

# Writing For Readers

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Effective writers write with their readers in mind. They make a series of decisions which guide their planning and composing. They ask themselves questions about the *content* of their writing (How much background do I have to give my readers? How many examples of my ideas should I supply?); the *language* in which they write (Should I use the vocabulary of those familiar with the subject in this piece of writing? Or should I use familiar, everyday terms?); and the *role* they wish to assume (Should I establish myself as an authority on my subject? Or should I establish myself as a peer or colleague of those to whom I am writing?)

Effective writers know that readers construct meaning from texts based upon the readers' personal and cultural backgrounds as well as their purposes for reading. In addition, readers construct meaning based upon specific *visual*, *verbal*, and *structural* features of the texts they are reading. Although writers cannot substantially alter either readers' personal or cultural knowledge or readers' purposes for reading, they can substantially influence the meaning constructed from their texts by supplying *visual*, *verbal*, and *structural* clues which invite readers to share the meaning they intend.

## VISUAL CUES

### *Graphic Layout*

The graphic layout of writing helps readers to understand a text more easily, giving cues to writers' major and minor points of emphasis. This notion can be illustrated by examining almost any text book. Major headings are often centered, capitalized, and underlined or italicized. **VISUAL CUES** above is an example of a major heading. Minor headings are indented, typed in capital and lower case letters, and underlined or italicized. *Graphic layout* above is an example of a minor heading. Both major and minor headings work best when they are parallel in structure.

Material which is indented and single spaced is quoted and serves as an illustration of an idea. Linda Flower explains the practice:

*The fact that this passage is indented and single spaced says it is either a long quotation or an example. The additional space around it and the single spacing indicate it is a different kind of text, and let readers adjust their reading speed and expectations (Flower, 160).*

Extra white space can also be used to highlight material or to signal a shift in thought. This notion can often be illus-

trated by looking at literature, where writers signal a shift in time or point of view by added white space. Some writers underline or *italicize* key words to call attention to their importance.

### *Paragraphing*

Donald Hall has called paragraphs the "hand-and-foot-holds in the cliff face of an essay" (*Writing Well*). They allow the reader to rest before going on to new information. A good class exercise, I learned from Francis Christensen, asks students to create paragraphs in an article where paragraph markers have been omitted. A good source is articles from a one volume encyclopedia where paragraph markers have been omitted as a space-saving device. Because students inevitably begin paragraphs at different places in the given text, their individual decisions can lead to interesting class discussions.

### *Punctuation*

Punctuation is also a visual cue to readers as to how they should relate ideas. To illustrate this point for my students, I make up examples. In the following examples, I demonstrate two functions which the semi-colon performs to make meaning visually apparent:

#### 1. Joining two closely related sentences

– to highlight contrast

*Her teeth were straight and white; he remembered the nicotine stains on his.*

– to suggest a logical relation that is not explicitly stated

*He hated to lie; she was such a nice girl.*

– to suggest what follows comments or what precedes

*Architecture is more than a science of being sure something will stand forever; it is also an art form.*

#### 2. Punctuating a complicated series of ideas into easily grouped semantic units

*He pulled at the chrome handle of the squat thick refrigerator, glossy and humming softly, and the plump door clicked open with a dull rubber sound, revealing a porcelain interior lighted from the rear by a frosted electric bulb and the food stuff his vacationing wife had left for him to forage on: pale yellow bottles of milk, beaded with cold and filled to the paper stopper; a covered plas-*

*tic dish of leftovers – deflated green peas, wax-like carrots in a thick gray juice; fluted aluminum mold of jello, red and shiny, like dime-store costume jewelry; and packages of meat – round, folded and right-wrapped in bloody brown paper and fastened with strips of sticky tape (Francis Christensen, A New Rhetoric).*

Students enjoy developing their own examples of how punctuation functions as a visual cue to meaning. They might try constructing examples using the colon, the dash, parentheses, and so on.

## VERBAL CUES

Some verbal cues to meaning preview points writers wish to make (titles, thesis statements, method of development statements, and topic sentences); some tell readers how to relate what follows to what precedes (transitional words); and some point back to what is presupposed (cohesive words of reference and repetition).

### *Cues that Preview Information*

A well chosen *title* does more than satisfy the needs of composition teachers for identification of the content of a paper. It gives readers a context and a frame for approaching a paper, directing their attention to the topic at hand. I ask students (1) to examine titles in a magazine, in their text books, or in other student papers, (2) to write a preview of what they think the articles are about on the basis of the titles, and then (3) to read the articles to see if their expectations are met.

*Thesis statements* and *method-of-development* statements function to preview points for readers and are easily illustrated for students of writing: I define a *thesis statement* as the explicit statement of the argument of the paper, and illustrate it:

*The eleven children as speakers of black English have been denied equal treatment under 1703f of the United States Code, which is part of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act, because in not treating these children differently from the other predominantly white students, the school failed to account for the children's special needs.*

A *method-of-development statement* differs, for here the writer simply suggests the direction of the paper, without explicitly stating the argument:

*This paper will answer three separate questions in order to determine if eleven black children who speak black dialect have been denied equal educational opportunity: whether black English is a separate dialect from standard English; whether speakers of black English have a language barrier as they participate in the school system; and whether, if these children have a language barrier, the school system has taken adequate action to help them.*

Sometimes writers preview their points with a combination of *thesis* and *method of development statements*.

*As speakers of black English, the eleven children have been denied equal educational opportunity under section 1703f of the United States Code. To demonstrate how they have been denied equal education opportunity, the following points will be discussed: black English as a distinct dialect; black English as a language barrier in learning to read, and teachers, and school board's responses to these students, language barrier.*

I also show my students that within a paper the same previewing of points occurs at the paragraph level. Sometimes initial sentences preview the entire content of a paragraph. Thus:

*There are three problems with capital punishment that argue for its abolition.*

suggests that the writer will develop three problems in the paragraph without specifying what they are. Just as the sentence:

*The solution is to abolish capital punishment and to institute a better system of rehabilitation which will have two features.*

suggests the paragraph will develop two features of the rehabilitation system without specifying what they are.

