

FOREWORD

AVAILABILITY MATTERS (AND SO DOES THIS BOOK)

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WRITING IS A TIME MACHINE

Writing is a time machine. It has always been a way to alter the constraints of space and time such that we humans might make available, to others and ourselves, ideas and the means to interact with these ideas: recall, view, edit or otherwise change, use, re-use, or share them. Texts afford that impressive list of interactions. This is writing as a technology, a thing invented by people.

The act of writing, then, is a deliberate move to engage the affordances of our time machine. This is true of the simple act of making a list of items for oneself to pick up at the grocery store, tagging a subway car with graffiti, or building a dictionary of definitions and their etymologies. It is true, too, of inscribing a thank-you card with a bon mot and penning a novel of genre fiction. We do each of these things to extend our ability to interact with others in time and space, to make something of ourselves available beyond the immediate moment and beyond the physical limits of human contact defined by an immediate moment.

This idea—availability—may be the least obsessed-over term by rhetoric scholars in Aristotle’s famous definition of rhetoric from his treatise *On Rhetoric*: “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.” And yet, if we consider it carefully for just a moment, in that one word lies much of the nuance of other essential terms of contemporary rhetorical thought that are not present in the definition: *context*, *situatedness*, *culture*, and even *power*. After all, what is and especially what is not available in a given time and place to one person is of tremendous import in any analysis of rhetorical activity. We may analyze these conditions in instrumental terms— “do you mean this place doesn’t have Wi-Fi?”—or in socio-economic ones—“the fact that public meetings were held in a location without easy access to public transit limited the means by which affected citizens could voice opposition to the proposal.” For Aristotle’s place-based conception of rhetoric, availability can act like gravity or

inertia, as a physical but invisible law that limits who can speak (no slaves or women allowed!) how, when, and where.

Availability matters. And, today, as an issue of rhetorical theory and rhetorical theorists, it might matter most of all. The reason is that we have a (relatively) new technology on the scene: network writing.

NETWORK WRITING IS A QUANTUM LEAP

Network writing (Jones, 2015) dramatically changes the foundations on which the act of writing is predicated. And it does so by scaling up and out—in a manner difficult to overstate—what it means to make ourselves and our texts become available to others, over time, across vast distances, (almost) instantaneously.

If writing is a time machine, we have for the most part in our theory and pedagogy of writing offered strategies for availability with a fairly linear and very slow understanding of time. Network writing introduces a quantum shift in how we must think about availability in the moment of composing, both in terms of the available means of persuasion (as Aristotle would have them) and the availability of others to whom we might connect to achieve our rhetorical aims. This latter group includes not only those people who we understand as our audience(s), but also those who we might count on to spread our message (willingly or not, consciously or not) and those we might enroll to help create it in the first place. In these space/time dynamics, we begin to see the import of availability for a wide variety of phenomena that, if not new, are suddenly much more matters of concern due to network writing, from trolling to trigger warnings.

But in writing studies, we are still wrapping our heads around what all of this might mean. And this is why I am so very grateful for the work Vie and Walls have assembled in this important collection. The pieces here help rhetorical scholars engage in an informed dialogue about the material conditions of network writing where they are most readily observable: in social networks. This is a timely collection.

Let me offer an example that shows how our sense of the affordances of time-travel—teaching students to use the time machine functions of writing—have been more H. G. Wells than Kurt Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. A few years ago now, the Writing in Digital Environments Research Center sponsored a national survey that captured a large, representative sample of the 2010 enrollment class in the United States. Nearly 3,000 students from all over the country and from different types of institutions of higher education responded to the survey. Demographically, our sample looked like the U.S. college student population in 2010. It was mostly young women. It was mostly white, but reflected

a growing population of Hispanic and African American women. We asked this group of students questions about their writing lives, in particular what kinds of things they routinely wrote and what technologies they used to write.

We learned some fascinating things from this survey, but perhaps no single thing surprised our colleagues more than the most common writing instrument was their mobile phone. More often than they picked up a pencil or a pen, they would reach for their phone to do the kinds of writing they did the most: short, informal genres to connect with other people in their lives. But they also use them for every other kind of text they reported writing, from screenplays to reports. They weren't just sending LOLs to one another.

