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# LITERACY ENGAGEMENT

## THROUGH PERITEXTUAL ANALYSIS

*edited by*

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# FOREWORD

**AS A CHILD, A TEENAGER, AND A LONG-TIME ADULT, I HAVE ALWAYS STARED** at book covers, tried to figure out why an author's birthplace may influence what gets noticed (or not) between the covers of a given text, and read a chapter's source notes as preliminary scaffolds for what eventually unfolded in the chapter. And, surprise, surprise, I never considered such behaviors eccentric or geeklike. If anything, I imagined myself a sleuth getting closer and closer to solving some unidentified mystery.

The fact that similar actions were rarely voiced or done by students during my grade school teaching days or later while teaching at the college level was disappointing. In hindsight, what I would have given for a copy of *Literacy Engagement through Peritextual Analysis*! First, this book's logical and timely four-part structure speaks to the need for a theoretically grounded pedagogy that focuses on literary, informational, and digital texts at a time when fake news and unqualified claims often go unharnessed.

A second measure of this book's timeliness is its attention to visual literacy and the peritextual analysis of nonprint texts. Without explicit instruction in these vitally important areas, the youth of today stand little chance of successfully navigating the communication networks that are forming on all sides and at varying levels—the very networks that a status quo curriculum is ill-equipped to decode and reconceptualize.

Finally, thanks to the multidisciplinary backgrounds of this volume's editors and chapter authors, *Literacy Engagement through Peritextual Analysis* is unequalled in its approach to engaging literate actions using peritextual analy-

sis. Authentic materials, examples of lesson plans and units, and critical literacy strategies honed to perfection virtually beg to be implemented. Full disclosure: reading this edited collection in preparing to write the foreword took me longer than anticipated because I could not resist taking marginal notes and then converting them into minilessons for use in my literacy teacher education courses this coming semester.

Donna Alvermann  
The University of Georgia  
May 12, 2018

# INTRODUCTION— MORE THAN WHITE NOISE

## Mining the Peritext for Literacy Engagement

SHELBY WITTE

**MALIK WAS A STUDENT IN MY EIGHTH-GRADE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS** class in 2006. As the class entered to begin the day, Malik strolled over to see what I was unpacking from the just-arrived box of young adult fiction and nonfiction books for my classroom library. “Are we gonna be reading this?” he asked, picking up a copy of the graphic novel *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda*.<sup>1</sup> I explained that if it was a book he chose to read, then he was welcome to check out a copy. Without a word, Malik picked up the book again, signed his name on the checkout list, and sat down to read.

Later that period, during my one-on-one reading workshop check-ins with students, I asked Malik what he had learned so far about Rwanda. The book, a vividly powerful fictional account of the Rwandan genocide, could be intense and rightfully disturbing. “I’m still pretty confused about what’s happening,” he admitted. I asked Malik what he learned from the historical overview in the preface or if he could make inferences from the book jacket. “Nah, that’s just some white noise. . . . I always jump straight in to read the real stuff.” Malik had avoided the peritext and had missed the opportunity to have the historical scaffolding needed to better understand the events of the story.

Malik’s characterization of any supplemental parts of a book as “white noise,” meaningless commotion or chatter, has stayed with me as I’ve considered and written about the ways in which adolescents engage with the books

and media that surround them. Clearly, these elements are not meaningless, and yet, many of our students avoid reading them. Although Malik's dismissal of the peritext is nothing new to classroom teachers and librarians who want our students to engage with the complete text, we have long needed a way to pedagogically approach peritext in a more substantial way. How can we help our students understand the purpose and function of peritext? How can we use peritext to support critical thinking and evaluation of information?

The Peritextual Literacy Framework gives clarity to the white noise Malik describes. Melissa Gross and Don Latham drew upon Gérard Genette's foundational definition to provide an approach to peritext applicable to print and nonprint texts.<sup>2</sup> Using the Peritextual Literacy Framework as a teaching and thinking tool allows teachers and librarians the opportunity to guide students in focusing on the important functions of peritextual elements and recognizing their purpose in informing and supporting the text proper. Although the idea of peritext is not new, the Peritextual Literacy Framework is a groundbreaking approach to providing a common vocabulary and guidepost for teachers and librarians and, ultimately, all readers. Some functions of peritext (a glossary, for example) support the reader in understanding the text, while other functions (author's note, resource lists) enrich or enhance the reader's experience. This built-in differentiation has often been overlooked in pedagogical terms and provides a multitude of opportunities. This collection brings together a talented group of educators and librarians, each taking up the work of peritext in different ways. Each of the contributors uses a variety of texts and grade levels to explore peritext's function in the further understanding of the text.

