

## Walking a Fine Line: Writing Negative Letters in an Insurance Company

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*Cette étude limitée examine les pratiques en matière de pratiques de langage-situé liées à la production des lettres négatives à l'intérieur d'une compagnie d'assurance. En se référant aux théories socioculturelles et du genre, l'étude a recours à des analyses textuelles d'un ensemble de lettres négatives ainsi qu'à un examen des comptes-rendus des auteurs de ces lettres pour identifier des stratégies efficaces (selon le critère d'efficacité défini par la compagnie) de composition de telle correspondance. Ces lettres sont des exemples d'action générique, et elles démontrent que les genres fonctionnent en tant que constellations de stratégies d'improvisation réglementées susceptibles d'être déclenchées par l'interaction entre la socialisation de l'individu et l'organisation. D'ailleurs, ces constellations de ressources expriment une relation chronotopique particulière à l'espace et au temps, et cette relation est toujours axiologique ou dictés par des valeurs. En d'autres termes, les genres expriment les relations espace-temps qui reflètent les croyances sociales courantes concernant le placement des individus et de leurs actions dans l'espace et dans le temps. L'article identifie certaines des stratégies qui caractérisent les messages négatifs efficaces dans cette organisation. Également, il offre une critiques de ces textes-types pour mettre en œuvre un ensemble de pratiques et d'orientation chronotopiques qui visent à l'encontre des intérêts de leurs rédacteurs et de leurs lecteurs.*

*This limited study examines the situated-language practices associated with the production of negative letters in an insurance company. Using genre and sociocultural theories, the study combines textual analyses of a set of negative letters together with writers' accounts of producing these letters to identify effective (as defined by the company) strategies for composing this correspondence. These letters are examples of generic action, and they demonstrate that genres function as constellations of regulated, improvisational strategies triggered by the interaction between individual socialization and an organization. Moreover, these constellations of resources express a particular*

*chronotopic relation to space and time, and this relation is always axiological or value oriented. In other words, genres express space/time relations that reflect current social beliefs regarding the placement and actions of human individuals in space and time. The article identifies some of the strategies that characterize effective negative messages in this organization. It also critiques this text type for enacting a set of practices and related chronotopic orientation that are against the interests of its readers and writers.*

Researcher: Do you think problems exist in this correspondence?

Writer: Yes, there are several problems. The clients get these lengthy letters that are to them filled with technical material. They quickly look over the letter, looking, looking for the decision. They have to figure out difficult contractual and medical language. Finally, they find the decision in the middle of the letter. And it's not what they wanted to hear. They get angry.

Researcher: Can you provide me with a specific case?

Writer: This case right here is particularly difficult because it is based on the client's own perceptions, but we need something more objective. We can't base it on just symptoms. It's hard, too, because there are no alternatives for her.

I know this woman is going to be very adamant on the phone. She's going to want to send me more information. And I know she's going to be upset but civil... The person in me wants to be sympathetic, but the assessor in me has to make a business decision. We walk a fine line all the time.

In this excerpt from interview data that I gathered during a case study of negative messages in a large international insurance company the anonymous writer is an assessor. Her job is to assess insurance claims to determine whether claimants should receive long-term disability (LTD) benefits. This assessor, along with 60 other predominantly female workers in her division, declines, or denies, many of the claims in her caseload. To convey her decision to the claimant, she writes a negative letter that explains the reasons for the decline.

As a researcher in professional communication, I was contacted by two managers of this large insurance company because they believed that many of their assessors were experiencing difficulty with what these managers described as the "grammar" and "tone" of letters refusing LTD benefits. Their concern may also have stemmed from the fact that approximately 66 % of this correspondence is appealed, an expen-

sive situation. Originally the managers just wanted me to conduct workshops focussing on grammar and style. However, I proposed that a study of the correspondence was needed for these reasons: Although existing research suggests that negative correspondence and its reception are important, little empirical research actually exists on the topic; and I could not conduct useful workshops for the assessors unless I understood this correspondence and its process of production.

### **Research on Negative Messages**

In my proposal to the managers, I argued that research into the production and reception of negative messages is important for organizations, writers, and researchers in professional communication. I pointed out that many organizations recognize that negative messages can affect their public relations' efforts. Recipients of bad news, for example, typically tell about 11 people as opposed to the recipients of good news, who tell about 6 other people. Alienating clients or customers can also prove costly because keeping an established customer is five times less expensive than finding a new one (Hart, Heskett, and Sasser). I emphasized that incidents of workplace violence related to rejections, demotions, or dismissals are becoming far too common. Certainly the high level of security at this insurance company as well as the pseudonyms used by its assessors when dealing with clients were indications that this correspondence was a source of anxiety for employees.

Existing research also suggests that this anxiety is real and that writing bad-news letters is, in fact, difficult. One survey of professional secretaries revealed that this group ranked writing refusal letters as extremely difficult and rated both themselves and their bosses weak in terms of their ability to write this correspondence (Lariviere). Other studies confirmed that writing bad-news messages is psychologically difficult. Elizabeth McCord's study of legal discourse demonstrated that many writers experience an emotional need to make readers feel better and thus tend to write negative news either vaguely or to create "false expectations" for readers (189). More pertinent is research on writers in an insurance company who, like the assessors in this study, were required to write numerous rejection letters. As recounted by Theresa Timmons, these writers reported experiencing intense anxiety as they faced frustrated claimants.

Although research on negative messages in professional communication is important, the existing research also is limited. Some research explores organizational and stylistic strategies characteristic of the genre (often using sample letters), but no study has been conducted to date on the situated practices that produce negative messages in the context of an organization. Nor, as Kitty Locker calls for, do studies exist of actual readers reacting to "real rejections" (33). Much of the current research,

in fact, offers conflicting advice regarding the form of negative correspondence. Several researchers (Salerno; Eure; Lariviere) and current textbooks (see Locker for a complete list) advocate an indirect structure consisting of a buffer (a neutral or positive statement intended to soften the impact of the refusal), an explanation of the refusal, the refusal, and a closing section that attempts to end the correspondence on a positive note. Other researchers (Brent; Scott and Green; Locker) opt for a more direct approach, one that places the refusal much closer to the top of the correspondence. Otherwise, they argue, readers feel that they are being manipulated. Certainly Locker's research on the impact of "buffers" on readers suggests that this strategy should not be routinely used. At the same time, research also exists that indicates that, despite this advice, the traditional, indirect form is, in fact, routinely used. Marcia Mascolini reported that 94 % of her sample of 49 letters from nine companies followed the traditional format of using a buffer.

Other researchers have examined the stylistic features of negative messages from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Several studies focus on the politeness strategies that writers of negative messages often feel compelled to use. Using Grice's theory of conversational implicature, Kathryn Riley explains how writers can use "indirectness" to convey negative information (102). Rather than directly stating bad news, she advises writers to help readers infer bad news to help readers "save face" (98). Using insights from speech act theory, Kim Sydow Campbell categorizes in ascending order of difficulty five universal strategies for politely refusing requests in the hopes of expanding the repertoire that students and instructors can access. She asserts that writers can deny that a requested item exists, deny that they can perform the required task, deny that the requested task is possible, provide explanations as to why they cannot do the requested task, and explain why the requested task is not in the requestor's best interests (372). Finally, other studies provide advice to help overcome the structural complexity associated with a genre that begins with a positive emphasis (the buffer) and then moves to negative action. Thomas Wiseman, for example, provides useful advice regarding the transitions needed to traverse the different sections of a traditional bad-news letter. None of these studies, however, looked at actual negative letters produced within the context of an organization.

For some time, researchers in professional communication have been calling for situated, contextual studies of communication within organizations. Certainly Stephen Doheny-Farina makes a strong case for using qualitative methods to gather information about organizational context. Graham Smart in his work on banking and Anthony Paré's on social workers have provided detailed accounts of the communication practices of these workplace writers. However, no such account exists for insurance writers or for writers who have to write negative letters as the focus of their job.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, using the available literature, I persuaded the managers that neither I nor anybody else really knew what “effective” writing meant in terms of negative correspondence. To develop the workshops they requested, I needed the opportunity to figure out what “effective” writing meant by studying the writing and production practices associated with negative correspondence in their company. The managers agreed to my proposal, and I implemented the following study designed to illuminate the situated-language practices that constituted the production of this text type in this insurance company. Using genre and sociocultural theories, I explored these texts in their context by bringing together a critical textual analysis of a set of negative letters and participant accounts of the production of those letters.

### **Research questions**

The following overarching questions, one descriptive and the other critical, helped focus this study.

1. What did the managers and writers in this company mean by an “effective” negative letter?
2. Did I, as a researcher, believe that these letters were “effective”?

I then developed, the following subset of research questions aimed at producing descriptive accounts of what participants accepted as “effective” practice in the context of this insurance company.

- What constellation of strategies constituted this genre?
- What constellation of strategies distinguished “effective” from “ineffective” negative letters?

A related subset of questions concerns the context in which these letters were produced.

- How were these letters actually produced?
- What material resources (computer programs, files, already preformulated sections) did these writers have access to?
- What training did the writers receive?
- What kinds of assistance did the writers have access to?

At the same time, however, I wanted to go beyond descriptions of what counted as “effective” practice to a critique of those practices. As an outsider to this organization but as an insider to several communities of research such as rhetoric and composition, professional writing, and, most specifically, genre research, I wanted to find out if this correspondence was “effective” from my perspective. Using current research in genre theory (Miller; Bakhtin; Schryer “Genre and Power”), discourse analysis (Hodge and Kress; Fairclough; Stillar), and socio-cultural criticism (Giddens; Bourdieu; Lemke), I asked a third subset of more critical questions:

- What kinds of chronotopic orientations or forms of symbolic order did these text types reproduce?
- What kind of agency did these text types enact for readers and writers?

These questions derived from the following theoretical orientation and shaped a project which aimed to explore the relationship of this text-type, negative messages, in the context of a specific organization—an insurance company.

### **Theoretical Orientation**

These research questions reflect a synthesis of genre and sociocultural theory that redefines genres as constellations of regulated, improvisational strategies triggered by the interaction between individual socialization, or “habitus” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 139), and an organization, or “field” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 17). To echo Jay Lemke, as constellations of flexible yet constrained resources, genres function as “trajectory entities” (12), or sets of strategies, that agents use to mutually negotiate or improvise their way through time and space. Moreover, these constellations of resources, as Mikhail Bakhtin (“Forms”) suggests, often express a particular relation to space and time, and this relation is always axiological, or value oriented. In other words, genres express space/time relations that reflect current social beliefs regarding the placement and actions of human individuals in space and time. Bakhtin calls this expression of place, time, and human values the “chronotope” (“Forms” 84). In each chronotope, differing sets of values are attached to human agency. Agents in some chronotopes have more access to meaningful action or power than in other chronotopes.