### **Cues that Demonstrate the Relationships Between Information**

I have found it useful to illustrate the layering of ideas that exists in a piece of writing by diagramming a text according to Francis Christensen's model. In Christensen's system ideas are categorized as being on the same level as what precedes them (coordinate) or at a lower level (subordinate). Superordinate ideas are marked with a (1) and ideas at subordinate levels are indented and are marked by numbers lower than (1). When ideas are added at the same level they receive the same number and are indented accordingly. I have analyzed the paragraph below according to Christensen's system, adding arrows to show how ideas either point back to a superordinate structure, or forward to a coordinate or a subordinate idea.

- (1) **People** have speculated about the **nature of language** for a long time.
- (2) **Both Plato and Aristotle** discussed the matter but as one might expect, they did not agree.
- (3) **Plato** seems to have **believed** that the connection between a word and a meaning was a product of the nature of things . . .
- (4) He was **therefore** interested in etymology as a process of discovering . . .
- (5) the word "etymology" reflects this view that . . .
- (3) **Aristotle**, on the other hand, **regarded** the connection between a word and a meaning as a product of convention . . .
- (4) **Consequently** he had little interest in seeking original meanings (Francis Christensen, *The New Rhetoric*, 137).

comparison/contrast  
(What follows is similar to, or different from what precedes, but is at the same level of prominence)

likewise, similarly  
however, nevertheless  
but, yet  
on the one hand/on the other hand

#### Ideas at a lower level

paraphrase conjunctions  
(What follows explains what precedes)

in other words  
to say it another way  
to explain

example conjunctions  
(What follows is an illustration of what precedes)

for example  
to illustrate

#### Ideas that sum up the consequence of what precedes

summary conjunctions  
(What follows sums up what precedes)

in summary  
in conclusion  
in short, in brief

consequential conjunctions  
(What follows spells out consequences of what precedes)

thus  
therefore  
hence  
so

### TEMPORAL RELATIONSHIPS

#### Ideas related in time to other ideas

time conjunctions

previously, before  
while, meanwhile  
soon  
after, immediately  
thereafter  
at length  
next  
then  
finally, last

### STRUCTURAL CLUES

Writers can also guide their readers' understanding of text by structuring their ideas according to familiar writing plans such as *narration*, *description*, *collection*, *cause-effect*, *comparison and contrast*, and *response* (see p.69 this issue of *forum* for B. Meyers taxonomy of writing plans to which I am indebted). Readers use these plans to help interpret what they are reading; the plans serve as a frame to which readers attach the details of the text as they read. Readers also use the plans to help them recall writers' ideas. To help readers grasp the underlying prose structure, writers can explicitly signal their writing plan.

I find it useful to analyze a piece of student writing for my classes to demonstrate that student writers embed one plan within another. For example, an essay a student of mine wrote arguing for the abolition of capital punishment used a

Transitional words and phrases constitute another device which writers use to give readers cues about how parts of a text relate to other parts that either follow or precede them. For example conjunctions indicate both a relationship between words and the level at which the material to follow is being added. Students quickly recognize specific examples of conjunction and the relationships they communicate:

Conjunction	Relationship
furthermore	addition
however	contrast
thus	consequence
before, after, next	time

However, not many students have thought about how conjunctions move a paper back and forth between general and specific ideas. Some conjunctions such as *and* indicate ideas are being added at the same level; whereas others such as *for example* indicate ideas at a lower level; some indicate the implications and consequences of what precedes such as *in conclusion* and some indicate a temporal relationship such as *finally*. A useful classroom activity is to ask students to construct as full a list of conjunctions as they can to explain the logical relationships implied by those conjunctions. After I assign this exercise, I give my students a chart like the following one which I have adapted from the work of Linda Jones, Michael Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan.

#### LOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS

##### Ideas at the same level

continuation conjunctions  
(What follows develops at the same level)

moreover  
in addition  
furthermore  
also  
and

enumeration conjunctions  
(What follows indicates material at the same level of prominence)

first, second, third  
first, next, finally

*response* plan with a *problem-solution format*. The student argued capital punishment should be abolished because of the problems associated with it. The problems were described through a *collection plan*: Capital punishment does not deter crime, does not eliminate murders, and is unfair. In turn each of these ideas was developed by a sub-plan. The idea that capital punishment does not deter crime was developed by a *contrast* plan which described deterrence of capital crimes in states that have capital punishment — Ohio, Indiana, and so on — and in those that do not — Michigan, Delaware; the argument that capital punishment does not eliminate murders was developed by a *collection* plan which detailed the numbers of murderers executed in a given time period; and the idea that capital punishment is unfair was developed by a *collection* plan which discussed the ways it is unfair: in jury selection, to the poor, to the innocent). Borrowing from Bonnie Meyer's method, I draw a tree diagram

to demonstrate the relationship of ideas in a text from the top down. The diagram is a good visual way to present students with the hierarchical organization of ideas in prose. Below is a diagram of the ideas of the student who argued for the abolition of capital punishment.

By explicitly demonstrating ways in which students can make use of *visual*, *verbal*, and *structural* clues and thereby improve their writing, I believe teachers introduce their students to useful devices. I find my students become more effective writers when they become more conscious of how they are structuring and presenting their ideas. As they become more aware of the *visual*, *verbal*, and *structural* features of the text which they are using, they can edit to make sure they are following through on patterns of organization, and taking advantage of the conventions of writing available to them.

Tree Diagram