The collection begins with Melissa Gross's foundational work of peritext and the Peritextual Literacy Framework, providing an overview of each as an anchor for the work shared in the collection. Illustrating the full use of the Peritextual Literacy Framework, Don Latham presents a case study of the use of young adult nonfiction, taking advantage of all the peritextual elements as an introduction to using peritext in the classroom.

The next section of the collection explores the ways in which we can use peritextual analysis to strengthen students' visual literacy skills. Crag Hill works with a high school English classroom to critically compare and contrast the function of two graphic novel covers. Librarian Jill Slay shares how she supports her high school's reading initiative by matching students to books using book cover speed dating, allowing students to make inferences about a book's



potential match with their interests. Sean Connors and Erin Daugherty focus on the promotional function of peritext, exploring the ways in which the covers on young adult fiction interface between the text and its potential audience. And Katie Rybakova shares how college students in an Introduction to Literature course use Socratic Circles to discuss existentialist themes represented through the peritextual analysis of canonical book covers.

The third section of the collection focuses on using peritextual analysis to strengthen students' critical thinking. Rebecca Weber and Kevin Dyke explore using the author's note in young adult historical fiction to investigate primary sources related to the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot. Luciana de Oliveira, Loren Jones, and Sharon Smith investigate dust jackets with first-grade students, providing opportunities for classroom discourse and critical thinking in developing readers. Pushing the boundaries of peritext, Antero Garcia and Bud Hunt examine the ways in which *Cathy's Book* challenges the notion of the physical boundaries of a book, critiquing not only where but how readers connect with the text.

A collection on peritextual analysis of text would not be complete without an examination of how the functions of peritext and the Peritextual Literacy Framework exist within nonprint texts. Hyerin Bak and Josey McDaniel present a case study of high school students' peritextual analysis of online news articles. From a media literacy perspective, Peter Kunze examines the peritextual elements and the implications of the packaging of Disney films. And in a culmination of popular culture texts, Jennifer Dail, Kyle Jones, and Glenn Chance provide opportunities for students to analyze the peritext of a documentary film about graffiti artist Banksy, applying the knowledge in their own text creations.

We hope this collection invites you to consider, or reconsider, the ways in which peritextual analysis can enhance students' engagement with the full text, as authors intended it. We hope that the ideas put forward here help you visualize ways of implementing the Peritextual Literacy Framework with a variety of texts in your classrooms and libraries. And most important, we hope that you will find ways to help students think more critically about the texts that they read, see, and hear.

## NOTES

1. Jean-Phillipe Stassen, *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda* (New York: First Second, 2006).

2. Melissa Gross and Don Latham, “The Peritextual Literacy Framework: Using the Functions of Peritext to Support Critical Thinking,” *Library and Information Science Research* 39, no. 2 (2017): 116–23.

PART I

AN OVERVIEW  
OF PERITEXTUAL  
ANALYSIS

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*We should make a dance called the Peritext!*

—One student to another

# Grounding Our Work Theoretically

## *The Peritextual Literacy Framework*

MELISSA GROSS

IN EARLY 2016, WITH THE HELP OF AN ASSEMBLY ON LITERATURE FOR ADOLESCENTS of the National Council of Teachers of English (ALAN) Foundation grant, an after-school peritext book club met once a month for five months to begin testing the newly developed Peritextual Literacy Framework (PLF).<sup>1</sup> The PLF (see the appendix) provides a scaffold for the comprehension of media, assisting the reader or user in deciding to engage with a work, in evaluating the content of the work, and in understanding the nature of the work by analyzing its peritextual elements.

Peritext is the elements of a work that surround the main content and help to mediate between the work and its readers. Examples of common peritext often provided in books include the title page, table of contents, index, and source notes. The analysis of peritext can increase comprehension of a work and assist in the development of critical thinking and information literacy; however, little has been written about methods of embedding peritext into information literacy instruction. The peritext book club, which is the source of the quotation that opens this chapter and which is described more fully later in the chapter, was a resounding success. It demonstrated that the middle school participants enjoyed learning about peritext, the terminology used in the PLF,

and how peritext functions to deepen understanding of a work. This chapter introduces the PLF and explains its theoretical base.