This definition of genres as constellations of regulated, improvisational strategies with chronotopic orientations frames the design of the critical questions addressed in this article. However, the key terms might not be familiar to researchers in professional communication. Consequently, I provide here a key word analysis of this definition and then locate it within the current discussions in genre and sociocultural

theory. The key word “constellation” allowed me to conceptualize genres as flexible sets of reoccurring practices (textual and nontextual). Early in the research I noted that the texts that my participants labeled as negative messages used, in fact, a range of different strategies. At the same time, I also noticed that some strategies were never used. They seemed to be outside the constellation, or resources, that writers could access.

The next key phrase, “regulated, improvisational strategies”, might seem inherently contradictory. How can a set of practices be both regulated and improvisational? In fact, however, we are familiar with this phenomenon. Jazz musicians regularly work with a set of conventions around which and within which they improvise. I am contending that genres work in much the same way. The term “strategies” is also central as it allowed me to reconceptualize rules and conventions (terms that seem to preclude choice) as strategies (a term that connotes choice) and thus explore questions related to agency. From this perspective I was able to ask whether certain strategies seemed to characterize “effective” letters.

Finally, the term “chronotope”—the expression of place, time, and human values—allowed me to question the fundamental social and ideological action at work in this text type. Just as jazz musicians lay down a theme and thus create a trajectory for a piece of music, so also genres create patterns of action (for an analysis of the very different chronotope at work in the experimental article see Schryer “Genre/Time Space”).

## Genre research

This definition of genre reflects recent developments in genre theory and research. Researchers in professional communication have only lately turned their attention to this body of research (see Rude; Forman and Rymer). However, genre researchers have for some time focused on professional communication. Patrick Dias and his colleagues, for example, provide detailed accounts of genres in areas as diverse as law, architecture, banking and social work. JoAnne Yates and Wanda Orlikowski examine genres of organizational communication. I turned to recent research in genre to help me develop a theoretical orientation and methodological framework that would allow both descriptive and critical accounts of these text types in their workplace context.

Genre researchers work within either a rhetorical or a linguistic tradition. The rhetorical tradition tends to focus on providing ethnographic accounts of the impact of context on texts. The linguistic tradition tends to focus on providing language-based analysis of sets of texts. Both traditions have recently been critiqued for their tendency toward descriptive, acritical research (see Luke). In response, many genre

theorists are moving toward perspectives that permit critical accounts, particularly of the way power circulates within texts and organizations. I argue that researchers in professional communication need to develop research projects that combine contextual and textual approaches. We need genre research that provides both participant accounts as well as analytical, close readings of texts that instantiate a genre. Based on such accounts, I believe that we will be able to document more closely the resources available to a genre and interrogate the way agents strategically use genres and their resources in specific contexts. Consequently, we will be able to see more clearly the relationship between genres and issues of power.

### *Rhetorical Theories of Genre*

North American genre theory emerged from discussions on texts sharing commonalities of form (Black), audience (Mohrmann and Leff), and rhetorical situations (Windt; Ware and Linkugel; Halloran). In her seminal article "Genre as Social Action," Carolyn Miller moved the discussion away from a focus on textual similarities toward a more pragmatic understanding of genre—as forms of social action. To make this move, Miller defined genres as typical responses to recurrent rhetorical situations. Of course, the only people who can label a situation as "recurrent" or a response as "typical" are the social actors involved in that social setting. Consequently, Miller acknowledged that the impulse toward genre classification, or the tendency for people in social settings to identify text types as the ways they accomplished tasks, was inherently "ethnomethodological" (155). In effect, Miller reconceptualized genre theory by bringing to the forefront the issue of social context. To her credit, however, Miller balanced this focus on context with a continuing emphasis on the necessity that genres have "recurrent patterns of language use" (163). She did not lose sight of the fact that genres are texts in their contexts.

Although some composition researchers (see Devitt) have brought genre theory into university classrooms, empirical researchers in professional communication have most profited from and most developed Miller's linking of genres to social contexts. My own work, for example, explored the relationship between the genre of medical records and a veterinary college ("Records" and "The Lab"). Using insights from Miller, Bakhtin ("The Problem"), and Dorothy Smith, I noted that these records are evolving, dynamic entities that both shape and are shaped by their users. To echo the flexible yet powerful effect of these texts on their social contexts, I conceptualized them as genres or as "stabilized-for-now or stabilized-enough sites of social and ideological action" ("Records" 200). The major contribution of this work was that it revealed both the dynamic nature of genres and their ability to reflect and shape tacit social values—what Raymond Williams so aptly called "common sense" (38).



In his qualitative study of genre-affected reading practices, Smart explored the relationship between the social context of a major Canadian bank and several reoccurring text types or genres that shaped executives' reading practices and thus the writing practices of their subordinates. In his study, Smart assumed that "a genre can usefully be conceived as a distinctive profile of regularities across three dimensions: a set of written texts, the composing processes involved in producing these texts, and the reading practices used to interpret them" (127). In a related comparative study of the predisposition report produced by social workers in a social service agency and the automation proposal characteristic of a large Canadian bank, Paré and Smart built on Smart's original definition to redefine genres by adding a fourth dimension, "the social roles performed by writers and readers" (147). This research tradition has resulted in several important contributions: a theorization of the nature of context (defined as production and reception regimes) and a detailed examination of regularities between texts and between texts and their contexts. What this research tradition, however, tends not to do, until recently (see Coe et al.; Schryer, "Genre and Power"), is provide critiques of the texts or genres located within organizations, or the processes that produce these texts.

### *Linguistic Theories of Genre*

If rhetorical theorists have been focusing on the importance of context, linguists have been focusing on textual analysis of sets of texts. Linguists such as Gunther Kress, J. R. Martin, and Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis as well as John Swales and Vijay Bhatia have been working within theoretical frameworks that allow them to document the linguistic resources (e. g., conventions, formal structure, recurring stylistic features) available within different genres. Another important difference between the rhetorical and linguistic approaches is their motivations. From its inception the rhetorical tradition focused on genres from different discourse communities such as medicine, banking, and architecture. Much of the motivation for this research tradition seemed focused on explaining the discursive strategies of professional communication. On the other hand, linguistic researchers were motivated by a concern for school literacy. Consequently, much of their research centered on recording the conventions associated with different genres deemed important in school settings or in documenting conventions operating in professional contexts so that English as a second language speakers could more easily acquire these genres.

Unlike the rhetorical tradition, the linguistic tradition has experienced much more internal controversy— not only from differing concepts of genre but also from differing views on the pedagogical implications of genre research. The linguistic tradition for the most part derives from the work of M. A. K. Halliday and Ruqaiya

Hasan and their theory of systemic functional linguistics. Halliday and Hasan, intent on producing a practical linguistics, one that facilitated a systematic, close reading of the ways language works, developed the concept of “register” (38) to describe the way a constellation of linguistic features worked together. Register analysis, as Cope and Kalantzis explained, explores the “interrelation of field, or what a text is about; tenor, which explains the interpersonal relations in text; and mode, which demonstrates how the text interacts with the world” (14). For Halliday and Hasan and later for Kress, however, genre or register analysis had two important characteristics. First, genre analysis was not a way to classify texts into formal categories, but a “tool for analysing texts in their infinite variety and subtle variations” (Cope and Kalantzis 14). Second, Halliday and Hasan and Kress argued that an important distinction exists between texts and their contexts. The social context cannot be collapsed into a text; rather, context and text are separate yet related entities. This insight suggests that genre researchers must develop research programs that gather data regarding the textual features of specific genres and the social context that both shapes and is shaped by genres.

Martin, although adopting much of Halliday and Hasan’s theoretical model, broke with these last two points. According to Martin, critical readers, using a semiotic analysis, could locate and describe all the linguistics features of a set of texts or genre and thus could codify the linguistic characteristics of a genre. Furthermore, Martin argued critical readers could also discover all they needed to know about social context in the text. Consequently, resources used to address the social context could also be identified and codified. These two breaks had important pedagogical consequences. In the pedagogy derived from this position, students were given detailed models to work with as they wrote in school genres such as the report or the story. Furthermore, these models were often viewed as fixed products, not as flexible sets of resources that should vary according to social contexts. As Hasan suggested, this approach leads all too easily to a “structural formalism which does not reflect the fluid social and textual relations that characterize text in context” (qtd. in Cope and Kalantzis 14).

To a large extent, then, genre researchers have adopted a text-in-context approach to examining recurring linguistic events. However, depending on their orientation, they have emphasized descriptive accounts of either context (rhetorical approaches) or text (linguistic approaches). At this time researchers (Luke; Freedman and Medway *Genre and the New Rhetoric*) are calling for theoretical and methodological models that allow genre theorists to account for both contextual and textual practices in a more critical way.

## Sociocultural Theory

Theoretical models are emerging that accept as a basic premise that dialectical relationships exist between individuals and their social groups and between language and society. Structuration theorists such as Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu explore the relationship between social structure and individual agency. Bakhtin explores the relationship between the language and individual expression. Both perspectives helped shape the critical approach required for this project.

### *Structuration Theories*

Both Giddens and Bourdieu note the recursive, dialectical relationship between social structures and agents. Agents reproduce social structures at the same time that these social structures shape agents. JoAnne Yates and Wanda Orlikowski note, for example, that genres, such as proposals, often function in organizations as “social institutions that both shape and are shaped by individuals’ communicative actions” (300). According to Giddens, structures consist of organized sets of “rules and resources” that both constrain and enable social action (118). Bourdieu agrees with Giddens as to the “double structuration” (Harker, Mahar and Wilkes 202) wherein social structures affect their users as their users reproduce them. However, as Richard Harker, Cheleen Mahar, and Chris Wilkes observe, Bourdieu substitutes the notion of “strategy” for the notion of rules and resources (202). “People,” Harker and his colleagues note, “adopt strategies which are the result of other social practices; they do not adopt rules” (202). This notion of strategy allows Bourdieu to escape the narrow structuralist confines implied by the concept of “rules” and provides social actors with more agency. As a result of their socialization, or “habitus,” agents can improvise strategically to advance their own interests. Bourdieu thus provides a better understanding of how power operates within organizations, or “fields.” As a result of their socialization, agents have more or less access to different sets of strategies. This access allows them to improvise more or less effectively in different organizational contexts.

To date, researchers in professional writing have had little opportunity to observe applications of Bourdieu’s methods and concepts (see, however, Oakes Townley and Cooper’s study of symbolic violence in the workplace and Dias et al’s multiple case study of workplaces). As the following review of Bourdieu’s interrelated concepts of habitus and field indicates, Bourdieu’s insights offer rich theoretical material for genre researchers in professional contexts.

