Understanding Writing Situations

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Introduction

Many of us think of writing as a solitary activity -- something done when we're alone in a quiet place. Yet most of our writing, like other forms of communication -- telephone conversations, classroom discussions, meetings, and presentations -- is an intensely social activity. In this guide, you can learn more about the situations in which writers and readers find themselves and the physical, social, cultural, and historical contexts that shape them.

Reading and Writing as Social Acts

Writing is hard work, and it's usually done in a quiet place, away from others. It might seem odd to hear it called a "social act." However, most experienced writers and writing teachers call it just that.

If you think about it carefully, you'll realize that, with a few exceptions (diaries, travel journals, and grocery lists among them), most writing activities are intensely social. Even relatively simple writing activities, such as taking a telephone message, sending email, or writing a personal letter, involve conveying a message to another person as clearly as possible. The writer of a two-word telephone message, for instance, ought to consider whether the person reading the message will understand that "call Gail" means call Gail Garcia and not Gail Evans or Gail Chen.

More complex writing activities, such as writing a business proposal or a progress report, require writers to think much more carefully about how their readers will react to what they've written. A memo to a manager outlining reasons why a promotion and a raise are good ideas is clearly shaped by a writer's concerns about his or her readers. Even decisions made by writers of poems, short stories, novels, and plays are affected by what readers know and how they are likely to react.

In much the same way, readers are engaged in a social act. Knowing that you wrote a particular phone message, they will contemplate what you most likely meant by the words "call Gail." A
manager, reading a memo requesting a promotion and a raise, will take into account his or her perceptions of the writer and what the writer most likely meant by a phrase such as "or else." Similarly, readers of documents ranging from marketing plans to lyric poems to personal letters will read between the lines of those documents based on their knowledge (or the lack thereof) of the writer. Their interpretation of a document, as a result, will be based at least to some degree on something other than the words themselves.

**Reading and Writing as Conversation**

In some ways, writers' and readers' interactions with each other are like conversations at a party. You've probably wandered around a party, listening in briefly on conversations until you find one you want to join. What you hear in a conversation is filtered through your interests and experiences. And what you say is shaped by a particular purpose (to entertain or inform someone, to ask a question, or perhaps to interest someone in getting together with you at a later time). If you're like most people, you try to avoid repeating things that have already been said and you try to stay on the subject. To do this, you listen to a conversation before adding to it.

This is one of the ways in which writing is most like a conversation. Just as you do at a party, you want to listen (or read) long enough to know what's been said, what people are discussing at the moment, and what they might welcome as a relevant contribution. In other words, you want to be accountable to what's been going on before you add to the conversation (see Accountability, below).

In addition, members of a conversation typically try to create responses that offer something of value to their readers -- something new or interesting, something that helps move the conversation forward (see Value, below). Your decisions about what you might add to a conversation will be based not only on what you've listened to -- or, in the case of writing, what you've read -- but also on your understanding of the needs, interests, values, and beliefs of other members of the conversation (see Considering Your Readers, below).

For these reasons, the relationships between readers and writers can become quite complex. Just as writers compose documents for a wide range of purposes, readers read for a variety of reasons. The degree to which writers can accomplish their purposes depends in large part on the extent to which their document can influence readers to behave or think in certain ways. The degree to which readers find a document useful depends on the extent to which it is consistent with their interests and needs. The document, as a result, becomes the key point of contact between readers and writers - who might live in different times, be separated by thousands of miles, and/or bring radically different experiences to their writing and reading of the document.

**Accountability in Writing**

Accountability is a key concept in writing, and particularly so in academic writing and research writing. It would be embarrassing to repeat what someone had just said before you joined a conversation. It would be even more embarrassing to be accused of stealing someone's ideas
because you hadn't bothered to read what they'd written about an issue. Knowing what's been written about an issue - being an accountable member of a conversation - is the first step toward becoming an effective writer.

**Contributing Something of Value**

Contributing something of value to a conversation is centrally important in most writing projects. Simply changing the dates on last year's product marketing plan isn't likely to get you a promotion, nor is it likely that summarizing the current state of debate on an environmental policy issue will elicit more than yawns from people who have been closely following the issue. Just as you'll be ignored or even shut down if you make an irrelevant comment at a party, your writing will be ignored if it fails to offer something of value to your readers.

