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## Characteristics of Genres

L.F.L.6

If a movie preview shows a spaceship battle and talking robots, you can immediately guess that the movie is science fiction rather than a biography or a historical drama.

You already have experience using key characteristics to tell different kinds of stories apart. As an active reader, you will look for and think about those characteristics. All stories have tell-tale elements that let you identify what kind of story they are.

**Genre** identifies stories mostly by their content. Look below for a list of common genres and their tell-tale characteristics.

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**Look** One way to identify genre is to look at what parts are factual and what parts are made up. Think about *who* is in the passage, *what* happens, and *where* and *when* it happens.

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**Nonfiction** is completely real and factual, like a news story or a textbook.

- A **biography** tells the story of someone’s life. An **autobiography** is written by that person himself.

**Fiction** is made up, though parts of it may be real.

**Realistic fiction** has believable characters, settings, and plots. It *could* all happen in real life but it did not.

- **Historical fiction** uses real settings from the past, such as the American Great Depression or the French Revolution. These works usually focus on made-up characters who may deal with real people and events.

**Fantasy fiction** does not try to feel exactly like real life. There are many kinds of fantasy.

- **Science fiction** builds on real science to show what life might be like in other places or times, often in the future. Look for things that do not exist in the real world yet but seem possible, such as astronauts traveling to other planets.
- **Folk tales** and **myths** are traditional stories passed down among a group of people. Myths, though, try to explain why things are the way they are when people don’t know the answer. That is why they feature gods or magical beings.




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**Connections** Authors also write to suit particular groups of readers, called the **audience**. Who do you think is the intended audience for “The Hip-Hip-Hooray”? Explain why those people might be particularly interested in this story.

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**Form** identifies stories mostly by the shape and style of the writing. That is, we look at *how* things are said more than *what* is said.

- **Poems** play with language to create strong feelings and images. They often use devices like rhyme and rhythm, which you will read about in the next lesson. Poems are usually not written like ordinary writing, or **prose**. Instead of sentences, they have **lines**. Instead of paragraphs, they have **stanzas**. Many poems do not have characters, settings, or plots. While a **narrative poem** tells a story, a **lyric poem** focuses on describing feelings or observations.
- **Dramas**, or **plays**, are meant to be performed by actors on a stage or in a movie or television show. They contain directions that show what the actors should do and say, or how the stage should look, such as (*Fred turns away from Ginger.*)
- Form may also be measured by length. **Short stories** can be read in one sitting. They might have one page or several dozen. **Chapter books** are longer: long enough to be broken up into smaller chunks, called chapters. **Novels** also use chapters, but they are even longer. They may be hundreds of pages long. In general, the longer the writing, the more characters and settings it has, and the more complicated the plot is.

### Example

"The Hip-Hip-Hooray" is best described as which type of work?

- Ⓐ a contemporary short story                      Ⓒ an excerpt from a biography  
 Ⓑ a work of historical fiction                      Ⓓ a piece of science fiction

<b>D I S C U S S</b>	Ⓐ "Contemporary" means current or modern. The passage is a modern, short, made-up story with one setting, two characters, and a simple plot.	Ⓒ Eileen narrates the story herself. So this could be part of an autobiography, but not a biography.
	Ⓑ The story does not seem to be set in the past, and doesn't use real historical people or events.	Ⓓ Everything in the passage seems like it could happen today. Is there anything in it that seems to be beyond our technology?



**Connections** Think of one of your favorite stories or movies. What genre or form could you change it to? How would that change the story?

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