**Habitus.** The concept of “habitus” best captures Bourdieu’s vision of how human agency interacts with structure. John Thompson, quoting Bourdieu, explains:

The habitus is a set of *dispositions* which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are “regular” without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any rule...Dispositions are acquired through a gradual process of *inculcation*...the dispositions produced thereby are also *structured* in the sense that they unavoidably reflect the social condition within which they were acquired. (12)

Habitus thus describes the sociophysical and sociocognitive process wherein we all acquire our practical logic, our problem-solving strategies, and our linguistic capacities. This socialization process quite literally shapes the way we perceive and interact with our social worlds. Habitus, a product of prior and ongoing social experiences (especially group or institutional experiences such as the family, schools, or organizations), creates an individual social potential or social trajectory. Loic Wacquant describes the relationship between habitus and practical logic as follows:

The “practical sense” *precognizes*; it reads in the present state the possible states with which the field is pregnant. For in habitus, the past, the present and the future intersect and interpenetrate one another. Habitus may be understood as virtual “sedimented situations” ... lodged inside the body waiting to be reactivated. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 23)

In other words, social agents, as a result of their previous social experiences, are primed (or not) to respond to exigencies presented by different social situations. For Bourdieu, habitus, especially linguistic habitus, affects perception, classification systems, and prepares individuals for more or fewer opportunities as they encounter distinctive fields or linguistic markets (such as disciplines or specific organizations).

**Field.** Just as Bourdieu has been working toward a dynamic understanding of agency so he has also been working toward a dynamic understanding of organizations or what we might formerly have called discourse communities. The concept of “field” or “market” or “game” is his way of conceptualizing disciplines, organizations, or social systems. For Bourdieu, society is not a seamless totality, but rather an “ensemble of relatively autonomous spheres of play” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 17). A game, market, or field is a “structured space of positions in which the positions and their interrelations are determined by the distributions of different kinds of resources or capital” (Bourdieu 14).

As Bourdieu explains, agents in each field are in the constant process of attempting to distinguish their field from other markets and thus acquire more recognition, or symbolic power, and a better position vis-à-vis other fields. At the same time, agents

within fields are also jockeying for positions within their field trying to win better positions for themselves. An agent's position within a field is determined by the agent's access to three different forms of power or capital: economic (material wealth), cultural (knowledge, skills, and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications), and social (accumulated prestige or honor) (Thompson 14). Bourdieu's model highlights the workings of power between and within different social spaces or fields.

In other words, agents are structured by their experiences within a field. At the same time they also structure or reproduce those fields but not in purely reductive ways. Rather, because agents occupy different positions within their fields (and thus have different access to power) and because fields themselves occupy different positions in relation to each other, agents enact different strategies (although only within a specific range). Bourdieu calls these regulated, improvisational strategies, triggered by the interaction between habitus and field "the logic of practice" (qtd. in Robbins 112).

Linguistic habitus, or agents' improvisational "feel for the game" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 129), consists then of the strategies that agents can access in order to enhance and distinguish their own position and thus play the game successfully. Language, particularly that aspect of language called style, is deeply implicated in this struggle to play the game successfully. Bourdieu observes that "style exists only in relation to agents endowed with schemes of perception and appreciation that enable them to constitute it as a set of systematic differences" (39). Furthermore, this process of differentiation, or style production is deeply implicated in the reproduction of symbolic power. Bourdieu notes that

This production of instruments of production, such as rhetorical devices, genres, legitimate styles, and manners and, more generally, all the formulations destined to be "authoritative" and to be cited as examples of "good usage", confers on those who engage it a power over language.  
(58)

As instruments of production, some genres, especially those enacted by well-positioned agents in well-positioned fields such as education and medicine, can reproduce forms of symbolic power that can literally shape their receivers' views of the world. These genres are, in Bourdieu's terms, "symbolic structures":

As instruments of knowledge and communication, "symbolic structures" can exercise a structuring power only because they themselves are structured. Symbolic power is a power of constructing reality, and one which

tends to establish a *gnoseological* order: the immediate meaning of the world (and in particular of the social world) depends on what Durkheim calls *logical conformism*, that is “a homogeneous conception of time, space, number, and cause, one which makes it possible for different intellects to reach agreement.” (166)

From Bourdieu’s perspective, then, genres can be seen as constellations of regulated, improvisational strategies triggered by the interaction between individual socialization, or “habitus”, and an organization or “field”. At the same time, he also suggests that some genres can function as “symbolic structures” that reflect gnoseological systems, or deeply shared worldviews, based on common perceptions of space and time. Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope (“Forms”), however, clarifies this insight.

### *Chronotopic Theory*

Bakhtin suggests that every genre expresses a particular relation to space and time, and this relation is always axiological. In other words, every genre expresses space/time relations that reflect current social beliefs regarding the placement and actions of human individuals in space and time. Bakhtin calls this expression of place, time and human values the “chronotope” (“Forms”). The workings of the chronotope become clearer as Bakhtin applies them to text-types. For example, he examined the chronotope in Greek adventure romances in which two lovers are separated by chance, endure a set of impossible adventures in distant lands, and then are reunited, totally unchanged by their experiences. Bakhtin points out that as soon as adventure time begins, time stands still for the protagonists although space expands. This space, however, is abstract; the places the protagonists are sent to are marked only by strangeness or difference; the places have no social or cultural connections to specific peoples or groups. Time and change only begin again when the protagonists return to their own place, their traditional Greek culture. Individual protagonists have an abstract identity in these types of Greek novels, and as characters they are totally subject to chance. Their identities cannot change; they remain unaffected by their experiences.

Bakhtin contrasts this chronotope with a very different chronotope at work in metamorphosis stories. In these accounts, protagonists are also subject to chance. Yet they are often responsible for the crisis that precipitates their fate, and they learn from their experiences. In each chronotope, differing sets of values are attached to human agency. Agents in some chronotopes have more access to meaningful action than in other chronotopes.

In an effort once to explain chronotopes, or socially constructed time/spaces, to a class, I asked the students to consider the classroom space that we were occupying. The room was a long rectangle, wider than it was deep. A black board covered the front part of the room, with the instructor's desk positioned in the center. A single door allowed entry from the side of the room, and the opposite side was occupied with windows covered by black curtains. Tables with chairs facing the front of the room were provided for the students. As we considered the room, certain tendencies became evident. The designers of the room evidently believed that all validated information came from the center front of the room. All the sight lines of the room were oriented in that direction; people on the far side of the room could not see people on the other side of the room. More important, those located on either side of the room had difficulty hearing each other because of the presence of a ventilator shaft located at the back. Only sound emanating from the front of the room could be heard by all. The placement of the tables and chairs also supported this orientation. Time, too, had a salient presence in this room. The room itself was spartan, the chairs uncomfortable, and a clock was positioned above the board at the center of the room. Clearly, we were expected to spend little time in this room. We could, of course, try to make this time/space more flexible. We did hold workshops, but inevitably groups had to report their findings from the front of the room, and, of course, the time constraints (as anyone in an educational institute knows) were inescapable. Our access to various forms of action were constrained by physical limitations of the socially defined time/space that we occupied.

Just as certain locations have chronotopic orientations, so do specific text types. Each genre has a different trajectory, a different potential for producing worldviews and representing human agency. In my view, all genres operate in this fashion. They function as discourse formations or constellations of strategies that instantiate a common sense understanding of time and space that can affect their writers or readers. We can become habituated to these constellations of strategies and fail to see both the possibilities for or constraints on human action that they enact.

In effect, then, I am suggesting that when we address the issue of genre and power, we also need to explore a genre's relationship to time and space. In particular, we need to examine the possibilities for human action that exist within specific chronotopes. Genres are forms of "symbolic power" (Bourdieu 163) and could be forms of "symbolic violence" (139) if they create time/spaces that work against their users' best interests and if their users perceive them as naturalized or as "just the way we do things around here." One of the purposes of genre research, then, should be to catch a glimpse of the "chronotopic unconscious" or "set of unspoken assumptions about space and

time that are so fundamental that they lie even deeper (and therefore may ultimately be more determining) than the prejudices imposed by ideology" (Holquist 142).

## Method

The theoretical orientation of this project and my desire to conduct a text-in-context study necessitated some careful thought about methodology and the implications of research design.

### *Methodology Reconsidered*

I believe that we need research studies that bring the insights of both streams of genre research into the same project and that we already have many of the tools from both traditions to do so. From the rhetorical tradition, the emphasis on ethnographic, qualitative projects (see Dias et al) has led to detailed studies on the context of genre production and reception. From the linguistic tradition, we have not only the work of descriptive linguists such as Swales and the many researchers he has influenced (e. g., Connor and Mauranen; Holmes; Skulstad), but also the work of critical discourse analysts such as Fairclough, Hodge and Kress, and Stillar, all of whom provide ways to analyze the linguistic features of specific texts. What we lack is an overall framework in which to conduct such studies.

Bourdieu suggests a methodology that combines both types of analyses in order to undercover the structures that maintain and reproduce power. His methodology, called "social praxeology" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 11), consists of two crucial steps:

First, we push aside mundane representations to construct the objective structures (spaces of *positions*), the distribution of socially efficient resources that define the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations. Second, we reintroduce the immediate, lived experience of agents in order to explicate the categories of perception and appreciation. (11)

From the perspective of genre research, the first step entails the close reading of texts that instantiate genres to describe and critique the strategies that some genres activate to represent power. The second step involves acknowledging the practical logic or problem-solving techniques that social agents employ in different contexts. As Bourdieu makes clear, although both steps are necessary, the first step takes priority. In other words, disciplinary forms of analysis are crucial and lead to what he calls "objectivist" analysis (11). However, Bourdieu is not invoking the objective paradigm



of truth and validity to which feminist researchers and postmodernists have so rightly objected. Bourdieu sees disciplinary forms of analysis as situated language practices that themselves require reflection to see what values and ideologies they espouse.

Bourdieu also insists researchers must analyze agents' practical knowledge, or "phronesis" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 128), for two reasons. First, in order for researchers to understand what passes for common sense, or decorum, or "the way we do things around here," this intuitive "feel for the game" set of improvisational strategies must be articulated (128). And, second, when the operations of the logic of practice are articulated, agents can sometimes acquire "tools for distinguishing zones of necessity and of freedom, and thereby for identifying spaces open to moral action" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 49). This moment of reflexivity occurs when social agents themselves can become more aware of the social within them and more capable of controlling their own categories of thought and action.

### **Methodology for This Project—Or What Really Happened**

As John Swales and Priscilla Rogers report in their study of mission statements, organizations can sometimes strenuously resist study of sensitive correspondence. The managers of this large, international insurance company did agree reluctantly to a case study of their correspondence but imposed several constraints: I was the only researcher permitted to conduct the study; only a limited set of assessors, selected by management, could be interviewed; and the company would approve the questions that I would ask the assessors. I also negotiated with the company a contract in which I would be allowed to publish the results of the study with their approval. In fact, the company's lawyers have approved the published results of the study. Their primary concern was that the company remain anonymous.