## The Theory of Paratext

Paratext is a concept that was developed by Gérard Genette.<sup>2</sup> He used this term to describe elements that are part of a work (peritext) and elements outside a work (epitext) that influence perceptions of the work and mediate a reader's engagement with a work. In developing his theory of paratext, Genette mainly discussed books, and, as previously noted, examples of peritextual elements in books include the title page, table of contents, index, and source notes among others (see the appendix). Epitext is not part of the book but, rather, points to it. Examples of epitext include book reviews, author websites, and works of critical literary analysis. Genette defines paratext in this way: paratext = peritext + epitext. The PLF focuses solely on peritext, filling a gap in Genette's theory by identifying the functions of peritext and placing peritextual elements into logical categories.

Genette was interested in analyzing the paratext associated with printed books and noted that though all books have paratext, they do not consistently provide the same kinds of paratext. For example, not all books include a foreword, glossary, bibliography, and the like, which means that paratextual analysis needs to assess individual works and that both the presence and the absence of paratext can be the focus of a paratextual analysis. For Genette,

defining a paratextual element consists of determining its location (the question *where?*); the date of its appearance and, if need be, its disappearance (*when?*); its mode of existence, verbal or other (*how?*); the characteristics of its situation of communication—its sender and addressee (*from whom? to whom?*); and the functions that its message aims to fulfill (*to do what?*).<sup>3</sup>

Paratext has been widely adopted in the study of narrative and literary analysis.<sup>4</sup> It has been studied in a variety of disciplines to investigate not only the book but also a diversity of media, including fan fiction, film, DVDs, digital texts, networked media, and transmedia.<sup>5</sup> There have also been several studies of the paratext provided in children's books. These studies are interested in paratext and emergent literacy, the development of reading skills, and how paratext promotes interactivity between texts and readers. A primary focus has

been on picture books and how paratext supports comprehension and appreciation and enriches the reading experience.<sup>6</sup> However, authors also observe that although there are many potential benefits (including media literacy) that can come from the examination of paratext, insufficient attention has been paid to it in educational environments.<sup>7</sup>

## The Peritextual Literacy Framework

Although much has been written about paratext, and specifically about peritext, Gross and Latham were the first to describe peritext as a kind of literacy.<sup>8</sup> However, even though the PLF has relevance across a range of media types for both their use and production, peritextual literacy is not conceptualized as a framework that subsumes other literacies. Rather, it promotes a skill that has significance for a variety of other literacies, such as information literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, visual literacy, cyber literacy, and information fluency. The PLF also offers skills that are relevant for transliteracy—“the ability to competently read, write, and interact across a range of platforms”—as well as basic skills such as reading and writing.<sup>9</sup>

As noted, the PLF concentrates on the functions of peritext and does not examine the role of epitext in relation to works. The PLF categorizes the functions of peritext into six types: production, promotional, navigational, intratextual, supplemental, and documentary. The PLF identifies each of the types of peritext, provides examples of the kind of peritextual elements that support the function, and provides questions to consider when assessing particular peritextual functions. The example elements are not exhaustive but, rather, suggestive and are largely taken from printed books. Many of these elements are also used in other kinds of media, and other kinds of media may provide additional peritextual elements that support the functions of peritext. The analysis of peritextual elements across a variety of media provides an ongoing opportunity for research.

*Production.* The job of production elements is to uniquely identify a work. These elements, such as the author’s name, copyright, and ISBN information, establish what work the reader has in hand, or wishes to locate, differentiating it from other works and providing information about the work’s creation. These elements allow the reader to refer to and locate works as well as to make comparisons between works. Understanding production elements, where they

appear in a work, and how they can be used makes clear why they are important in motivating engagement with a work as well as in describing and sharing texts.

*Promotional.* Promotional elements interface between the work and its potential audience with the goal of making the work appealing to intended readers. Examples of promotional elements include dust jackets, author biographies, endorsements, and award medallions. Promotional elements present another opportunity for readers to decide whether to engage with a work. Peritextual analysis of these elements considers the number and type of promotional elements included in a work and how they influence the potential or actual use of a work.

*Navigational.* Navigational elements assist the reader in understanding the organization of the work and how to search the content. Some examples are the table of contents, index, hyperlinks, and page numbers. Peritextual analysis of these elements can reveal the scope of the work, how topics are arranged, and the author's emphasis or approach to the topic. Navigational elements also reveal how information within the work can be accessed. This guidance is especially important for works that do not have to be experienced linearly, such as reference works or databases. Peritextual analysis can assess how well information is organized and the usability of the work in terms of easy retrieval of information.

*Intratextual.* Intratextual elements interface between the work and the reader by providing insight into what the author was trying to achieve as well as the author's relationship to the work and purpose in creating the work. Some examples of intratextual elements are the foreword, afterword, dedication, and acknowledgments. Peritextual analysis of these elements looks at how they work to increase understanding of the work, to inform ways of approaching the work, and to help the reader understand the purposes for which the work was created.

