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CONCEPT 2

Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms

2.0

WRITING SPEAKS TO SITUATIONS THROUGH RECOGNIZABLE FORMS

Charles Bazerman

A fundamental problem in communication precedes the choosing of any words or shaping of any message: identifying the situation we are in and the nature of the communication we wish to make. Are salespeople offering us a deal and do we want to accept? Are our acquaintances amusing each other with jokes and are we amused? Are our trusted advisors asking us to reconsider our behaviors and do we resist? The situation frames our understanding of the communicative action of others and gives us the urgency and motive to respond because somehow we sense our words will satisfy our needs in the situation or otherwise make the situation better for us. In face-to-face life, this problem is solved through our recognizing the geographic locale we are in, the people we are talking to, our relationship to them, the events unfolding before us, and our impulses to do something. Through long practical experience we learn to recognize spontaneously what appears to be going on around us and how it affects us. Our impulses to act communicatively emerge as doable actions in the situation, in forms recognizable to others—we accept the offer, we laugh at the joke, we agree to change. Conscious thought is warranted only if we have reason to believe things are not as they appear to be, if confusions arise within the situation, or if we want to suppress our first impulse and pursue a less obvious strategic path—laughing to appear congenial though we find the joke offensive.

Writing, as well, addresses social situations and audiences organized in social groups and does so through recognizable forms associated with those situations and social groups. But with writing we have fewer here-and-now clues about what the situation is, who our audiences are, and how we want to respond. Written messages can circulate from one material and social situation to another, and in fact are usually intended to.

A newspaper report about events in one city is read in another, even in another country, and further events have evolved between writing and reading. A poem written for a small circle of friends is read centuries later in a literature classroom.

The technical concept of rhetorical situation brings together recognition of the specifics of the situation, the exigency the situation creates, and our perception that by communication we can make the situation better for ourselves (Bitzer 1968). Awareness of rhetorical situation is the beginning of reflection on how we perceive the situation, what more we can understand about it, how we can formulate our goals, and what strategies we may take in our utterances. It helps us put in focus what we can accomplish in a situation, how we can accomplish it, and what the stakes are. But this awareness also puts a reflective distance between our perception of the situation and our responses, which may disrupt spontaneous impulses and our sense of being in the moment. This disruption can thus can be troublesome and require a fundamental reorientation toward our experiences, which we may at first resist. Recognizing we are being accused of misdeeds may make us aware we need to answer but also aware that we must frame our words carefully so as to defend ourselves persuasively and so as not to lead to further trouble or accusations.

With writing, the need for understanding the rhetorical situation is even greater than in speaking because there are fewer material clues with which to locate ourselves spontaneously. To engage in a disciplinary discussion in chemistry, we not only need to know the chemistry, we need to know how each text is entering into a debate or accumulating past findings or projecting future plans (see 2.3, “Writing Is a Way of Enacting Disciplinary”). It is through genre that we recognize the kinds of messages a document may contain, the kind of situation it is part of and it might migrate to, the kinds of roles and relations of writers and readers, and the kinds of actions realized in the document (see 1.2, “Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences,” and 2.2, “Genres Are Enacted by Writers and Readers”). Genre recognition provides a necessary clue for locating and making sense of any piece of paper or any digital display that comes before our eyes. Perhaps even more complexly, we may need to understand how documents move from among and between spaces, including from real spaces to enduring virtual spaces, which then may return to specific material spaces. So, teachers may collect records of students within a classroom for immediate classroom-management needs, but these records then may enter the school records for school-management purposes and then may be combined with school medical and other records to create a file on the

student, creating an enduring characterization of the student that may reappear in a court proceeding. Thus, to understand the full range of situations a document in a particular genre may be used in and the full set of meanings that might be attributed to it, we also need to understand the activity system it is part of (Russell 1997) (see 1.0, “Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity,” and 1.5, “Writing Mediates Activity”).

Yet while writing may require more awareness of genres, the associated situations, and the activity systems those genres are part of, several factors limit conscious, reflective examination of genres and an understanding of their implications for the variability of writing. First, much learning of writing is in school, where stylized and repetitive classroom relations and situations, teacher authority, and student display of competence prevail. People often take school-based assumptions with them long after they leave school, associating writing with particular kinds of school assignments and finding their main motives to be avoiding correction and getting a good grade.