The company did not require an ethical review of this project. Consequently, I built in my own ethical procedures, according to the standards of my university. I asked to interview only writers whom the company identified as effective. A comparison between information provided by effective writers and information provided by less effective writers might have produced even more triangulated data. However, I was concerned about the ethical implications of management classifying writers in this fashion. I also returned a draft copy of the interview transcript to each participant and asked each of them for additions and corrections. A final version of the transcript was then returned to each participant. All identifying information (clients' and doctors' names) was removed from the letters, and all participants were provided with pseudonyms.

Working within these constraints and based on my own background as a genre researcher in professional communication, I developed the following methodology. To create an external, objective account of these letters I asked the managers to provide a set of actual decline letters that they considered representative of the range of skills of all their assessors. Of the 26 letters they provided, I asked them to label four letters in total as “effective” or “ineffective” and to leave the rest uncategorized and in random order (see Appendices A and B for example effective and ineffective letters). After examining the labeled letters, I then sorted the letters into three sets: one set I hypothesized contained effective letters; the next set contained average letters; and the last set contained ineffective letters. I then brought pairs of letters (without labels) to each interview and asked participants to tell me which letter they considered more effective and their reasons for their decision. In this way I confirmed my hypothetical ranking of the letters. I then subjected six of these letters (two letters from each category) to three kinds of external, objective analyse—readability, rhetorical organization, and critical discourse analyse to find out what strategies characterized this discourse in general and what constellation of strategies seemed aligned with “effective” versus “ineffective” negative correspondence as these classifications were understood in this company. At the same time, of course, I was building “theory triangulation” (Janesick 215) into the project by analyzing one set of data from various perspectives.

To balance my analysis with “constructivist” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 11) or subjective accounts of the “logic of practice” (Robbins 102-103), I conducted semistructured interviews with three assessors—Bev, Kala, and Iona—whom managers considered effective. All were middle aged women between 30 and 40 years old. Bev was in a lower-management position and worked full-time. Kala and Iona worked part-time (as did many of the other assessors). During the interviews (about two hours per interview in length) I asked all three participants the same questions (see Appendix 3) as well as unstructured follow-up questions raised by their answers. As noted earlier, I also used the interviews to test my growing understanding of what effective negative correspondence meant in the context of this organization. I gave each participant a pair of letters and asked her to explain which one she considered more effective and her reasons for her choice. In each case the participant confirmed my own judgement although her explanation often differed quite radically from my own. For security reasons, these interviews were not tape-recorded; rather, they were recorded using a traditional anthropological technique, reconstructed field notes (see Lofland). I took detailed notes as participants spoke, and then as soon as possible after the interview I

reconstructed the conversation in the first person (see the interview excerpt at the beginning of this article for an example of this technique). These transcripts were then returned to the participants for their commentary and corrections.

The results of this research were reported to the company via an internal report and to the other writers/assessors via workshops that aimed at sharing more effective strategies with all assessors. In two of the interviews, participants used the expression “walking a fine line” to describe the difficulties they experienced as they composed this correspondence—that is, as they tried to access the constellation of resources needed to write effective negative letters in the context of their organization.

## Results

In presenting the results of this limited case study, I have followed Bourdieu’s methodology in that each external, objective analysis is followed by the participants’ accounts and explanations of their own practices. A reading back and forth between these two forms of textual and contextual sources of information and analysis provides a complex look at the workings of one genre in one organizational context.

### *Readability Analysis*

Readability formulas are now rarely used in research and certainly not in the way they were used in this study. These tools claim to assess the grade level of texts by formulas that note the relationship between the number of syllables in words and sentence lengths in 100-word samples. The higher the score (as a result of longer words and sentences), the presumed greater level of difficulty. As Thomas Duffy observes, these measures do not account for individual comprehension, for the background information that readers bring to texts, nor for the typographical and graphical features of texts that can improve readability. If used at all in current research projects (see Hoke; Johnson et al. ) readability formulas are accompanied by other measures.

I used readability analysis on these letters for several reasons. From my first reading of the letters, I was struck by what I perceived as a stylistic inconsistency between the paragraphs explaining policy and the rest of the letters. Those sections seemed convoluted and abstract. From the beginning of the project I knew that I wanted to argue that the policy sections needed revision, and I wanted a way to measure that inconsistency that management would understand. Although readability formulas are not well regarded within the field of professional communication, many people outside of our field still refer to and understand the basic point of readability formulas—that

complex styles are more difficult to read than simple styles. Using readability formulas for this admittedly rhetorical purpose seemed reasonable especially since I was balancing this analysis with two other more sophisticated forms of analyse.

I applied Edward Fry's readability measure to six letters that were randomly selected from the full set of 26 letters. Fry's measure was selected because it is as reliable as any other readability formula but far easier to apply than most. Fry presents his formula in the form of a set of instructions and a graph that clearly aligns readability scores with grade levels (249). In accordance with readability research conventions, the measure was applied to a set of texts; however, unlike standard readability procedures, the measure was actually used to score sections within the letters rather than the whole text.

Specifically, I submitted each selected letter to two readability analyses. In each case, following Fry's procedure, I selected a 100-word sample from the section explaining policy and another 100-word sample from the sections detailing the medical record or explaining the refusal. Even in my first readings of these letters I was struck by the internal stylistic inconsistencies between the sections. For instance, here are two sections about policy from two different letters from which I selected 100-word samples:

### **Policy Section: Example A**

In order to receive benefits under this policy, you must be considered to be totally disabled. Totally disabled means that the member has a medically determinable physical or mental impairment due to injury or disease which prevents her from performing the regular duties of ANY occupation, in ANY setting:

- for which she has at least minimum qualifications, and
- that provides an income that is equal to or greater than the amount of monthly disability benefit payable under this provision adjusted annually by the Consumer Price Index.

The availability of work does not affect the determination of totally disabled (Letter 18).

### **Policy Section: Example B**

The group plan states, in part:

During the two-year period immediately following the date the member becomes totally disabled, total disability means that the member has medically determinable physical or mental impairment due to injury or illness, which prevents her from performing the regular duties of the occupation in which she participated just before the disability started.

After the two-year period, totally disabled means the member has a medically determinable physical or mental impairment due to injury or illness, which prevents her from performing the duties of ANY occupation:

1. for which she is or may become fitted through education, training or experience, and
2. that provides an income that is equal to or greater than the amount of monthly disability benefit payable under this provision, adjusted annually by the Consumer Price Index. (Letter 1)

On average in the 6 letters tested, readability scores indicated that these sections were rated well over grade 16 (fourth year college). In fact, the scores for these sections were so high that they frequently went beyond Fry's graph.

Other sections in the letters differed in complexity. For example, in reviewing the medical documentation, one writer notes the following:

According to the information we have received, you have been unable to perform the duties of your occupation of Assistant Store Manager due to the symptoms of arthritis. The arthritis has limited your ability to stand, walk, bend and lift (Letter 18).

Another letter reads "We have noted that you have had some recent improvement in the symptomatology of your condition, i. e. , grip strength, stiffness, and joint assessment (Letter 25)." In fact, the readability rating for these sections in the 6 letters analyzed ranged between grade 10 and first-year college, with the average between grades 11 and 12. This finding suggested that readability was inconsistent within letters, with the policy sections being far more difficult to read than other sections. However, only when I interviewed the writers, did I begin to understand the complex nature of this inconsistency.

### *What Participants Said*

All three participants I interviewed believed that the readers did not understand the policy section. As Bev, the manager, noted, "People read these letters over quickly. They stumble through the contractual language and can't figure out why the decision was made." As Kala added, "We have to work with contract language so the letters get too contract like." Yet all the participants contended that these sections were absolutely necessary. Bev explained, "We are obligated to provide the contractual language. Clients have often only seen watered down versions of the group plan. Many have never seen the actual language of the group plan." The interview data also revealed that these participants identified as experienced and effective writers by their managers, also preferred a less complex style when given the choice. When presented with two pairs of letters, one of which had a higher readability score in the non policy sections, these writers selected the letter with the lower readability score.

### *What Do These Findings Mean?*

Interview data from the participants about the process of composing this correspondence reveals some of the context maintaining the policy section. These assessors worked within an e-mail program and were required to import several possible variations of the policy section into their document.

In fact, the policy section demonstrates dramatically Giddens's and Bourdieu's point that a practice can be both a resource and a constraint. This section was easy for assessors to include because it was preformulated, and they could quickly import it into their letters. At the same time, this section constrained the assessors because they knew many of their readers did not understand it and that it would generate phone calls that the assessors dreaded receiving. Also the policy section often affected the rest of the letter. Echoes of policy language are present, for example, in the underlined section of this sample: "According to the information we have received, *you have been unable to perform the duties of your occupation of Assistant Store Manager due to the symptoms of arthritis*" (Letter 18). The underlined section echoes the policy definition of total disability which states that "totally disabled means that the member has a medically determinable physical or mental impairment due to injury or disease which prevents her from *performing the regular duties of ANY occupation, in ANY setting*" (Letter 18).

Yet the assessors had some choices and had discovered some strategies that, in their view, made the letters more effective. All the participants interviewed agreed that simply quoting the plan verbatim (as in Example B) was a viable but less effective practice than that of importing one of the shorter versions (as in Example A). They

had also discovered company-approved ways to slightly alter the policy sections. By including the gender of the reader or by using a “you” tone, they could slightly personalize the section. In the following example, the writer has attempted to moderate the tone of this admittedly intimidating section by using both strategies:

Under the terms of this Plan Document, in order to qualify for benefits, you must be considered totally disabled. “Totally disabled” means that the member has a medically determinable physical or mental impairment due to injury or disease which prevents her from performing the essential duties of the occupation in which she participated just before the disability started. (Letter 11)

Even though the syntax is simpler and the readability score is a little lower in this section, some strategies clearly were considered outside of the constellation of strategies that writers could access. In all of the correspondence that I examined, the sentence “Totally disabled means that the member has a medically determinable physical or mental impairment” was never written as “Totally disabled means that you have a medically determinable physical or mental impairment.” Presumably, suggesting that the reader/claimant might have an impairment was not allowed.

Although readability measures such as Fry’s provide only limited information regarding reading levels in texts, managers are often more convinced by quantitative rather than qualitative measures. Using Fry’s readability scoring allowed me to prove that the reading levels in the policy section were well beyond the abilities of most readers and that the letters were stylistically inconsistent for reasons beyond the assessors’ control. The assessors were required by management to import these legally approved sections into their letters. In my report to management I argued that the policy section needed to be revised or perhaps even included as an insert.

