

## genre and mode

In general, “genre” is a term used to identify **a recognizable or established category of writing**--as it were, a "type" or subcategory that distinguishes one species of writing from another. As such, genre is typically connected to *conventions*, since each is thought to reciprocally identify the other: a sonnet is, for instance, conventionally a fourteen-line poem, or a naturalist novel characteristically presents characters swept up in the determining power of their social circumstances. Along with representing the conventions imported into journalism from more recognized literary genres (e.g. travel writing, or the war novel), many varieties of narrative journalism have occupied critical interest as individual genres: for example, the profile, and ethnographic realism (see entries); the so-called “Gonzo Journalism” made famous by Hunter Thompson; the immersion or undercover narrative; and others. In addition, journalists sometimes adopt a recognized “literary” genre wholesale: John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, for instance, is modeled directly on the “modernist realism” of Thornton Wilder and Ernest Hemingway. The “fly on the wall” term we use, in fact, was generated in part not only *within* journalism (say, at the *New Yorker*), but within traditions of fiction.

Genres have histories. Take the example of the “**profile**,” a genre term actually invented by the staff of *The New Yorker* in its early years. You can learn a lot from the way this genre has changed over time. While today we tend to use the term "profile" to refer to a genre for an intensive, detailed, deeply nuanced biographical portrait, in fact originally *The New Yorker* idea reflected a parallel idea in the visual arts: the profile was literally a sideways view, as in a sketch or pencil drawing. *New Yorker* editors actually wanted a portrait in writing that was less than three-dimensional, more oblique and ironic and even breezy in its intentional indirectness. Only in the late 1930s did what we think of as the trademark form, the “accumulating” of fact upon fact, come into being. *New Yorker* profiles became longer and longer—as Ben Yagoda has put it, “as if the writer were continually circulating around the subject” until he or she arrived at something the three-dimensional study we would recognize now.

Of late, meanwhile--as you’ll hear me saying--critics have turned to the idea of "modes" rather than genres, in part to refer to **smaller-scale, more temporary operations within given texts** (e.g. a "melodramatic" mode, rather than saying a text is “a melodrama”) that actually can appear within or inside many different genre categories. One way to think about it, then, is that a “mode” is a downshift: a writer can “shift into,” say, a mode that is closer to “memoir,” or “immersion,” or a “profile.” Or a journalist might shift into an “historical” mode (backgrounding), a confessional mode, an “ethnographic” one (where subjects are seen as “cultures” or ways of life)—and so on. And finally, to parallel what I’m saying above, an especially **literary mode** can also be in play: a journalist might try out a phase of being “Orwellian,” or “Dickensian,” or (as with many a war correspondent) call up Hemingway or Joseph Conrad or others.

