



What Does the Instructor Want? The View from the Writing Center

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When I first confronted the question posed by the editors of this volume, “What is college-level writing?” my initial response was a desperate desire to evade answering. Then a feeling of utter helplessness set in when pondering a question much like one of those all-encompassing questions we used to debate over endless mugs of coffee in college coffee houses. Everyone in those discussions had different answers on different days to the same question. Sometimes we argued whether the question of the day could even be asked. But then, I’m supposed to be more experienced now, having directed and tutored in a writing center for almost thirty years. I’m tempted to offer an answer similar to U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s often-quoted reply when asked how to recognize pornography. As he said, “you know when you see it” (Jacobellis). Can’t I, I wondered, recognize college-level writing when I see it?

Yet, as a tutor, I have to admit I am not always sure which college-level writing I am supposed to recognize. For example, one rainy fall afternoon a student dragged himself into the writing lab where I tutored, flung himself into a chair next to me, and with a truly dejected look produced a paper he had written. His first comment was that he was an A student in the first-year Advanced Composition course. And then he admitted that the paper lying limply in front of us was considered a disaster zone by the faculty member who taught his engineering course. As I read his paper, I admired the elegant sentences, the careful use of transitions, the introduction that led readers smoothly into the subject, the clear thesis statement, and so on. This would be an A

paper in any composition course, but for his engineering instructor it was inappropriate and, therefore, poorly written. The student was mystified as to what the engineering instructor wanted, despite the notation across the top of the title page: “GET TO THE POINT.” From the student’s perspective, there was indeed a clear thesis sentence. What did the professor want?

That was merely one example of what others in this book and elsewhere have pointed out—the variety of programs and goals as well as the fundamental problem of lack of universally similar responses from readers. As Patrick Sullivan notes, when he raised the problem of defining college-level writing because of the lack of stability both in language and in readers:

A number of important modern literary theorists . . . argue . . . that because language is so slippery, the art of reading and, by extension, interpretation and evaluation, must be conducted as a provisional enterprise. . . . (376)

Ellen Andrews Knodt confirms the disparity among standards that exists and notes that it stems from the “wide disagreement among composition programs and faculty about the goals to be achieved in college writing programs” (146). Exploring the causes of this divergence in goals, she sees one of the problems with uniformity as arising from “many college writing programs [that] have come to serve many purposes” (146). Other contributors to this book confirm the problems of lack of similar goals, standards, readers, programs, and institutional structures and populations. The official Outcomes Statement of the Council of Writing Program Administrators prefers instead to define *outcomes* or *types of results* and declines to specify *standards* for first-year composition because, as the Outcomes Statement explains: “The setting of standards should be left to specific institutions or specific groups of institutions” (Council).

If we are not likely to reach agreement through the prism of standards, and if the Council of Writing Program Administrators chooses to present outcomes instead of standards, how do we recognize when the outcomes have indeed been reached? For example, one outcome in the Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement is that by the end of a first-year composi-

tion program the student should be able to focus on a purpose; another outcome is that first-year students should be able to control surface features such as syntax, grammar, and punctuation. But how are we to determine what constitutes *control* of such features? The Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement is a noble attempt to recognize and cope with diversity among institutions and still determine what students should be learning in their first composition courses. It is a description of goals and does not attempt to answer the question of how to recognize when the outcomes are met.

So, once again, we cycle back to the question of what college-level writing is, looking for a place to become specific enough to be useful across broad differences among institutions, programs, and instructors. One thing we can do is to return to the basic question of underlying characteristics of writing that define experienced writers, concepts that lie at the intersections of that welter of programs, goals, and varied reader interpretations. Ronald Lunsford concludes that college-level writers should be able to respond to texts that contain abstract content, should be able to “deal with complex issues that challenge students to read against their biases” (196). The list of aptitudes that define characteristics of college writing is, of course, still plagued by the very basic divergence of reader responses, but we can continue to try to work on the list of abilities such as Lunsford has done. My contribution to that list is that college-level writing should demonstrate the writer’s ability to write effectively to his or her particular audience. Moreover, I hope to expand on the problems caused by lack of audience awareness.