*Supplemental.* The job of supplemental elements is to provide information outside the main contents of the work to enhance the reader's experience of the text. Some examples of supplemental elements are time lines, maps, photographs, and glossaries. Analysis of these elements can show how they build contextual, historical, linguistic, or other kinds of knowledge as well as how they help the author achieve her goals. Readers can also consider whether



there are supplemental materials not contained in the work that would have enhanced the reading experience.

*Documentary.* Documentary elements connect the reader to external materials used in the production of the work as well as to additional materials that support or extend the content of the work. Some examples of documentary elements are source notes, suggested reading, webographies, and reference lists. Readers can use documentary evidence to understand the credibility of a work as well as the sources of the author's knowledge. The presence or absence of documentary elements can affect how the reader engages with a work.

## Significance of Peritext for Teaching and Research

Understanding the functions of peritext and the PLF can offer many benefits to research and teaching. For example, an analysis of peritext can reveal the character and quality of a work and help readers and users decide whether to examine it further. If an individual decides to engage with a work, analyzing peritext can help him understand and appreciate what the work offers.

Peritextual analysis can inform a reader about how a work can be navigated and can reveal the quality of the information in a work before an in-depth reading. It assists the reader in understanding the basis of the author's knowledge as well as what the author is trying to say. Peritext can also be used to clarify discipline-specific use of sources, revealing how knowledge is created within specific learning communities.

Using the PLF as a teaching aid provides librarians and teachers with a structure for teaching critical thinking and increasing reading comprehension. For teachers, the PLF provides a specific approach for teaching critical thinking about a variety of media that can affect the development of skills and dispositions that support critical thinking and information literacy.

Critical thinking is a goal that library and information science and education share in terms of desired outcomes for readers. This goal is embedded in the *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*; the AASL's *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries*; the *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)* framework; the *Next Generation Science Standards*; and the *Common Core State Standards*.<sup>10</sup>

As Gross and Latham have noted, the PLF can help students

- Understand how the author has formed an opinion or point of view
- Assess the credibility of information
- Assess the usability of the text
- Assess the ethical dimensions of information used and presented
- Consider how supplemental elements augment presentation of the text
- Develop confidence in interpreting texts
- Consider incorporating peritextual elements into their own writing and design<sup>11</sup>

Students who are able to use the functions of peritext will be able to make better selections of works to engage with, will have a better understanding of a variety of media, and will increase their ability to evaluate the credibility of works. Further, understanding the functions of peritext can support the creation and production of new works across a variety of media.

In addition to using the PLF as a scaffold for critical thinking, teachers can use the framework as a tool for assessing how students are interacting with a work, including their ability to interpret and understand a work, to locate and recall information within a work, and to use peritextual elements to analyze and critique both the credibility and the aesthetic value of a work.

## Sample Applications of the Idea

Although all works incorporate peritext into their production, nonfiction is often a robust source for those interested in mining for peritext. In addition, nonfiction is increasingly being used in classrooms as a way to help students develop the background knowledge needed to support achievement.<sup>12</sup> Thus, initial work on the PLF has utilized nonfiction to test its application to teaching and research. Four applications of the PLF are described next.

*Peritext Book Club: Reading to Foster Critical Thinking about STEAM Texts.*<sup>13</sup> The peritext book club was an after-school activity for sixth- through eighth-graders that was led by the school librarian. The book club's focus was on thinking critically about science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics (STEAM) texts using the PLF as a framework. The STEAM focus reflects the current

emphasis on these topics in schools. Twelve middle school students met once a month for five months to learn about and apply the PLF to various books, one on each of the STEAM topics. Along the way, the students participated in a variety of games developed to teach the functions of peritext and took monthly pre- and post-intervention surveys to track their engagement with the book club and their growing knowledge of peritext. The games were developed by the school librarian using Kahoot! (a free, game-based learning platform) and an interactive whiteboard. The books were all young adult trade books (not textbooks). Over the course of the semester, the students reported enjoying the book club and were able to demonstrate their command of the functions of peritext as well as their understanding of what peritextual elements support these functions. They were also able to demonstrate critical thinking about the books they encountered using the PLF as an evaluation tool.