However, according to management, revising this section or including it as an insert was impossible. Claimants, they argued, had rarely seen the actual provisions in their own policies, and, if inserts were used, the company could never actually prove that the insert had been included in the letter. Revising the policy section would, in fact, require revising the wording in their actual set of insurance policies, and they were not prepared to undertake this admittedly large task.

## Rhetorical Organization Analysis

In his work on genre, Rick Coe points out that genres have formal or structural properties that function as “incipient actions” or “potential actions waiting for an activating situation” (183). These negative letters support Coe’s insight that genres often function heuristically; they function like moves that writers follow. For exam-

ple, all 26 letters in the data set followed the traditional structure of negative messages: a neutral buffer opening, the explanation for the decision, the decision, and a closing section. In these letters the explanation was divided into two sections. The first section explained company policy and the second explained why the medical evidence did not support the reader's claim for disability under company policy.

#### What Participants Said

As noted earlier, available research on this traditional structure of negative messages is slender and contradictory. No research study exists that actually tests this organizational structure on readers. In fact, anecdotal evidence suggests that readers skim down to the decision and then return to struggle through the explanation (Brent). Oddly enough the assessors in the company also believed that readers read this way. Iona reported:

The clients get these lengthy letters that are to them filled with technical material. They quickly look over the letter, looking, looking for the decision. They have to figure out difficult contractual and medical language. Finally, they find the decision in the middle of the letter. And it's not what they wanted to hear. They get angry.

Evidence also suggests that alternate structures do exist for negative messages. As Scott and Green report, British negative letters tend to be far more direct than their North American counterparts. Yet, at this international insurance company, both writers and managers believed that the traditional structure (buffer, explanation, decision, closing) was the only way to compose these letters. As Bev explained, after the introduction, "all we do is go over the contractual definition, explain the medical evidence, and then say sorry that you didn't like the decision." The other writers all agreed that this structure was the only way to write this correspondence even though Bev admitted that the company had never tested its letters on readers.

Again, interview data revealed that this heuristic is supported by the company computer system. The assessors worked within an e-mail shell or template that generated the traditional structure of the "negative letter," and they were required by their managers to follow that structure. The irony here is that our own pedagogy may be maintaining an outmoded system. The major organizational structure still advocated in many text books is comprised of a neutral opening section ( thebuffer), an explanation of the decision, the decision, and a closing section. And Kala noted,



I took a letter writing course when I first got here and they told us to put in a neutral opening, then explain the bad news and then express sympathy. The system at least gets readers to read over the whole letter before reacting.

Both the managers and the writers believe in this structure even though the writers know that the readers find the structure frustrating and irritating.

Once again, however, strategies exist that separate effective from less effective correspondence. The writers whom I interviewed and the writers who participated in the workshops, for example, agreed that a letter that simply regurgitated the structure in its purest, barest form was ineffective. Instead to be effective letters needed to prove to readers that their case had been taken seriously. Consequently, in the opening buffer section details of the case such as the claimant's physician's name needed to be included, and the medical explanation section must be logical and detailed. Kala reported, "I always refer to all the information that I have reviewed. I say that I have this and this piece of evidence. I try to let them know that I have looked at everything. If you don't do that, they get back to you saying—'What about the file that Dr. Jones sent you?'"

Kala also explained what logical meant in the context of this correspondence. While examining a letter that she considered more effective, she noted:

This letter is more logical because it sets up the criteria and then explains them. It also acknowledges that we know that the claimant does have some restrictions (just not enough to warrant long-term disability benefits). It's important to acknowledge this because if you don't, the claimant will get back to you suggesting that you haven't noted his restrictions.

So a major strategy is to include enough information to, as one writer put it, "ward off an argument with the claimant." At the same time these assessors could not include too much information. Not only might too much information prove confusing to claimants, but they also had another group of readers to satisfy, the claimants' physicians. These writers were not in a position to provide too much medical analysis because many lacked medical training. Also they could not afford to appear to be critiquing the claimant's medical treatment. Bev observed:

We have to be careful about our treatment of the doctors. We can't be judgmental about them. Sometimes we know that the doctor could have provided better treatment, but we can't say that. We have to walk a fine line in this area.

### What Do These Findings Mean?

From the perspective of genre theory, wherein genres are thought of as trajectory entities, this heuristic structure of the negative letter combined with the stylistic features analyzed in the next section create interesting effects for both readers and writers. For example, in the North American setting we seem to share a common belief that many readers of negative messages need to be kept waiting. These readers need to listen to the explanation first and wait for the writer's decision.

Again, the rhetorical form being reproduced within this correspondence operates both as a constraint and a resource and demonstrates the complex and contradictory operations of power within organizations. These writers were enacting and re-producing this set of discursive practices while at the same time these discursive practices, as we shall see, were affecting the writers' own habitus or regulated improvisational strategies. Some of the discursive practices were clearly against the writers' best interests. All the participants mentioned the difficulties they faced trying to explain their decisions to their readers and the intense frustration that they experienced.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

Genre theory, especially if linked to Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope and Lemke's notion of genres as "trajectory entities" and to some critical discourse analysis (CDA) tools, can provide us with more insights into the resources associated with these texts as well as the gnoseological system they create. According to Bourdieu, powerful symbolic structures tend to create gnoseological order or "a homogeneous conception of time, space, number, and cause..." (166). The discursive practices in these texts create, in fact, a commonsense and thus ideological version of time and space for their readers.

Most of the current research in CDA (Fairclough; Stillar) derives from the practical linguistics developed by Halliday and Hasan and focuses on creating tools for the detailed, close reading of texts. For this project, I turned to the work of Roger Hodge and Gunter Kress because they have produced a relatively simple model of close reading that specifically looks for the relationship between language use and power within organizations. Unlike Hodge and Kress and other CDA specialists who usually focus on one text, as a genre researcher, I have applied this model to a set of text types that the participants in the study identified as participating in a genre.

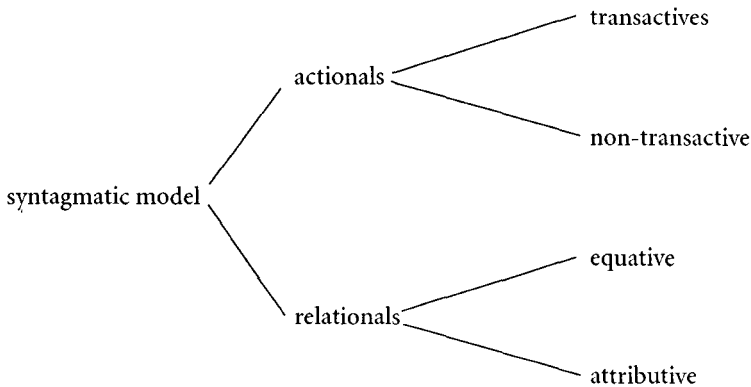
Hodge and Kress summarize a main insight of CDA when they note that "The grammar of a language is its theory of reality" (7). They regard language as "consisting of a related set of categories and processes" (8); these fundamental categories

create “a set of ‘models’ which describe the interrelation of objects and events” (8). Within language, then, schemata exist that represent the typical ways that agents can (or cannot) affect their environments. Furthermore, Hodge and Kress assert that language is always imbued with ideology, sets of categories (often unconscious) or versions of reality that represent the interests of one group over another. In a related study on agency, Dorothy Holland and her colleagues call these versions of reality “figured worlds,” by which they mean “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (52). Holland’s research group, for example, identifies Alcohol Anonymous as a “figured world” in which certain genres and rituals shape the experience and identity of participants.

Hodge and Kress provide two tools—syntagmatic and transformational analysis—that allow researchers to identify often unacknowledged categories or processes. The tools, in Bourdieu’s words, allow researchers to “push aside mundane representations to construct the objective structures (spaces of positions), the distribution of socially efficient resources that define the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 11). Hodge and Kress’s model provides insights into the commonsense or deeply shared beliefs characteristic of a social system and the users that constitute and are constituted by that system’s syntax.

### Syntagmatic Model

The first tool, the syntagmatic model (see Figure 1), classifies events “that involve one or two objects in a specified relation to a verbal process” (Hodge and Kress 8). In effect, Hodge and Kress classify sentence structures according to how (or if) agents



**Figure 1. Hodge and Kress’s Syntagmatic Model.** Hodge and Kress (9).

are represented as affecting their social worlds. For example, in the sentence “Mary failed the course,” Mary is constructed as an agent who willingly chose to fail a course. An entirely different worldview and power structure is enacted if we change the sentence to “The instructor failed Mary.”

A syntagmatic analysis involves identifying two types of operations: actionals and relationals. Actionals represent “the relationships perceived in the physical world” (Hodge and Kress 9) and consist of two types: transactives and non-transactive. Transactives consist of a subject (agent), verb (process), object (patient) construction. Such constructions represent subjects (agents) as directly affecting objects (patients). So, for example, the sentence “Mary fires John,” depicts Mary, the agent, as having the power to fire John, the object or patient. In the sentence “We will be terminating your claim file effective September 16, 1994” (Letter 25), the company (we) represents itself as having the power to terminate a claim file.<sup>2</sup> Non-transactive constructions consist of an agent and an action but do not represent agents as affecting their worlds. In the sentence “John runs away” John is represented as performing an action (running) but not as affecting his environment. In the construction “However, in view of the fact that you are currently involved in a rehabilitation program...” (Letter 25), only one entity—the subject, or agent—is involved so, as Hodge and Kress observe, “it is difficult to know whether it is actor or affected; in fact neither category really applies, since this model is vague about precise causal and affected status” (8). Non-transactives represent agents as acting but not as acting on the world and are often representations of a lack of power. Mental processes can also be represented in non-transactives as in “As you are aware” (Letter 9).

Relationals, according to Hodge and Kress, “display the activity of the mind, making judgments, commenting and so on” (9). Relationals fundamentally involve classification and often involve evaluation or judgment. Two types of relationals occur: equatives and attributives. Equatives establish a relationship between two nouns as in “John is Lear.” Attributives establish a relationship between nouns and qualities, usually adjectives, as in “John is good” or as in “your headaches are less frequent” (Letter 2). Constructions that involve possession can also fall in this category as they represent a noun as owning an attribute. For example, in the construction “Apparently you have been overweight and have had hypothyroidism for some time” (Letter 1), a relationship is definitely established between the agent (you, the reader) and certain negative attributes. As Hodge and Kress note, relational constructions involve classification, and “classification,” they suggest, “imposes order on what is classified. So classification is an instrument of control in two directions: control over the flux of experience of physical and social reality... and society’s conception of that reality” (63).