Audiences vary, of course, but when a student’s writing does not succeed with its intended reader, as with that engineering instructor who condemned the student’s paper because the point was not immediately obvious to that reader, the student has not attended appropriately to the audience. This does not mean that the problem automatically lies with the writer because it may be that the student was not appropriately made aware of various genre and instructor guidelines or that his first-year composition course had not made him aware of differences among audiences. But nevertheless, that paper for that teacher in that class was not a piece of successful writing. I also do not mean that every genre

has tight, uniform standards or that all engineering faculty want concise documents that boil down the prose to its essence. However, I have met with students writing papers for many fields whose instructors had impressed upon them the need to be concise. But I have also worked with students whose writing met the standard of conciseness but were writing for faculty who found some students' writing too elliptical, too tightly packed. One such instructor wanted his students to be able to write for the business world where, from his experience with outside consulting, a different, more relaxed tone prevails, despite the added verbiage this might cause. (As I found out in a conversation with this faculty member who encouraged informality, "thou shalt not use passive voice" should be the eleventh commandment. He had clearly drunk from the fountain of Strunk and White.) In the responses Susan Schorn received from colleagues at her institution, she notes that an instructor in the School of Business at her university shares this emphasis on audience: "If I had to pick one thing that separates adult-level writing from adolescent-level writing, it is the ability to reflect the needs of the audience in your writing. To be able to empathize with the reader and present the material in a way they can best receive and comprehend it" (336). Further on in her response, the Business School instructor notes that this includes "[leaving] behind the self-centered focus of youth" (Schorn 336).

The literature of composition is filled with references to the need for writers to move beyond writing for themselves, and composition texts explain and explain the need for audience awareness. And the Writing Program Administrators Outcomes Statement includes the ability to respond to the needs of different audiences (Council). But for some students, this simply does not register or is not meaningful in any useful way, does not seem as urgent as getting the commas in the right place or avoiding fragments or getting the thesis statement in the first paragraph. If so, the student is not yet able to produce college-level writing. The variety of audiences out there is not only real in academia (as the literature of writing-across-the-curriculum documents), it is also critically important when writers address the basic prewriting/planning questions such as "who am I writing to?" "why?" and "what do they need to know?" The answers to these questions

will determine whether that writer “leaves behind the self-centered focus of youth” that the Business School instructor in Schorn’s institution sees as a defining criterion of adult-level writing. This move from the self-centered focus of youth, however, may not be just confined to youth. When Linda Flower introduced the powerful concept of writer-based and reader-based prose, she invited us to look deep into our own composing processes, as well as our students’, to see what writer-based prose is, how it appears on paper, and what we can do to move the writer to reader-based prose.

Flower begins with a question: “[W]hy do papers that do express what the writer meant (to his or her own satisfaction) often fail to communicate the same meaning to a reader?” (19). She continues: “[E]ffective writers do not simply *express* thought but *transform* it in certain complex but describable ways for the needs of the reader” (19). We see here the movement that Flower describes. Writer-based prose is not merely inadequate prose but prose, possibly in its early states, that has not yet been transformed. Farther into her discussion of writer-based and reader-based prose, Flower reminds us that this earlier form of writing, writer-based prose, is common to us all, prose that she notes is “a major and familiar mode of expression which we all use from time to time,” characterized by “features of structure, function, and style. Furthermore, it shares many of these features with the modes of inner and egocentric speech described by Vygotsky and Piaget” (20). Inner speech may be that shorthand we use mentally, and it often shows up in student papers that are incompletely informative, often as a first draft being passed off as a finished paper. Lisa Ede calls such writing egocentric, but not writing that implies selfishness; rather, moving beyond one’s self as the audience is a skill children must learn as they acquire the ability to decenter and begin to envision viewpoints of others (145). As a tutor, my task as a reader might be to ask the writer to clarify or expand on what is being discussed because I seem to be missing content that will explain an argument, a line of thought, or a connection between two ideas. We recognize some writer-based prose, then, when it is confusing, not completely developed, or lacking certain parts of an analysis or even a description that we, as intended readers, need in order to understand and

