



MODELS MAKE WRITING TASKS EASIER

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Experienced writers have learned to ask themselves questions about their writing that are determined by the familiarity and complexity of the task ahead. Such questions as these are customary: (A) Who is going to read this document? (B) What should they learn from reading it? (C) How must the information be presented to achieve the results I want?



**INEXPERIENCED WRITER HAVING
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Perhaps all three questions apply to a writing task, perhaps only one; their application is determined by the writer's purpose. For instance, in compiling a family grocery list, categories (A) and (C) generally don't need any attention at all, but when category (B) is incomplete, there will be immediate complaints. By contrast, if the same person writes a proposal to obtain funding for a project, serious inquiry into all three categories becomes essential. A writer with such a

task is likely to obtain copies of previously funded proposals to use as a model for appropriate format and language. Experienced writers invariably learn from the successes and failures of others and themselves. Because inexperienced writers lack practice asking or answering questions which guide different composing processes, they often cannot define or master unfamiliar writing situations.

The Value of Models

As teachers of writing we need to help students experiment within many sorts of rhetorical constraints. Such experiments with writing are not threatening when a model or framework is supplied and the writer is free to compose within it; the best models, therefore, encourage two very different behaviors: imitation and invention. The writer imitates a form and invents an original text.

Newspapers are a good source of various rhetorical models: editorials, sports reports, letters to the editor, obituaries, advertisements. Television is another familiar, accessible form of communication that students can imitate. For example, with free rein to invent their own products and with straightforward direction to work from, two students together write and present a commercial to the class. The following model for writing a commercial supplies a clear explanation of the rhetorical purposes of television dialogue:

Steps to a Convincing Television Commercial

1. Make clear what the merchandise is and does.
2. Persuade through visual demonstration of the product in use.
3. Appeal to a basic desire and link it to the product.
4. List the benefits of the item and the arguments for buying it.
5. Provide interest for both eye and ear.

6. Use a maximum of action with a minimum of words.

In preparing a television commercial using two people, employ the device of the **proxy question**. First, identify the information you want to give the viewer, then ask a question that requires the desired explanation. The better you can disguise the fact that you are using a proxy question to give information to your viewers, the more acceptable it will be to them. Proxy questions can be perfectly disguised by the script. For instance, when one character is being interviewed for a job by the other one, a great deal of information can be made clear to the viewer without detailed explanations seeming to be contrived and awkward. The viewer believes that the circumstances of the interview necessitate the facts coming to light.

Characters in a television commercial must sound like real people, and yet they cannot talk the way real people talk. This is a contradiction resolved by the viewer himself. Although the speech the viewer hears is not the same as everyday speech, he earnestly wants recognizable clues as to the common function and role of the people he sees on the screen. These clues, or props as I call them, are readily accepted by an audience, for they complete the image. Equally important--the information they give must be reinforced by the words of the person talking. Thus, in the very act of speaking unlike real people, the characters supply the viewer with information props which create dimension, history, and intention. The sense of reality gained in this simultaneous process is so much greater than the viewers' sense of unreality in the conversation that the illusion is expanded rather than diminished. A triangle of association is established between speakers and props for the viewer.

Putting this to the actual test, imagine two men engaged in this actual conversation:

1st MAN: Will you be able to meet me?

2nd MAN: Yes...I think so.

1st MAN: What time will you be through?

2nd MAN: Oh, about five.

1st MAN: Well...we can meet at the regular place.

2nd MAN: Sure.

Not a great deal can be made of this conversation because it does not take into account a dialogue triangle between speakers and props. With so little time at his disposal, the television writer can't make use of such relatively empty dialogue. Here is the same dialogue with the props added:

1st MAN: Will you be able to meet me?

2nd MAN: I think so. I've only one operation this afternoon.

1st MAN: Glad to see you're taking it easier. What time will you be through?

2nd MAN: If everything goes well, about five. I'm planning to relax this weekend, and drive my new Electrocar north for some skiing.

1st MAN: Sounds great. I'll pick up Doris and we can meet you in front of the hospital. We'll split the cost.

2nd MAN: Fine! I can use this weekend in the country. And it won't cost us anything for gas. We just charge the battery.

The viewer now knows a great deal. One of the men is a doctor who works very

hard, and his friend--who knows him well--is aware of this. The first man sounds as if he is married, for he mentions a woman named Doris. They will drive to the country, we may assume, for relaxation in a beautiful setting. The doctor is the happy owner of a new money-saving Electrocar; the consumer in the audience is being influenced to imitate the buyer. The original dialogue merely tells the viewer that the men have a place to meet, but there is no reason for a viewer to identify that place with an object anyone would like to own. The second version creates important associations. Of course, the picture the television viewer sees reinforces the belief that owning this car to vacation in would be pleasurable.

From Speech to Writing

Assignments like this allow students to begin from ordinary conversation and then adapt such speech to writing for a defined purpose. The assignment encourages invention while its dimension of playfulness reduces students' self-consciousness about trying a new kind of composition. When the audience is the entire class, student writers inevitably engage in a livelier process of inquiry about the product to be sold and the method of its presentation than they would for the teacher alone. The classroom provides the forum for analysis of types of writing people encounter as listeners, readers, and writers. Varying the emphasis and requirements of assignments brings different linguistic and rhetorical conditions to students' attention; expanding the audience for writers' ideas demonstrates how language is responded to in a world of different perceptions.

During Workshop '80 I plan to examine the design of several kinds of writing tasks, including assignments which students can produce and talk about collaboratively.