Later, after schooling, if they become deeply embedded in a set of writing practices associated with their profession or career, they may then assume, with little conscious attention to how complex and varied situations, exigencies, motives, and genres may be, that what they learn in that specific context are general rules and models for effective writing—with the result that they overgeneralize the practices they have learned. Further, they may think of the writing practices they develop through long professional experience to be part of their profession and may think of how they produce their texts as a matter of just doing good science, or being a good salesman, or knowing how to keep good records of what happens. Their writing knowledge, knowledge of situations, and sense of genres becomes deeply tacit and less accessible to conscious reflection. However, bringing such things to reflective attention through the concepts of rhetorical situation, genre, and activity systems is a necessary step to understanding their writing and making deeper choices.

2.1

WRITING REPRESENTS THE WORLD, EVENTS, IDEAS, AND FEELINGS

Charles Bazerman

It is no surprise to people that they can talk or write about things they see or do, what they feel, and what they think. But it is something of a surprise to realize that how each of these is represented in the writing

or speaking—in other words, in the communication—changes what is shared about each of them and thus what our common knowledge is. I may think if I write about a mountain that the mountain is there for all to see, so the words I use are not that important. But when I realize that all my readers are likely to know of the mountain, particularly on a sunny early spring afternoon after an overnight snow storm ending in sleet so the crust breaks through unpredictably beneath the feet, is through the words I write, I begin to take greater care in choosing my words. I want to represent facts, the world, or my imaginings as precisely and powerfully as I can. We may resist this idea because we think the world and the meaning of our ideas are more robust than the words we choose, or because grappling with words is hard and frustrating work, and we may feel that our words are always a reduction, always lose something. That is indeed so. But because words are such thin and frail communicators, writers must work hard to make them do the best they can do.

A further troublesome corollary is that what we can share with each other through writing is limited by our ability to represent the world through language and the ability of our readers to make sense of our representations in ways congruent to our intentions (see 1.2, “Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences,” and 1.3, “Writing Expresses and Shares Meanings to Be Reconstructed by the Reader”). Writers often have great ambitions about the effects and power of what they write and their ability to capture the truth of realities or conjure imagined realities, but they are constantly caught up short by what they can bring into shared reality through words. Recognizing the limitations of our representations can lead us to appropriate modesty and caution about what we and others write and about decisions and calculations made on the basis of the representations. Alfred Korzybski stated this concept vividly by noting “the map is not the territory” (Korzybski 1958, 58). Yet knowledge of this concept helps us work more effectively from our verbal maps in the way we view and contemplate the world represented.

Despite the limits of language, most of what we consider knowledge comes from the representation of the world and events in texts (see 1.1, “Writing Is a Knowledge-Making Activity”). Will Rogers famously said, “All I know is what I read in the newspapers.” The humor and humility in his statement are precisely in the recognition that most of our knowledge comes from the texts we read. If people don’t share those texts (or other texts derivative of the primary representation), they don’t share the knowledge. The recognition that different statements representing knowledge circulate in different groups does not mean all

representations are equal, but it focuses our attention on the procedures and criteria by which these representations enter a communicative network and are evaluated, held accountable, and established as credible. People may resist this recognition as it destabilizes the absoluteness of knowledge and seems to undermine certainty of truth, but recognition of this concept provides a path to a more detailed understanding of how things reach the status of truth within different communities and the criteria by which truth is held. Knowing this can help us write more carefully and effectively to represent the world, events, and ideas credibly within and across communities and to discuss the representations of others in relation to the social worlds the knowledge circulates within.

2.2

GENRES ARE ENACTED BY WRITERS AND READERS

Bill Hart-Davidson

One of the more counterintuitive ideas in writing studies has to do with the nature of a genre—not just how the term is defined but also about what genres are. Common-sense notions of *genre* hold that that the term describes a form of discourse recognizable as a common set of structural or thematic qualities. People may speak about detective novels as a genre distinct from romance novels, for instance. We can also recognize nonliterary forms as genres, such as the scientific article.

In writing studies, though, the stabilization of formal elements by which we recognize genres is seen as the visible effects of human *action*, routinized to the point of habit in specific cultural conditions. The textual structures are akin to the fossil record left behind, evidence that writers have employed familiar discursive moves in accordance with reader expectations, institutional norms, market forces, and other social influences.

The idea that genres are enacted is associated most strongly, perhaps, with Carolyn Miller's argument in a 1984 article in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* titled "Genres as Social Action." Miller's (1984) argument was influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), and has been developed over the last thirty years by a number of scholars studying writing in organizational settings such as David Russell (1991), Charles Bazerman (1988), and Catherine Schryer (1993), among many others.