*Using the Peritextual Literacy Framework with Young Adult Biographies.*<sup>14</sup> This project demonstrated the use of the PLF in the context of a middle school social studies class using the biography *Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* by Philip Hoose. The goal of this demonstration was to show content area teachers how the PLF can augment the study of biography in promoting the acquisition of background knowledge and assisting students in navigating the complexity of nonfiction content. The project used a three-pronged approach, using the PLF first as a pre-reading strategy, then during reading, and finally after reading the book. For each phase of reading, the pertinent peritextual functions and elements were discussed and activities suggested for use in the classroom for analyzing the bibliography and extending the work through the creation of extension texts. The researchers also suggested ways in which social studies teachers can work collaboratively with their school librarian to develop lesson plans and assignments, supply resources, assist students in searching for evidence and other resources, help with the integration of technology into lesson plans, and assist with student evaluation.

*Supporting Critical Thinking through Young Adult Nonfiction.*<sup>15</sup> This project focused on the analysis of peritextual elements that help a reader evaluate the credibility of a work: the author biography, author notes, source notes, references, bibliography/webography/discography, suggested reading, and image credits. The researchers used Steve Sheinkin's *Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World's Most Dangerous Weapon* and Neal Bascomb's *The Nazi Hunt-*

ers: *How a Team of Spies and Survivors Captured the World's Most Notorious Nazi* as case studies. A framework of the following questions taken from Wilson guided the analysis:<sup>16</sup>

- What did the author learn in writing the book?
- How does the author know?
- What sources are used?
- What does the author say about the sources?
- What does the author want us to know about the topic?
- Does the author adhere to documentation standards?

The analysis demonstrated that the authority of these authors relies on providing lists of their previous works rather than indications of their education or special training. The peritextual elements in both books provided information about the process of research and writing and the authors' excitement in working on their projects. Bascomb talked about the quality of his sources and the problem of contradictory accounts. Sheinkin focused on identifying sources he preferred, but not why. Neither work provides the level of source identification that is expected of young adults in school, and image credits in these works were often cited only at the level of the museum, library, or archive where the images reside. These findings provide a basis for an in-depth discussion of how to understand how authors know what they know and how to judge the credibility of works.

*"The President Has Been Shot!"* This case study by Latham, which follows this chapter, identifies and discusses the various types of peritext found in *"The President Has Been Shot!" The Assassination of John F. Kennedy* by James L. Swanson. Further, the chapter provides prompts that can be used in the classroom to assist thinking about how the analysis of peritext aids the reader in approaching, understanding, and evaluating this specific work. This step-by-step guide to a peritextual analysis demonstrates the use of the PLF and provides an example of peritextual analysis that can be followed using other books and media.

## Further Applications and Questions to Consider

Because little has been written about using peritextual analysis to develop critical thinking and information literacy, the topic is rich with opportunities for both research and the development of lesson plans and assessments for use of

the PLF in the classroom. The proliferation of media also provides opportunities to further test the PLF and to extend understanding of the presence and absence of peritextual elements in various media types as well as the inclusion of peritext in the production of new works. The question of how peritext can facilitate user experience with media (media literacy) and across media (trans-literacy) is far from answered, and the resulting question of how peritext helps users understand, access, navigate, and assess a variety of media should be addressed in research and in work with users across the age spectrum.

Other areas for investigation include research on the usefulness of the PLF for advancing emergent literacy, reading comprehension, reading motivation, and information literacy in formal and informal learning environments. It will also be interesting to learn the extent to which readers who are introduced to the functions of peritext incorporate peritextual analysis into their reading habits and include peritextual elements in the works they produce. This relates also to the need to understand the impact of the functions of peritext on interface design and usability.

As noted throughout this chapter, the PLF is focused solely on the functions of peritext. As a next step in theory development, it will be interesting to explore the functions of epitext and how it influences motivation to read, critical thinking about works, and the interpretation and evaluation of works as well as their reception in the broader culture.

## Conclusion

*Can I do the book club next year again? You'd better do this again next year!*

—Seventh-grade girl

Genette himself notes that the use of paratext (remember, paratext = peritext + epitext) in works is not mandatory and that readers are free to ignore paratext if they wish.<sup>17</sup> However, the importance of paratext has become evident as the number and types of media expand.<sup>18</sup> Peritext is informing research across a wide variety of fields, and it behooves librarians and teachers to explore how students and users can benefit from exposure to the functions of peritext. The PLF fills a gap in paratext theory and provides a scaffold that educators of all kinds can use to promote critical thinking in the use, analysis, and production of works. There is still much to know about how peritext can be harnessed to

improve reading comprehension and the development of habits and dispositions that can serve full participation in an increasingly complex world of information. Librarians and teachers have an important role to play in exploring the benefits of peritext in working with students and users of all ages.

## NOTES

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