### Transformational Model

Hodge and Kress also suggest that researchers use a second tool, the transformational model to look carefully at transformations such as nominalizations, passive constructions, and negative constructions. Such transformations are never “innocent” and in fact serve two functions: “economy and distortion” (10). As Hodge and Kress suggest, nominalization is a particularly interesting formation (21-24). In the sentence “We have received and reviewed the additional medical documentation requested from Dr. Smith and Dr. Taylor” (Letter 1), for example, the nominalization “documentation” has three important effects. First, although the original process might be represented as someone (doctor) documents something (records, tests results, signs, symptoms), in the transformation we lose sight of the specific identities of the actor and the affected. We do not know exactly who documented what. Second, this transformation directs our attention only to the “verbal version of the action which was performed” (Hodge and Kress 21) and away from the process wherein the information was constructed. And finally, nominalizations have the effect of depriving processes of an orientation to specific times and places. This attempt to stabilize, or freeze processes in space and time, has the effect, Hodge and Kress suggest, of creating “a

**TABLE 1**  
**Syntagmatic and Transformational Constructions**  
**Found in a Set of Negative-News Letters**

	<i>Effective</i>		<i>Average</i>		<i>Ineffective</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Letter 25</i>	<i>Letter 20</i>	<i>Letter 18</i>	<i>Letter 10</i>	<i>Letter 2</i>	<i>Letter 1</i>	
Transactives	18	15	13	8	10	12	76
Nontransactives	12	4	4	5	4	6	35
Attributives	6	3	1	4	5	10	29
Nominalizations	20	18	18	9	15	22	102
Passives	7	8	8	5	10	5	43
Negatives	6	5	5	5	6	5	32

NOTE: These letters are ranged according to how participants judged their effectiveness. Letters 25 and 20 were deemed effective letters by managers and assessors, Letters 18 and 10 were deemed average, and Letters 2 and 1 were classified as ineffective. Each letter was examined for every incidence of syntagmatic and transformational constructions.

world of thinglike abstract beings or objects, which are capable of acting or being acted on" (24). This kind of alternate world can have two effects on readers: First, these alternate linguistic worlds can prevent readers from seeing or believing in the world of physical events and processes; second, these shadowy words of abstract entities can lead to ambiguity and confusion, especially for readers who cannot undo the transformations.

Passive and negative transformations also have interesting effects. As professional communicators know, passive constructions hide agency. In the sentence "A number of investigative tests have been performed in order to determine the underlying cause of the various symptoms" (Letter 19) the agent, presumably a doctor, has disappeared. Negative constructions are also worthy attention as they always imply their opposite.

These tools of CDA were applied in two different analyses to six letters (see Table 1) ranging from effective (Letter 25) to ineffective letters (Letter 1). A letter was classified as effective or ineffective if both management and the assessors I interviewed agreed to its status. As part of the first analysis, I classified each instance of a transactive, non-transactive, and attributive construction in each of the six selected letters. I also recorded all instances of transformations—nominalizations, passive constructions, and negative constructions (see Table 1). The purpose of this analysis was to locate some of the linguistic "rules and resources," or "member resources" (Fairclough 140), available to these writers but also to see if the more effective letters had a different profile than the less effective letters.

### *First analysis: General Strategies*

This first analysis revealed some interesting patterns at the macro level of the six letters. Compared to other transformations, a large number of nominalizing constructions (102 instances) were present and, more interestingly, were equally present in both effective as well as ineffective letters. Oddly enough, compared to all other constructions, the number of negative constructions (32) was low across the set, and passive constructions (43) did not predominate. In fact, in comparison to passive constructions, actional constructions, both transactive (76) and non-transactive (35), are clearly preferred in these letters. However, several possible patterns emerge that could distinguish the strategies characteristic of effective versus ineffective letters. More effective letters seem, in general, to have more transactive and non-transactive constructions and, on average, fewer attributive constructions. In other words, fewer judgmental comments and more linguistic representation of activity seem to occur in the more effective letters.

### *Second Analysis: Chronotopic Analysis of Agency*

The second analysis (see Tables 2,3 and 4) attempted a more chronotopic analysis as it documented the patterns of activity that were assigned to different agents in the six letters. For example, in the “you” analysis (Table 2) I recorded the number of times where readers (you) were depicted as involved in a transactional construction so that they affected their own social world as well as the number of non-transactional constructions assigned to you, the reader. I also looked at the number of attributive constructions that involved the reader. In the “we” analysis (Table 3) I looked at the pattern of activity assigned to the company (we). The “others” analysis” (Table 4) explored the kinds of action assigned to other entities such as files, doctors, and documents. Thus, this chronotopic analysis attempted to locate in each letter what “you”, the reader, could do, be, or have; what “we”, the company, could do, be, or have; and what other entities (doctors, files, documents) could do, be, or have. Nominalizations were assigned to one of the three categories according to who owned them. So, for example, “our belief” was assigned to the “we” category and represents an action that the company controls. Passive constructions were categorized according to their implied subjects. For example, the construction “This information, as well as your entire claim file, has been reviewed” (Letter 1) was assigned to the “we” category, as the construction implies that the company (we) reviewed the file.

Using Hodge and Kress’s terms, I focus first on the role of syntagmatic processes and then on the transformational processes aligned to the three agent groups.

**TABLE 2**  
**An Analysis of the Action Assigned to “You,”**  
**the Reader, in a Set of Negative-News Messages**

	<i>Effective</i>		<i>Average</i>		<i>Ineffective</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Letter 25</i>	<i>Letter 20</i>	<i>Letter 18</i>	<i>Letter 10</i>	<i>Letter 2</i>	<i>Letter 1</i>	
Transactives	6	6	2	3	2	4	23
Nontransactives	10	0	0	3	2	2	17
Attributives	2	2	0	1	3	3	11
Nominalizations	7	5	3	2	2	2	21
Passives	0	0	0	2	2	2	6
Negatives	2	2	1	1	2	1	9

*Syntagmatic Analysis of Agency.* From an actional perspective, on first glance, all three agent groups were represented as equally capable of controlling action. If we add together the actional units in each group, 40 instances of actional processes were assigned to readers (see Table 2), 35 instances allotted to the company (see Table 3), and 36 instances assigned to other entities (see Table 4). However, a closer look reveals an uneven distribution pattern. Readers in this “figured world” (Holland et al. 52) were assigned more non-transactional action (17 instances) than any other agent was. Both the company (9 instances) and other entities (9 instances) were assigned fewer non-transactional constructions. At the same time, readers were also assigned fewer transactional constructions (23 instances) as opposed to the company (26 instances) and other entities (27 instances). Consequently, readers were depicted far less often as controlling their social world than either the company or other entities were.

**TABLE 3**  
**An Analysis of the Action Assigned to “We,”**  
**the Company, in a Set of Negative-News Messages**

	<i>Effective</i>		<i>Average</i>		<i>Ineffective</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Letter 25</i>	<i>Letter 20</i>	<i>Letter 18</i>	<i>Letter 10</i>	<i>Letter 2</i>	<i>Letter 1</i>	
Transactives	9	3	3	1	5	5	26
Nontransactives	2	2	4	1	0	0	9
Attributives	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nominalizations	1	0	0	2	1	4	8
Passives	3	4	6	3	2	5	23
Negatives	1	2	3	4	1	1	12

This chronotopic orientation becomes clearer when we examine the actual action that agents were represented as controlling. Letter 25 was identified as an effective letter by management and the writers I interviewed. Letter 25 had a total of 18 transactive units in it (see Table 1). According to this letter, “you,” the reader, could appeal your claim, make a request, give reasons, and obtain documents. So “you” were represented as an entity basically limited to speech acts. In contrast, “we,” the company could inform you, conclude that you are capable, terminate your claim, base our decision, receive documentation, and decline your claim. So “we” were represented as active agents who could both receive information and make decisions that affect the reader’s future.



**TABLE 4**  
**An Analysis of Action Assigned to “Others”**  
**in a Set of Negative-News Messages**

	<i>Effective</i>		<i>Average</i>		<i>Ineffective</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Letter 25</i>	<i>Letter 20</i>	<i>Letter 18</i>	<i>Letter 10</i>	<i>Letter 2</i>	<i>Letter 1</i>	
Transactives	3	6	8	2	3	5	27
Nontransactives	0	2	0	1	2	4	9
Attributives	4	1	1	3	2	6	17
Nominalizations	12	13	15	5	12	16	73
Passives	4	4	2	3	7	3	23
Negatives	3	1	1	0	3	3	11

NOTE: “Others” include files, documents, doctors, or any entity, other than the reader or the company, that can control the subject position in a sentence.

Other entities in these documents typically included doctors, files, and nominalizations such as medical conditions. These nominalizations were often represented as powerful, and they often appropriated actions that could pertain to the reader. In Letter 25, for example, “an impairment... prevents her [the member],” and an “occupation...provides income.” In another chronotope, the reader could possess the impairment, and the reader could provide income.

Throughout these six letters, two trends were evident. Readers’ actions were consistently limited to speech acts, and much of the most powerful forms of action was delegated to other entities, as in “The current findings indicate that your depression appears to be stable” (Letter 2). This latter strategy is quite striking as it allows the writer (i. e., the company) to co-opt the action of the other entity—the findings.

Despite these trends effective and ineffective letters differed in several ways. The better letters simply had a higher level of activity assigned to all entities, especially to readers. A closer reading of these actional processes also suggests that effective letters often represented readers as capable of more than speech acts. In Letter 25, for example, the reader was characterized as being “capable of performing a light sedentary occupation” and as being “involved in a rehabilitation program and attempting to return to [the reader’s] own occupation.” The future orientation of these comments contrasted with those in more typical letters that limited readers to speech acts and, to a large extent, past actions, as in:

We have noted that you continue to report symptoms of pain in your neck, back and both shoulders; however from the medical evidence on file, we have not established that your condition would be of the severity to prevent you from performing your own occupation. (Letter 10)

Similarities and differences between effective and ineffective strategies become clearer when we look at the role of relationals—especially attributives—in this set of letters. In fact, attributives were never associated with the writer/company (see Table 3). The company did not classify itself although it did judge readers (see Table 2) and classify other entities (see Table 4). It judged readers, for example, as “angry,” “disappointed,” and as having “symptoms” and sometimes having “improvement.” Other entities were classified in various ways: income was “greater or less,” evidence was “incorrect,” headaches were “less frequent,” and depression was “stabilized.” Overall, the ineffective letters tended to use more attributive constructions than the effective ones did (see Table 1).

The following excerpt from Letter 1 illustrates how attributive constructions were used in an ineffective letter:

While it seems you have some signs and symptoms that are compatible with depression, by the level of treatment being suggested and received, it would seem that your depression is not totally disabling. Apparently, you have been overweight and have had hypothyroidism for some time, and have still been able to work.