move forward. When I turn to a writer and ask what was meant at the point of my confusion, that writer may stop and verbally fill in the blanks needed for me to proceed. Then, we need only look back at the paper to see that the missing information may have been in the writer's mind but not on the paper. In short, the writer was writing to himself or herself until a reader stopped him or her to indicate what is missing. If the writer fills in the blanks with the awareness of what the reader needs, he or she is on the way to transforming the paper into *reader-based* prose. Sayanti Ganguly, a writing center tutor experiencing the incompleteness that writer-based prose causes, describes her pedagogy in action as she works with students:

When I come across sentences and paragraphs that are unclear because of word choice, word order, or simply because they are too brief, I ask students to tell me what they mean. In explaining, the student usually talks about the idea he/she is trying to convey in much greater detail. They use three sentences to explain what they have said cryptically in one. (11)

Flower's concept of writer-based and reader-based prose was widely acknowledged after her 1979 article in *College English*, but it has tended to fall off our agendas or awareness of how to fold it into our thinking about college-level writing, despite Flower's description of writer-based prose as "the source of some of the most common and pervasive problems in academic and professional writing" (19). How then can we unpack this complex notion of writer-based prose caused by lack of awareness of audience needs? What are the characteristics of this use of language that Vygotsky calls "inner speech"? When we can recognize it, we are on our way to being able to distinguish it from reader-based prose, which is a major characteristic of college-level writing. One feature of writer-based prose, in Flower's taxonomy, is that it is highly elliptical, condensed, because we may not need to spell out who or what the subject is or perhaps even the context of the thought. "Not now" might be a bit of inner speech that, when expanded for someone else who does not share the thought or situation, might mean "I won't have time to make that phone call because I need to leave the house now." An

instructor's response to a similar writer-based sentence or paragraph might well be "expand on this" or "tell me more" or "what does this mean?" or "please explain" or simply "confusing." From a tutor's perspective, when I met with a student whose writer-based prose contained such instructor responses, I found that some students needed help in realizing that a reader would need such explanation. Good writers are more likely to come to the writing center to ask a tutor to read a draft and to answer the writer's question: "Does this make sense?" or "Do you get what I'm trying to say?" In that case, the writer already recognizes the need to transform the prose but is not sure if sufficient transformation has taken place. Elliptical writing, however, is not the only cause of lack of development in a paper. Some students do not know what else to add to a paper that is supposed to be 500 words but is only 425. That is more likely not writer-based or elliptical writing; instead, the writer may need invention strategies, though Theodore Clevinger views audience analysis as inherently a heuristic procedure (qtd. in Ede 142). Certainly I have used audience analysis that way in tutorials when I ask not "What else can you say here?" but instead assume the role of the intended reader and ask "Why are you telling me this?" or some other reader question to turn the writer's attention to my need to know why I should be reading some sentence or paragraph or paper.

A second characteristic of writer-based prose, as Flower teases out its elements, is that it uses words "saturated with sense" (21), words that do not necessarily carry their public meanings. Again, we are back to private or idiosyncratic language, language laden with connotations in the writer's mind that are not publicly shared. For example, a student with whom I worked in a tutorial began an *issue paper* (that is, not a research paper but a statement of the writer's opinion on some issue) with the following:

Dodgers really tick me off. It seems that these people in society today are the ones that get all of the benefits. This is a huge problem, not only because they are not productive for America but they are making the productive people in society less productive.