This view holds that genres are habitual responses to recurring socially bounded situations. Regularities of textual form most lay people experience as the structural characteristics of genres emerge from these repeated instances of action and are reinforced by institutional power

structures. Genres are constructions of groups, over time, usually with the implicit or explicit sanction of organizational or institutional power.

This view of genre has several interesting implications most newcomers to the idea find challenging and fascinating. One is that no single text is a genre; it can only be an instance of that genre as it enters into contexts (activity systems) where it might be taken up as such an instance. Readers and users of texts have as much to do with a text becoming an instance of a genre as writers do (see 1.2, “Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences,”). And because creating a genre is not something an individual writer does, but rather is the result of a series of socially mediated actions that accumulate over time, genres are only *relatively* stable. Generic forms are open to hybridization and change over time. This is why Schryer refers to the textual features of genres as “stable for now” forms, acknowledging that they can evolve.

JoAnne Yates (1993) offers a fascinating historical account of this sort of genre hybridization in the context of the rise of American industrialization. In this account, we learn that standard features of genres, such as the header block of a business memo appearing in the upper left corner, become stable in use situations. When documents were stored in vertical stacks rather than in file cabinets, the memo block allowed for easy search and retrieval. This convention remains today even in email though we no longer need to flip through hard copies to find a message. As we might expect, the convention is less stable due to changes in the use context; users can choose to hide or minimize headers, for instance, in many email programs.

2.3

WRITING IS A WAY OF ENACTING DISCIPLINARITY

Neal Lerner

The central claim of this threshold concept is that disciplines shape—and in turn are shaped by—the writing that members of those disciplines do. In sum, the relationship between disciplinary knowledge making and the ways writing and other communicative practices create and communicate that knowledge are at the heart of what defines particular disciplines.

As an example of the relationship between writing and disciplinarity, consider the use of citations. On the most visible level, citation practices vary by discipline—and often within subdisciplines. Whether the practice is an author-last-name parenthetical system, author-last-name-plus-date

parenthetical citation, footnotes, or numbered references, disciplinary distinctions are clearly marked, and readers in those disciplines have clear expectations for what type of citation formats they will encounter. Different formats also convey different disciplinary values. For example, formats that include the date in a parenthetical citation (e.g., APA) convey to readers that timeliness is important to that discipline; in contrast, formats that only include authors' last names (e.g., MLA) convey the value that references are timeless in certain ways.

Citation practices also enact disciplinaryity on more subtle levels (see, e.g., Bazerman 1987; Connors 1999; Hyland 1999; Swales 1990). The mechanics used to introduce previously published work—for example, a parenthetical reference or footnote versus an attributive phrase—convey distinct disciplinary values. Citations tell us something about the discipline's values and practices while also recreating them by enacting them.

On a larger discourse level, any disciplinary genre speaks to the processes by which members of a discipline shape, make distinct, and value its forms and practices of knowledge creation and communication, and these processes, in turn, are shaped by the histories of those genres (see 2.0, "Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms"). For example, the experimental report in science has evolved over several hundred years into the IMRD format—introduction, methods, results, discussion—an organizational scheme meant to mimic the scientific research process, particularly as that process has become more codified (Bazerman 1988). In contrast, while a short story also has specific features meant to function in specific ways for a specific disciplinary audience, readers would be hard pressed to confuse a short story with an experimental report. Many distinct disciplinary genres—e.g., legal briefs, SOAP notes, mathematical proofs—reflect the values those disciplines assign to particular kinds of evidence, particular forms of argument, and particular expectations for the transaction between readers and writers in particular rhetorical situations (see 2.0, "Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms").

Of course, disciplinary boundaries can sometimes be quite fluid rather than fixed and stable. Such fluidity offers further evidence that disciplinary knowledge making is a social process and subject to changing norms, practices, and technologies (Thaiss and Zawacki 2006; also see 1.9 "Writing Is a Technology through Which Writers Create and Recreate Meaning"). Ultimately, writers and readers come to writing in their disciplines with histories, intentions, and expectations, all shaping the disciplines themselves and, in turn, shaping the writing that members of those disciplines do.

2.4

ALL WRITING IS MULTIMODAL

Cheryl E. Ball and Colin Charlton

Multimodal means “multiple + mode.” In contemporary writing studies, a mode refers to a way of meaning making, or communicating. The New London Group (NLG) outlines five modes through which meaning is made: linguistic, aural, visual, gestural, and spatial. Any combination of modes makes a multimodal text, and all texts—every piece of communication a human composes—use more than one mode. Thus, all writing is multimodal (New London Group 1996).