So it bears consideration: What does a mobile phone have that a pencil and paper do not? The answer: Mobile phones have dramatically improved affordances for making writing resources available. Mobile phones offer easier access to reference material as well as the previous writing students have done. And they make trustworthy, knowledgeable people easy to contact for advice and feedback. All of these are important things that speak to the quantum shift of network writing.

We still see teachers of writing banning mobile phones in classrooms. Why? Perhaps they fail to see how the mobile phone is not a tool for fooling around; instead, it represents the ability to compose with a vast array of human knowledge resources at one's fingertips and with other knowledgeable and trustworthy people at one's immediate disposal simply by hailing them. It represents that chance to engage invention as the thoroughly social act that we have been saying it is for decades now in composition studies. Sure, it also means that I can reply to a friend with just the right animated gif of Nicolas Cage saying a line from a campy film because OF COURSE that gif exists and I can send it from my phone to hers with just a few long presses of the screen. But the dramatic change here is that this clip is available to me. And that friends are available to one another, even if she is four time zones away in a sales meeting and I am at home on my couch.

WHAT MAKES DIGITAL OBJECTS AVAILABLE? OR WHY YOUR PHONE IS BETTER THAN A PENCIL

Because writing is spread out in time as we live it—laminated chronotopically as Paul Prior and Jody Shipka (2003) have said—phones are much, much more useful for writing than pencils are.

Everything you write with your phone is going to stand a chance of being found again. Everything can quickly and easily—even instantly—be moved to another composing space. It can be shared with others. It can be combined with

another thing you wrote earlier without standing apart as two distinct texts . . . that is, your phone can accommodate the relationships among texts that represent the larger things you are writing.

Another way to think about this is to say that everything we write with our phones has more of the features that make the resulting text “available” than anything we write with a pencil. So, you might ask, what makes a text more available? A text is more available if it is . . .

- a. Digital, by which I mean numerically encoded. Why? Because we can perform computing operations to transform it and move it across disparate forms of networks: coaxial and fiberoptic and social.
- b. Highly addressable (Witmore, 2010), by which I mean that rather than consisting of inscrutable wholes, texts are understood and represented as consisting of an array of pieces, each of which may be useful in combination or in isolation.
- c. Well-indexed, by which I mean that each of those small pieces of text that may need to be available has a known, communicable location. Text messages are better indexed by these criteria than photos are, because we have stable, relative location information for every character (this is why you can highlight and select a passage by using copy/paste).
- d. Easily reiterable, by which I mean that they exist in a format and a space that allows them to be copied, preferably in a non-destructive way (that is, in a way that leaves the prior version intact).

Network writing creates texts that are more available than non-networked. Sometimes vastly more available. And this has important, sometimes devastating and sometimes liberatory consequences. Availability matters.

MAKING OURSELVES AVAILABLE TO ONE ANOTHER

The primary focus of my work has been to explore the possibilities and the implications of increased availability for textual objects that result from network writing. The list of four features above is an attempt at a tidy synthesis of that work. I have written about what network writing does to teaching and learning writing, how it changes the work of writing (knowledge work), and how it changes the status of those who write in the knowledge economy. Many others have written about how network writing makes for new experiences of reading and composing. Indeed, the field of computers and writing has made this a central topic; Gail Hawisher et al. (1995) traced the origins of this conversation. And there is no doubt much more to come.

But I believe the most disruptive effects of network writing lie in the ways it

permits humans to be available to one another when they are engaged in writing. If you have ever had your pulse quicken when you posted an emotionally charged comment on someone's Facebook wall with whom you disagree, you have a sense (or a sense memory) of what I am talking about.

With social networks in particular, we can be present with, to, and for one another in ways that are only just beginning to resolve for us as a cultural phenomenon. And yet in these spaces we are writing. Together. My colleague Jeff Grabill (2014) has called Facebook "possibly the biggest, most significant collaborative writing project in human history."

I have seen him say this to crowds of people and the reaction is a wave of emotion: bemusement at first, then something like fear both signaled by nervous laughter, then something like quiet assent or agreement signaled by the proverbial smattering of applause. In a few cases where writing teachers and researchers have made up a majority of the audience, there is a second reaction that comes later when the implications of this claim hit home. What if we took it seriously? What if we understood Facebook for what it empirically is: a huge, collaboratively authored, multi-modal ruckus of a text, reaching billions (with a B) of people every day? What if we took social media writing seriously?

And what if we don't?

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Hart-Davidson

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