It seems that *dodgers* in that writer's mind are the people who live on welfare and dodge working. Or maybe they are the people who slip through various cracks and don't pay taxes or get free health care. Or maybe *dodgers* encompasses more in that student's mind. I never was able to understand fully what that word meant to that writer. Nor was the writer sympathetic to my need to understand the private use of this word. Other examples are those words that call up memories, smells, contexts in one person's mind that are not universally shared. *Grandmother* for some recalls a lovely lady who always had a home-baked pie in the kitchen; for others, it's a sick, frail person whom it was difficult to talk to. (I cite this example because of a tutorial with a student who was writing about divorce and its repercussions. One of the effects of a divorce discussed in the paper was that some children must then live with grandparents. For that writer, this was not a positive outcome, but that was not evident in the writing. As a reader, I could not tell whether that result was intended as a problem caused by divorce or some compensation for the upheaval in a child's life.) And here, we are back to the slipperiness of language. And sometimes the this-is-what-I-mean word choice can lead to lack of specificity. Endless science lab reports were carried into our writing lab with vague phrases such as the "hot liquid" listed as the cause of a synthetic coating to crack. The instructor notation in such a case is "how hot? Be precise."

The third characteristic of writer-based prose, as described by Flower, is the absence of logical and causal relations, the lack of transitions:

In experiments with children's use of logical-causal connectives such as *because*, *therefore*, and *although*, Piaget found that children have difficulty managing such relationships and in spontaneous speech will substitute a non-logical, non-causal connective such as *then*. Piaget described this strategy for relating things as *juxtaposition*: "the cognitive tendency simply to link (juxtapose) one thought element to another, rather than to tie them together by some causal or logical relation." (21)

We are all familiar with the disconnect or lack of logical flow of ideas caused by lack of transitions in a piece of writing. And sometimes, writers who have not explored in their own minds

how or why sentence B follows after sentence A will disguise the lack of logical connection with sentences strung together with *and* or, as Piaget noted, with *then*.

Such are some characteristics of writer-based prose, writing that has not been transformed into prose that indicates awareness of audience. The problems that can result from this elliptical, private writing are familiar to us all. One such difficulty is a lack of organization in a writer's paper because, as Flower explains, "it is the record and the working of his own verbal thought . . . the associative, narrative path of the writer's own confrontation with her subject" (19–20). Some of us might call this kind of narrative a *mind dump*, that is, putting into words all that spills from the writer's mind as he or she thinks about it. Research papers, lab reports, proposals that have not been transformed into *reader-based* prose often have this sort of narrative, tracing the path of what the writer did, what problems she encountered, how she overcame them, and so on. These are narratives of progress, usually reported in the chronological order of what happened or how the writer got to the result, thesis, or information. These "home movies of the writer's mind" (Flower 25) often contain endless uses of "I found" or "I realized" or "so then I tried to" or "then I found." There is, of course, the writer's desire to share with readers all that he or she went through to get to the discovery or result (particularly prevalent in papers that required some research). But again, that's a lack of reader consciousness, a lack of awareness that the reader may not really care about the path to the point, only what the point, outcome, or result is. As a tutor, I have tried as gently as I could to ask writers whose papers are just these narratives of their process or path why they are telling me all that. Some writers acknowledge the desire to show how hard they worked, but other writers do not easily see why the narrative should not dominate the paper.

There are also grammatical problems that result from lack of awareness of what information readers need. Ambiguous pronoun references are usually not ambiguous for the writer when writing for himself or herself; fragments might result when a thought trails off in the writer's mind or is merely the detached phrase or dependent clause that follows the previous sentence. Textbooks invoke the need to gain distance from a piece of writ-

ing so that the writer can see what revisions may be needed for the reader, but that assumes an easy transition to a reader stance, an understanding or ability to recognize what readers will need. Sentences drained of any internal punctuation can reflect the writer's ability to decode for himself or herself what he or she has written, without realizing how to chunk the information for the reader.