Historically, rhetoric and composition studies is often assumed to focus on writing (and sometimes speech) as solely alphanumeric-based communication—what the NLG would label as part of the linguistic mode of communication. The term *mode*, within this historical perception, was reserved for defining the rhetorical modes of exposition, argumentation, description, and narration. In multimodal theory, the definition of *mode* is complicated to distribute equal emphasis on how meanings are created, delivered, and circulated through choices in design, material composition, tools and technologies, delivery systems, and interpretive senses (see 1.3, “Writing Expresses and Shares Meaning to Be Reconstructed by the Reader,” and 1.9, “Writing Is a Technology through Which Writers Create and Recreate Meaning”). That is, *mode* isn’t just words (in the linguistic sense of NLG’s framework) but sound, texture, movement, and all other communicative acts that contribute to the making of meaning.

While the concept of multimodality has enjoyed increased circulation since the turn of the twenty-first century and has been associated with new media or new technologies, rhetoric and composition’s historic approach to the teaching of writing has almost always included the production of multimodal texts. This understanding can be traced from classical rhetorical studies of effective speech design including body and hand gestures to current concerns with infographics and visual rhetorics.

With this context in mind, there are still two major misconceptions associated with multimodality. First, some assume all multimodal texts are digital. While it’s true that most writing and design work in the twenty-first century is mediated through digital technologies such as computers, smartphones, or tablets, many texts that might be produced with digital technologies aren’t necessarily distributed with digital technologies (e.g., posters, flyers, brochures, memos, some reports, receipts,

magazines, books, scholarly print-based articles, etc.). In addition, many texts are not digital in their production *or* distribution ('zines, paintings, scrapbooks, etc.).

Second, some assume that the opposite of multimodal is monomodal. In fact, there is no such thing as a monomodal text. This assumption is a throwback to the romantic version of writing as focusing solely on alpha-numeric textual production and analysis and is often used by scholar-teachers new to multimodal theory as a way to distinguish between “old” ways of researching and teaching writing and “new,” multimodal ways (see the discussion of writing and disciplinarity in 2.3, “Writing Is a Way of Enacting Disciplinarity”). An example of a text often referred to as being monomodal is the traditional first-year-composition research essay (see 2.0, “Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms”). Yet such a text is recognized from its linguistic mode and its visual and spatial arrangement on the page (title, name block, double spacing, margins, default font size, formulaic structure, etc.).

Monomodality, then, is used (incorrectly) to signify a lack of multiple media or modes when really what a user might mean is that a structure like a five-paragraph essay *privileges* the linguistic mode over the spatial or visual modes. Thus, writing as a knowledge-making activity (see 2.0, “Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms”) isn’t limited to understanding writing as a single mode of communication but as a multimodal, performative (see 1.5, “Writing Mediates Activity,” and 2.5, “Writing Is Performative”) activity that takes place within any number of genres (see 2.2, “Genres Are Enacted by Writers and Readers”) and disciplines.

2.5

WRITING IS PERFORMATIVE

Andrea A. Lunsford

Students are sometimes puzzled by the notion that writing is performative. Yet some discussion usually clarifies the concept as students quickly see that their writing performs for a grade or other reward for an audience of academics (mostly teachers; see 1.7, “Assessing Writing Shapes Contexts and Instruction”). In these pieces of writing, students might adopt a role or persona—of the “good student,” for example. But writing is performative in other important senses as well. Kenneth Burke’s concept of “language as symbolic action” helps explain why (Burke 1966). For Burke and other contemporary theorists, language

and writing have the capacity to act, to do things in the world. Speech act theorists such as J. L. Austin (1962) speak of “performatives,” by which they mean spoken phrases or sentences that constitute an action: a judge saying “I now pronounce you husband and wife” or “I sentence you to X” actually performs these acts. Other examples (“I bequeath” in a will or “I name this ship the Enterprise”) carry such performativity (see 2.6, “Texts Get Their Meaning from Other Texts”).

But we can see other ways in which writing performs: from the Declaration of Independence to the petition that results in a change of policy to a Kickstarter site whose statements are so compelling that they elicit spontaneous donations, writing has the capacity to perform. At its most basic, saying that writing is performative means that writing *acts*, that it can make things happen. This is what students in the Stanford Study of Writing, a longitudinal exploration of writing development during the college years, meant when they told researchers over and over again that “good writing is writing that makes something good happen in the world.”