The reader was judged pretty harshly (for example, as being “overweight”) in this letter. The reader seemed not only to have little future action but almost to be blamed for that very limited future. In contrast, the more effective letters tended to use attributive constructions assigned to readers more cautiously. Even more interesting, however, is the strategic use of attributives as related to other entities. The policy sections in all the letters have a variation of the following phrase “in order to be considered ‘totally disabled’ the Member must have a medically determinable physical or mental impairment.” No letter ever allows readers to even imagine that they have the attribute of “impairment.”

*Transformational Analysis of Agency.* A transformational analysis revealed that nominalizing, passive, and negative constructions also played interesting roles in this genre. The most startling result concerned the relation between other entities and nominalizing constructions. In fact, 73 instances of nominalizations were associated with other entities, versus 8 with the company and 21 with the reader. Again, however,

the strategic use of these constructions was interesting. In letter 1, an ineffective letter, in the following constructions “The current findings available indicate that your depression appears to be stable” and “Since all the evidence provided to us indicates that there is no major limitation preventing you from returning to some non-stressful occupation” several strategies were at work. First, the actual process wherein the assessor made her decision is hidden behind expressions such as “the current findings...indicate.” Second, this same construction depicted the documentation itself making the decision. Finally, the experience of enduring a medical condition was often nominalized and made to appear as separate from the reader. In the above construction the reader’s entire experience of illness, including seizures, headaches, and depression, was summed up and sanitized as a “limitation.” Note too that the nominalizing construction “limitation,” not you, the reader, controlled the action of the sentence.

Strategies like these were present even in the most effective letters although they tended to be moderated. For example, in letter 20 in the sentence “We do not feel that the clinical findings would support a definition of total disability” the nominalization “findings” was used by the writer as an agent to support her decision. At the same time, the sentence began with the acknowledgement that “we” were making the decision. Of course, the “we” here was used strategically because only one person, the assessor, made this decision.

Although more active than passive constructions were present in these letters, a closer look at how passive constructions were aligned with agents proved illuminating. Note that readers appeared as implied agents in only six instances across the letters whereas both the company and other entities appeared as implied agents 23 times each. The six instances where the readers appeared as implied agents occurred in the same preformulated section used in a number of letters: “Medical reasons must be accompanied by supporting documentation from your specialist obtained at your expense” (Letter 10). The sentence implied that the reader is the agent who would obtain the documentation. This limited action stands in stark contrast to the action assigned to the company through passive constructions that establish agency in sentences such as “This medical information has been reviewed, along with your entire claim file” (Letter 25), and “It is our opinion that you would not be considered totally disabled as defined above” (Letter 10). In both cases the power of reviewing and decision making is hidden behind passive constructions that conceal agency. This same kind of action was assigned to other entities as well. For example, in discussing the medical files, one assessor wrote, “While mention is made of fibrositis as a diagnosis, there is minimal information on file to support this condition” (Letter 1). The logical, implied agent in this sentence appears to be the “file.”

Finally, the role of negative constructions was somewhat surprising. I had assumed that because these were negative news letters negative constructions would be strongly represented. However, as the analysis suggested, in comparison to the other constructions, negative constructions were not prevalent and were distributed relatively evenly among the agents. Again, a closer examination revealed an apparently strategic use of negative constructions that would suggest why negatives were used infrequently. For this analysis, I looked at the sentence in each letter that declined the reader's claim (see Figure 2).

Interestingly the usual negative indicator "not" was absent in these sentences declining the claims. As Hodge and Kress explain, however, some good strategic reasons exist for this absence. In all negative expressions, readers and listeners must entertain "the positive form in order to understand the negative" (137). So, for example, the sentence "There is not a tiger in this room" implies that a tiger could very well be in the room. In three of the examples in Figure 2 the writers used forms of the verbs "decline" and "terminate" where the act of negation was absorbed into the meaning of the verb. Using this extraordinarily powerful strategy, the writer did not even allow the reader the possibility of imagining an opposite result. The other strategy of using "unable" as the pivotal verb is also interesting. It avoids the direct negation of "not" and at the same time implies that the writer could not avoid her negative decision—that she was forced into it (usually by evidence or documentation).

In summation, the constellation of resources enacted by this genre created a "figured world" (Holland et al. 52) wherein the reader's control of time/space was severely constrained at the level of linguistic representation. Paradoxically, however, the more effective letters left readers with some limited action—particularly the freedom to improve and get better. The writers who used more actionals and fewer relationals assigning negative attributives seemed to produce the kind of letter that both the managers and the participants themselves identified as having a good tone.

Letter 1: Therefore, we must decline your claim for long term disability benefits.

Letter 2: We are unable to continue your claim beyond the definition change point which will be reached on August 23, 1994.

Letter 10: For this reason, we are declining your claim for LTD benefits.

Letter 18: Therefore, we are unable to approve your claim for LTD benefits.

Letter 20: Therefore, we are unable to approve your claim for long term disability benefits.

Letter 25. We will be terminating your claim file effective September 16, 1994.

**Figure 2. Example Decline Sentences.**

### *What Participants Said*

To understand the context of this correspondence, we need to consult, in Bourdieu's terms, the "logic of practice" (qtd. in Robbins 112). The process that writers followed in handling their cases and writing their letters was complex, dependant on technology, and accounted for many of the stylistic choices. This process consisted of two steps: reaching a decision and then conveying that decision.

*Reaching a Decision.* According to Bev, the decision rested with the individual assessors who were also the writers. Consequently, the "we" used throughout the letters is usually a strategic fiction. Only in rare, difficult cases did the assessor consult the company's doctor. In fact, many of the assessors did not have a college level education; some had nursing degrees, but many lacked this background as well. Instead they had what Bev called "business experience." To complete a case, the assessors first found out if coverage existed for the claim, that is, what kind of group plan the claimant fell under. Then they located the contractual provisions for that plan. As Bev explained, they had to consult the 344 ways of explaining the "contractual provisions" located in the Plan Code Manual. Writers used a reference guide to figure out which of the 344 explanations they needed. They read vertically down the page to locate the plan type and then horizontally across to find the specific provision. The results of this discursive set of practices appeared in the letter in the form of the mandated policy section.

Once the writers understood the contractual provisions for a specific claimant, they reviewed the claimant's documents to see if the evidence supported the claim of disability. The evidence consisted of medical reports, tests results, and psychological assessments, etc. These reports, scanned into the computer system, could consist of anywhere from 100-350 pages of information. The average file had about 150-160 pages.

Templates guided the assessor's decision-making process. The computer system generated a template in which the assessor recorded her interpretation of the signs, symptoms, and prognosis. These notes and the assessor's decision were then e-mailed to the file and became a permanent part of the record.

This template not only structured the way that the assessors read the file and arrived at their decision, but it also embodied the deeply held medical belief in the distinction between signs and symptoms. As Bourdieu observed, processes of classification are intricately connected to processes wherein dominant groups create "consensus, a fundamental agreement concerning the meaning or sense of the social world" (131). The most dramatic example of classification in this set of letters occurred in the total acceptance of the medical field's division between symptoms and signs. Symp-

toms constitute the language of what patients experience and provide only subjective evidence. Signs describe what the doctor sees or what test results record and provide objective evidence. Signs have far more ontological reality than symptoms. Bev, for example, explained that assessors had to follow the sign/ symptoms distinction because they had to have “objective evidence”:

Yes, we have to have objective evidence. And it’s really hard sometimes—say, for example in cases of chronic fatigue. The client says he or she is tired all the time. But the medical tests just don’t provide any objective evidence. So we have to decline the claim.

All the participants referred to this distinction.

*Writing the Decision.* Technology also intervened in interesting ways after assessors reached their decision. At this point they had two choices: They either dictated their letter, typed it and sent it to the secretarial unit, or they e-mailed their letter to the secretarial unit. No matter what their choice was, however, models, templates, and preformulated sections shaped much of the resulting letter and acted as both rules and resources. Writers had binders filled with model letters organized according to physiological conditions, and because writers often had little time, they would find one that worked and then “fill in the blanks.”<sup>4</sup> According to these participants, although they were trained for six weeks to write this correspondence, they received no ongoing training or feedback on their correspondence. In fact, these letters were not checked or surveyed by any supervisor prior to being sent to the claimant. Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, although these writers had large computers systems on their desks, they did not have access to a word-processing program and thus did not have access to spelling checkers or style checkers.<sup>5</sup>

### *What Do These Findings Mean?*

This account of the logic of practice dramatizes the very fine line around which these writers maneuver. Built within their linguistic and technological resources was a whole set of practices, including preformulated sections, templates, and models, that attempted to reproduce a chronotope that constrained the future actions of readers. Supporting these practices were the writers’ own beliefs in the necessity of mandated sections and the rhetorical structure of this genre. And yet room to maneuver did exist. Some writers had located strategic ways to avoid blaming readers, and some had located ways in which readers could at least be represented as getting better, even if they were deprived of the long-term disability benefits they requested.

## Deliverables And Recommendations

Based on this study, I made the following recommendations in an internal report to the managers of this company.

- The company conduct tests on reader reaction to negative messages, in particular, to different organizational frameworks (the delayed approach versus the direct approach).
- The policy section be included as an insert or be rewritten by a team of writers and legal experts so that the letters could achieve a consistent style.
- The assessors be given access to ongoing training because some assessors were evolving more effective strategies to deal with this correspondence, but no mechanism existed wherein assessors could legitimately share information.<sup>6</sup>
- The assessors be given access to word-processing programs.

Of these recommendations, only the last was fully implemented—a training program was developed that taught the assessors how to use word processing. The company was reluctant to conduct studies on readers for public relations reasons. Given the sensitive nature of negative communication, their hesitancy is somewhat understandable. However, in a social climate in which people are profoundly affected by such correspondence and in which some people have responded with violence, such hesitancy is shortsighted. Organizations simply need to know more about ways to convey bad news. More important, the company refused to consider either including the policy section as an insert or rewriting it. On the basis of the research results, however, they did support at least a series of workshops for the assessors on effective strategies for writing this correspondence.

For the writer/assessors of this company I developed a series of workshops built around their own best practices. Based on the research findings that more actional and less relational, or judgmental, strategies seem to characterize effective correspondence, I designed workshops that focused on a more direct style and on the management of tone. The style workshops centred on the theme of responsibility, that is using actional constructions, especially transactives, to express what the company is expected to do and what the client is expected to do. The tone workshop elicited in-depth discussions about the way diction can characterize readers. What made the workshops salient for participants, however, was that all the examples came from

their own correspondence and reflected their own experience. The workshops were evaluated by both the company and me, and the assessors reported that they learned a practical set of strategies that they could use in future correspondence.

