

Reading Teaches Plans for Writing

Bonnie J.F. Meyer
Department of Educational Psychology
Arizona State University

Plans are an important part of the processes involved in communicating and understanding: A writer must evolve some overall plans of what to say; and a reader, in turn, must be able to follow those plans. Plans give a writer a framework or organization for deciding how to structure information on a topic, how to sequence that information, and which ideas to highlight. In this essay I describe the topical function of plans — the aid they give writers in conceiving and organizing main ideas about a topic.

My research has been largely in reading and comprehension, with particular emphasis on the hierarchy of information in text structure. A text is more than just a series of sentences of paragraphs precisely because it follows a hierarchy of content: Some facts (statements, etc.) are superordinate or subordinate to others. It seems plain that such a hierarchy in a text is created by means of a plan; and, furthermore, that readers who are unable to follow authors' plans are at a disadvantage.

Drawing upon the insights which linguistics and rhetoric offer, I have gathered empirical evidence for the existence of five basic writing plans which have an impact upon reading comprehension. These five plans are designated as follows: *causation*, *comparison*, *description*, *response*, and *time-order*. I do not intend to imply that these five types of plans are exhaustive or definitive. I do suggest that they define useful distinctions that may help readers and writers. There is good support for the belief that significant differences exist among readers' comprehension of texts written according to these different plans.

The *causation* plan is devoted to presenting causal relationships, like the "if/then" of antecedent/consequent statements in logic. The *comparison* plan presents two opposing viewpoints, and can be subdivided accordingly: The alternative view gives equal weight to the two sides, whereas the adversative view clearly favors one side over the other. The *description* plan develops a topic by describing its component parts, for instance, by presenting attributes, specifications, or settings. For example, on the topic of frogs, descriptive texts could be generated by describing physical characteristics, one particular variety, the environment of frogs, etc. The *response* plan contains some kind of statement followed by a response, such as: remark and reply; question and answer; problem and solution; and so on. Finally, the *time-order* plan relates events on the basis of chronology.

These basic types are familiar in various contexts. Political speeches are often of the *comparison* type, and in particular,

its adversative subtype. Newspaper articles are often of the *description* type, telling us who, where, how, and when. Scientific treatises often adhere to the *response* type, first raising a question or problem and then seeking to give an answer or solution. History texts often exemplify the *time-order* plan.

Of course, many texts will reflect more than one of these five basic plans. Folktales contain much *description*, *causation*, and *time-order* within a general *response* plan in which the protagonist confronts and resolves a problem. Finally, folktales may carry an overall *comparison* plan, such as demonstrating the contrast between good vs. evil, selfishness vs. altruism, industry vs. slothfulness, and so on.

A research group with which I have been working has been using expository texts to probe how these five types of plans affect reading comprehension. In one study, 102 ninth graders each read two texts; one passage was written with a *comparison* plan, while the other had a *response* plan. The students wrote down whatever they remembered, first, right after reading; and then, one week later. The records of what they remembered were examined to see if the readers were organizing their reports along the same type of plan as was used by the authors of the texts. We then correlated the results of this analysis with the amount that the readers could recall.

The findings were impressive: Only 46% of the students organized the reports they wrote immediately after reading along the same plan as was used by the authors; one week later only 30% of the 102 students organized their reports with the authors' plans. It is significant to note that students who used the authors' plans a week after reading remembered far more content: Not only did they retain the main ideas especially well, but they also recovered more details. These students performed much better on a true/false test on the content of the passage; and they were also the students who had shown good reading comprehension skills on standardized tests. On the other hand, students who did not make use of authors' plans tended to make disorganized lists of ideas; they couldn't recover either main ideas or details very well. These same students also had lower scores on standardized reading tests.

There are two ways of interpreting this evidence: First, the evidence indicates a need to focus reading instruction upon plans, so that readers can effectively learn and remember the materials they study. Second, it indicates a parallel need in writing instruction, so that writers can offer readers the support of recognizable plans. When students are con-

fronted with many topics about which they are uninformed, apparent organizational plans are even more crucial to them than they would be otherwise because unfamiliar content is more easily learned if it is organized completely and clearly.

In order to explore the findings in our first study further, our research team gave a group of ninth-graders a week of training in identifying and using four types of plans — *causation*, *comparison*, *description*, and *response*. The ninth graders read and recalled texts on three occasions: Before training, a day after training, and three weeks after training. Another group did the same tasks, but received no instruction about the plans. After one week and three weeks, the trained group could remember nearly twice as much content from the texts as they could before their instruction; and they could remember twice the amount recalled by the group which had received no training in identifying the types of plans. Moreover, those students in both groups who found and used the authors' plans remembered more information from the texts than those who did not find the plans.

Similar studies have been conducted with older readers. In a sample of junior college students, slightly more than 50% used the authors' plans and thereby retained more of the content of texts than did those who failed to use the authors'

plans. Samples of graduate students and college graduates of various ages (young, middle, old) showed an even higher proportion (80-100%) using the authors' plans to recall the content of texts.

These and similar studies may provide support for composition teachers who assign papers that require students to describe, compare, raise problems, and so on. Teachers can identify these plans for students apart from content and then have students themselves practice identifying and using the plans.

When writers effectively integrate and organize content during writing, readers both remember more of it and spend less time and effort doing so. In light of our research, the teaching of plans in composition classes appears to be time well spent. (Presumably as writing students become more experienced they will automatically use the plans that they have consciously practiced earlier.) When readers and writers are consciously aware of rhetorical plans, both benefit. Certainly plans which can be recognized in texts are a help to readers who are asked to comprehend topics which are unfamiliar to them. Perhaps knowledge of plans which can be identified will both dissuade developing writers from falling back on trite commonplace topics and persuade them to tackle original topics.