There is yet a third way in which writing can be said to be performative, and that is in relation to another threshold concept, that writing is *epistemic*. That is to say that writing does not simply record thought or knowledge but rather that writing has the capacity to actually produce thought and knowledge (see 3.0, “Writing Enacts and Creates Identities and Ideologies”). Most writers have experienced this performative aspect of writing—a time when you are writing away and the writing suddenly gives rise to new ideas, new insights into your topic. In the moment of producing such insights, writing is, again, performative.

2.6

TEXTS GET THEIR MEANING FROM OTHER TEXTS

Kevin Roozen

If I were to ask a writer or reader what the text in front of her means, it would be easy to assume that *text* refers only to the text immediately at hand. This assumption, though, overlooks the fact that whatever meaning a writer or reader makes of a particular text is not a result of their engagements with that particular text alone. Rather than existing as autonomous documents, texts always refer to other texts and rely heavily on those texts to make meaning. Although we commonly refer to *a* text or *the* text, texts are profoundly intertextual in that they draw meaning from a network of other texts. As a field, writing studies has developed

a number of names for the networks of texts writers and readers create and act with, including *landscapes*, *sets*, *systems*, *ecologies*, *assemblages*, *repertoires*, and *intertexts*.

Some of the texts that contribute to the creation of meaning—for both writers and readers—are those that already exist. Thomas Jefferson's crafting of the Declaration of Independence, for example, was informed explicitly and implicitly by a vast network of previous texts that included Locke's writings on social contract theory, resolutions written by the First Continental Congress and other political bodies, political pamphlets, newspaper articles, a colonial play, the writings of Euripides, and the drafts and revisions offered by other members of Congress. Writers and readers rely on these kinds of intertextual linkages to make meaning of all kinds of texts. Children reading *Winnie the Pooh* for the first time might think about other books they have read or that have been read to them about forests, stuffed bears, or animals. Shoppers jotting grocery lists might rely on previous lists they have created and used or seen others use. Insurance processors adjusting claims might draw upon their previous encounters with the particular forms they need to read and fill out. Other texts drawn into an intertextual network are those the reader or writer might anticipate acting with in the future. A student taking notes while attempting to understand a philosophy text might also be thinking toward the essay exam at the end of the semester. A Supreme Court justice writing an opinion likely to be challenged in the future might craft it in a way that heads off particular legal arguments but leaves open others. The meaning writers and readers work to make of a given text at hand, then, is a function of the interplay of texts from their near and distant pasts as well as their anticipated futures.

Texts even rely upon a range of nonwritten texts. Readers and writers, for example, might draw upon visual images as they engage with a focal text. The child's reading of *Winnie the Pooh* might be informed by pictures or video images she has seen of the characters and scenes from the book. The shopper might use the images on coupons as a way to remember which items to include on next week's grocery list. Texts might also be linked to inscriptions such as charts, diagrams, and tables. Adjusting the insurance claim might involve the processor in looking up pricing data in a set of Excel charts, creating a digital drawing of an automobile accident, or interpreting schematics of automobile parts. Texts might also emerge from instances of talk. The philosophy student's notes, for example, might include comments offered by classmates during a class discussion or by a roommate. In drafting

an opinion, the Supreme Court justice might draw upon conversations with clerks or with other justices.

The concept of texts getting their meaning from other texts may conflict with dominant Western notions of authorship, creativity, and originality, but it is an important one for a number of stakeholders. For teachers, recognizing that texts work in conjunction with other texts is a key first step toward creating opportunities for students to engage with a wide variety of texts, perhaps even ones that might not be privileged in formal educational settings. It is also a key step toward teachers acknowledging, valuing, and fostering connections with the different kinds of texts that animate learners' lives beyond the classroom. For learners, recognizing that texts get their meaning from other texts is the first step toward thinking carefully and creatively about how forging and reconfiguring linkages to other texts and even other contexts can shift meaning in ways both subtle and profound. This realization, in turn, can lead learners toward strategies for writing and reading that foreground the role of other texts. For administrators, conceptualizing the intertextual nature of writing and reading provides the foundation for thinking carefully and systematically about the kinds of texts learners need to encounter at particular points throughout the curriculum. For writing researchers, recognizing the intertextual nature of meaning making is the vital first step toward developing theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches for tracing the textual connections persons and collectives employ in the continual making and remaking of knowledge, selves, and societies.

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