### **Implications For Professional Communicators**

With the caveat that the implications of this case study for professional communicators are necessarily tentative given its limited nature, I now address the sets of questions that framed this study. I asked descriptive questions aimed at getting a sense of what constituted an effective negative letter in the context of this organization. Clearly, to be perceived as effective, these letters had to conform to certain constraints. The convoluted policy sections were mandatory, the traditional form of the negative letter was required, and certain stylistic tendencies such as nominalizations, characterized the correspondence. Yet some writers were able to access the constellation of resources of this genre more strategically than other writers could. They were able to slightly manipulate the policy section, to fill in the rhetorical possibilities of the form, and to adjust the style toward a more action-directed, less judgmental orientation. They could play the game of this genre and yet slightly exceed the constraints under which they worked. Working within this highly constrained situation, they could improvise strategically to make their productions appear more effective to their audience of managers and other assessors.

I also asked critical questions about the chronotopic orientation of this genre and the effects of this orientation on readers and writers. The analyses of the negative messages in this organization revealed a text type that needs serious challenge. As noted earlier, genres function as “symbolic structures,” (Bourdieu 166) or constellations of strategies that attempt to reproduce certain kinds of “gnoseological order” (Bourdieu 166) or common sense ways of representing time and space and thus forms of human action. Genres function chronotopically in that they represent worlds of human action or movement. A critical examination of the rhetorical and linguistic resources present in the letters revealed a world in which readers are kept waiting, a world in which their movements are restricted often to speech acts, a world in which they are not encouraged to respond, and a world in which they are often judged harshly. At its heart, this genre attempts to freeze its readers in space and time and reduce them to passivity and nonresponse.

Clearly several centripetal forces are working to maintain the trajectory of this discourse formation. Our own disciplinary belief in the efficacy of the traditional bad-news letters is one of those forces even though this traditional structure has never been tested with actual readers. Some evidence exists that readers do not attend to the structure, and the structure itself might be ideologically questionable (Does one re-



ally want to keep anxious people waiting?). Ironically, this structure is now built into the models and templates that shape this discourse and will prove difficult for this insurance company to reconsider. The structure is now part of the rules and resources and thus the common sense of these writer/assessors.

At the same time, the contextual information gathered during the interviews revealed the network of power relations in which these writers were located. These writers made decisions that profoundly affected their readers' lives, and yet paradoxically, to a large extent, these writers were, in turn, constrained by their organization's discursive practices as embodied in this genre. To echo Bourdieu, these writers exercise power only in relation to their organization. They are "like the Homeric orator who takes hold of the *skeptron* in order to speak" (Thompson 9). To echo Dorothy Smith, we have here an example of institutional discourse rather than the discourse of individual subjects (151), a discourse that is now embedded in institutional practices such as models, preformulated sections, and computerized templates.

Furthermore, like some of the readers of this genre, these writers themselves might be subject to symbolic violence. Symbolic violence occurs when individuals believe in and participate in a system that is against their own self-interest. These writers knew that the mandated sections of contract language did not work and that their presence in the letters infuriated some readers, who then exercised their anger against these writers. And yet all the writers I interviewed stated that these sections had to be in the letter in their present state. In my view, these letters will not change substantially until the mandated section is adjusted to a different chronotopic orientation. This section operates hegemonically over the rest of the letter and represents the interests of a dominant group in the organization. Certainly the legal interests of this organization are important, but if the assessors' and readers' interests are also to be taken into account, then these mandated sections must be revised.

In conclusion, I suggest that useful data can be gleaned by asking questions such as "What is effective communication in this organization?" and "How is this correspondence produced?" As professional communicators, we need to build any advice we provide around contextual information rather than on only our own presumptions. We also need to acknowledge that writers, in the contexts of their organizations have often already discovered their own successful strategies. As professional communicators, our most important task might be to identify those strategies and make sure that they are recognized and shared. Accounts of the logic of practice are invaluable for researchers intending to figure out the constellation of strategies and constraints that constitute the generic resources for a text type. The better writers at this company had figured out ways to remain within the trajectory of the genre and yet test the limits of that trajectory. Their strategies included using more actional con-

structions for both the organization and the reader, fewer relationals that judged readers, a future orientation in which the reader could improve, and sometimes using expressions of regret.<sup>7</sup> These writers had found personally more satisfying ways to “walk the fine line.”

## NOTES

1. I found two studies on insurance writers. Theresa Timmons' 1988 anecdotal report provides some interesting information on insurance writers, but it is not an empirical study and fails to value the writers' logic of practice. Indeed, Timmons attempts to impose her own view of effective writing on the writers she worked with without attending to their explanations of their practices. Paula Pomerence's 1992 study gathers useful interview data on the working conditions of insurance writers. Her study, however, focuses on writers in public relations areas and does not include any analysis of the style or genres of insurance writing.
2. In this case the writer has tried to soften the impact by declining the “claim file,” as if a file folder were being refused.
3. The term symptom is particularly damning in this genre. Symptoms are always viewed as subjective, and thus lacking reality, in contrast to the objective, or more real, evidence found in medical reports.
4. As Lee Clark Johns suggests, filing cabinets, or their equivalent, really do have sex lives and maintain and reproduce discursive practices.
5. I questioned the managers about this situation. Why didn't the assessors have word-processing facilities when they were already working on-line? They replied that they thought it would take too long to get the assessors up-to-speed. In my report to the managers I pointed out the contradictions involved in their concern for grammar and spelling and yet their refusal to allow these workers access to the revision capabilities of computers. Shortly thereafter they did build word-processing capacities into the system.
6. In one of the original transcripts, one of the participants spoke of the assessors as working in their “stalls.” When I received her corrected version back, she noted in the margin, “If I used the word “stalls,” I certainly didn't mean to. It makes us sound like contented cows.” In fact, she had used the term, and it captured for me the isolated way in which these assessors work.

7. The possibility of expressing regret came as a surprise to many writers in the workshops. Some writers felt ambivalent about expressing regret in that it was “phoney.” In the end, we decide that expressing regret was a resource that writers could use if they genuinely felt regret and felt comfortable expressing it.

**APPENDIX A**  
**A More Effective Letter according to Managers and Writers**

<b>Buffer</b>	<p>Dear Ms. J.</p> <p>We are writing to inform you of our decision regarding your claim for Long Term Disability (LTD) benefits.</p> <p>As you aware [sic], as of May 15, 1994, in order to be considered "totally disabled" the Member must have a medically determinable physical or mental impairment due to injury or illness which prevents her from performing the duties of ANY occupation:</p>
<b>Policy Explanation</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. for which she is or may become fitted through education, training or experience, and</li> <li>2. that provides an income that is equal to or greater than the amount of monthly disability benefit payable under this provision, adjusted annually by the Consumer Price Index.</li> </ol> <p>The availability of work for the member does not affect the determination of totally disabled.</p>
<b>Medical Explanation</b>	<p>On March 11, 1994 we wrote to your physician, Dr. Smith, for an update on your medical condition.</p> <p>This medical information has been reviewed, along with your entire claim file. We have noted that you have had some recent improvement in the symptomatology of your condition, ie. grip strength, stiffness and joint assessment.</p>
<b>Decision</b>	<p>We have concluded that based on your current clinical findings, you would be capable of performing a light sedentary occupation as of May 15, 1994 and therefore we would not consider you to be totally disabled for ANY occupation.</p> <p>However, in view of the fact that you are currently involved in a rehabilitation program and attempting to return to your own occupation, we are willing to continue your claim on a rehabilitation basis only for a further period of time.</p> <p>Providing you do not return to work on a full-time basis prior to September 15, 1994, benefits will be released until this time to assist you with your return to work plans.</p>
<b>Appeal</b>	<p>We will be terminating your claim file effective September 16, 1994.</p> <p>If you believe the evidence on which we have based our decision is incorrect, or if there is other evidence which is not known to us, you may appeal your claim. If you decide to do so, please make such a request in writing, as soon as possible, giving reasons to support the appeal. Medical reasons must be accompanied by supporting documentation from your specialist at your expense. Until we receive such evidence, your file will remain closed.</p> <p>Sincerely</p>

## APPENDIX B

### A Less Effective Letter according to Managers and Writers

<b>Buffer</b>	<p>Dear Mrs. S.</p> <p>We have received and reviewed the additional medical documentation requested from Dr. Smith and Dr. Taylor</p> <p>This information, as well as your entire file, has been reviewed and a decision has been made about your eligibility for disability benefits. Our decision of whether or not to grant benefits must take into consideration both the terms of the group plan and the medical evidence received. The group plan states, in part:</p> <p>During the two-year period immediately following the date the member becomes totally disabled, total disability means that the member has a medically determinable physical or mental impairment due to injury or illness which prevents her from performing the regular duties of the occupation in which she participated just before the disability started.</p>
<b>Policy Explanation</b>	<p>After the two-year period, totally disabled means that the member has a medically determinable physical or mental impairment due to injury or illness, which prevents her from performing the duties of ANY occupation:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. for which she is or may become fitted through education, training or experience, and</li> <li>2. that provides an income that is equal to or greater than the amount of monthly disability benefit payable under this provision, adjusted annually by the Consumer Price Index.</li> </ol> <p>The availability of work for the member does not affect the determination of totally disabled.</p> <p>You are claiming disability benefits due to reactive depression, morbid obesity, hypothyroidism, and fibrositis.</p>
<b>Medical Explanation</b>	<p>While it seems that you have some signs and symptoms that are compatible with depression, by the level of treatment being suggested and received, it would seem that your depression is not totally disabling. Apparently you have been overweight and have had hypothyroidism for some time and have still been able to work. While mention is made of fibrositis as a diagnosis, there is minimal information on file to support this condition.</p>
<b>Decision</b>	<p>It is our belief that the medical evidence provided does not support your being totally disabled and unable to perform your own occupation. Therefore, we must decline your claim for long term disability benefits.</p>
<b>Appeal</b>	<p>If you believe the evidence on which we have based our decision is incorrect, or if there is other evidence which is not known to us, you may appeal your claim. If you decide to do so, please make such a request in writing, as soon as possible, giving reasons to support the appeal. Medical reasons must be accompanied by supporting documentation from your specialist at your expense. Until we receive such evidence, your file will remain closed.</p> <p>Sincerely</p>

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**APPENDIX C**  
**Interview Questions Approved by Management**

1. What is your background—educational, business? What previous experience prepared you for the work you are doing now?
2. Do you think there is a problem with these letters? If so, what kinds of problems do these letters generate for readers? For writers?
3. How do you actually compose these letters? What do you consult? Could you please walk me through a case?
4. How did you learn how to write these letters? How long did it take you to learn how to write them to your satisfaction?
5. How many writers are there in this department? How long do people usually stay in this position?
6. Which of these two letters in your view is more effective? Why?
7. What would you do to make these letters easier to write?
8. What questions haven't I asked that I should ask?

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