Lest we get carried away with condemning writer-based prose as mere problem-ridden discourse, Flower happily notes that writer-based prose "is not a composite of errors or a mistake that should be scrapped. Instead, it is a half-way place for many writers" (37) before the needed transformation into reader-based prose has taken place. However, we are still left with the question of who the reader is. The literature of composition has recognized to various degrees the fiction behind the notion of a knowable audience. Beginning with Walter Ong's seminal essay demonstrating that the audience a writer constructs is a fiction, scholars have explored the implications and nature of this fictional audience. As Fred Pfister and Joanne Petrick point out, fictionalizing an audience is an act of constructing in the imagination a replica of the readers who actually exist out there in the world (213–14). Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, in an effort to move away from any simplified conception of audience, distinguish two different audiences a writer might envision: the audience addressed, which emphasizes a real audience out there who can be observed and analyzed (the audience that Ede and Lunsford see as privileged by Pfister and Petrick), and the audience invoked, the audience writers construct because they cannot know the reality of who is out there. This audience that is invoked is a created fiction in which writers indicate the role they want readers to adopt in responding to text. Readers, then, cannot simply invoke some idiosyncratic need and deem prose less than college level if, for some personal reason or bias, the writing is unclear or inappropriate. By noting that college-level writing is writing that is appropriate for its intended audience, we have to expand the concept of audience or reader to include the fictionalized aspect as well.

But, just to muddy up the waters even further, there is yet one more aspect of audience as a factor in determining if writing

meets college-level standards, and that is to recognize the growing complexity of audiences in academia and beyond. Today, the transformation that Flower notes as needed for text to become public is far more complex, given the ever-growing numbers of students with diverse cultural backgrounds and/or students whose first language is not English. Whereas a more homogeneous audience might once have been a construct to work with, the diversity of cultures, primary languages of readers, even the diverse and constantly changing world of business and commerce, would ask a reasonably competent writer to rise to the sophisticated level of being able to write for discourse communities that college writers have little knowledge of. But if we do not ask that writers be able to recognize all the various facets of diversity that exist, student writers should still exhibit some awareness of diverse audiences other than those who share the writer's beliefs and background. As students progress through their college education, they can be expected to grow in awareness so that what is expected of a first-year college writer is less than what is expected of a graduating senior. For example, a first-year composition student who strongly defends the need to halt immigration to the United States should show some recognition of the benefits of immigration, some awareness that there are opposing views that should be accounted for. Thus, students writing argumentation papers should be learning how to seek common ground but should be excused from not envisioning all the complexities of various groups who are concerned with immigration. Later in the student's college career, that recognition (we hope) will grow and deepen. So, college-level writing needs to show maturation from year to year as students progress through their academic career, a fact that the Outcomes Statement of the Council of Writing Program Administrators also emphasizes when it notes that as students move beyond first-year composition courses, their "abilities not only diversify along disciplinary and professional lines but also move into whole new levels where expected outcomes expand, multiply, and diverge" (Council).

If audience awareness should be a major topic in composition pedagogy, we will have to confront the question of how to teach it. Lisa Ede is not sure how teachers can develop audience awareness (147), while Linda Flower and John Hayes suggest

creating real assignments with real audiences with real needs (qtd. in Ede 147). Barry Kroll offers three views of audience and examines the theoretical and pedagogical implications (172). But even with strong pedagogy to help writers make that necessary transformation from writer-based to reader-based prose, we should recognize that audience awareness for some students will not quickly develop beyond writing for the teacher. But instructors at all levels of academia who assign writing in their classes can assist in this by providing students with clear descriptions of who the intended audience is and what they need in order to find the writing effective and appropriate.

And, finally, we return to a question that must still nag at us. If we can't specify standards that allow for divergence of programs, goals, and so on, and writing program administrators talk in terms of outcomes, how do we recognize college-level writing? If I have made a sufficient argument for the importance of audience and how it affects so much of the quality of a written document, then one criterion might be any permutation of a set of questions to ask a reader how he or she is positioned to be the reader of that document. Such a reader can ask, "Am I the appropriate reader of this paper? If so, does the writing make sense? Is it clear? Do I need more information? Do I find it free of distracting surface errors?" When the reader is the appropriate reader, given the complexity of that term, and finds the writing satisfactory in such terms, then perhaps we might have some confidence in considering that we have begun to identify college-level writing.

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