaged, he actually emerged as the leader of many of the conversations. He asked questions, and together the class investigated the answer. Brandon had found a purpose for reading.

Because he felt encouraged rather than intimidated, Brandon excelled in reading and writing from that unit on.

Beth’s class studied multiple genres throughout the year, and in each one, Brandon surpassed her expectations. Beth learned that studying the genres helped her students see the connection between reading and writing (author’s craft and reader’s craft). She discovered that genre study enhanced her language-arts curriculum by giving the students ownership of their work and a sense of pride.

Beth’s success story is just one of many! Taking students on a genre journey of reading, analyzing, and producing skillful writing in any genre is a trip worth taking.

The skills and strategies students acquire during this journey will be more than souvenirs that collect dust upon a shelf. They will be scrapbooks of resources that enrich the students’ lives and enhance their writing.

---

**NOTES AND REFERENCES**

2. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 115.
5. Ibid., pp. 125–128.
6. Ibid., pp. 128–133.
7. Ibid., p. 151.
9. Name changed to protect the student’s privacy.