**Considering Your Readers**

Considering your readers involves attempting to understand what they bring to the conversation -- their knowledge of the issue, their needs and interests, and their values and beliefs. If you are writing a feature article about an Olympic slalom racer for *Ski* magazine, for example, you'll annoy your readers if you spend a lot of time defining the terms *cap skis* and *sidecut* instead of talking about training techniques and race strategies. On the other hand, if you're writing for *Parade* magazine, a national publication included in many Sunday newspapers, many of your readers (who will be much less familiar with skiing and ski technology than the readers of *Ski* magazine) are likely to be annoyed if you fail to define those terms. Similarly, providing a detailed history of the Internet will win you little favor from readers of a technical manual for Web server software, but will be of great value to readers of a book covering the development of the World Wide Web.

In a written conversation, you'll have much more time to consider how your readers will react to what you write. As you draft your contribution, consider not only how well it will match your readers' knowledge, but also their needs, interests, values, and beliefs. Consider as well their reasons -- or purposes -- for reading what you'll write.

**A Social Model of Writing**

Models are useful tools for discussing complex concepts. The model discussed in this guide considers the relationships among writers, readers, and texts. Although it can't fully predict the complexities of a specific writing situation, they can help writers understand the general principles that shape those situations.

This model is based on three observations. First, a text may serve as the only point of contact between a reader and writer, particularly when writers are separated by time and distance. Second, texts cannot pass "meaning" transparently and perfectly from writer to reader. Writers seldom write
exactly what they mean and readers seldom interpret a writer's words exactly as the writer intended. Third, the factors that affect the attempts of writers and readers to share an understanding of a text include not only their respective purposes, influences, and understanding of each other, but also the physical, social, cultural, and historical contexts in which reading and writing take place.

This model of the writing situation is based on five key questions:

**Writing as a Social Act: Graphic Model**

Click on parts of the image to view information about the writing situation model.

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Every writer has a *purpose* for writing. In fact, most writers have *multiple purposes*. A student writing an essay for a class might want to accomplish several things, including completing the particular assignment as required, learning something new, improving writing skills, convincing others to adopt a particular point of view about an issue, and getting a good grade. An employee working on a project status report for a business might want to convey key information to his or her superiors, earn a manager's approval, perform well enough to earn a promotion, and gain valuable experience in project management. Understanding a writer's purposes can help you understand one of the most important aspects of the writing situation. Among other factors, identifying a writer's purposes can help you understand the writer's decisions about the content, structure, and design of a document.
As a writer, understanding your purposes can help you in virtually every aspect of your writing process. Knowing what you want to accomplish will help you select your topic, consider your readers' needs and interests, and choose appropriate evidence to support your points. It will also help you with decisions regarding tone, style, and document design.

**What Influences Writers?**

Writers will be influenced by a number of factors as they compose a document. Their *interests* (what they'd like to do) and their *needs* (what they must do) will affect their decision about choosing a particular topic, the points they make in that document, and the evidence they use to support their points.

Writers' *values* and *beliefs* will also influence their document. Writers are likely to choose examples and evidence that reflects their particular perspective on a topic. They will also affect the way they relate to their readers -- whether they adopt a friendly tone, for example.

Writers' *knowledge* of a particular topic will also affect their work on a document. When writers know a great deal about a topic, they might find it easier to locate appropriate evidence. When writers know relatively little about a topic, in contrast, they'll need to spend much more time searching for, evaluating, and critically reading sources.

Writers--and the writing situations in which they find themselves--are seldom free of *requirements* and *limitations*. Requirements are typically associated with an academic or workplace assignment. Common requirements include: length (in words or pages), due date, number and/or type of sources that can be used, organization and format (such as whether to include a title page, works cited list, and so on), documentation style (such as MLA or APA), and intermediate drafts. In addition to these requirements, writers are likely to face certain limitations, such as lack of access to information and lack of time to work on a project.

Reflecting on the requirements and limitations faced by a particular writer can help you understand why particular decisions were made. As a writer, reflecting on your requirements and limitations can help you decide whether a particular decision—such as choice of topic or the inclusion of evidence from a particular type of source—will help or hurt your chances of accomplishing your purposes.

In contrast to requirements and limitations, *opportunities* expand the possibilities for a writer. Among many other possibilities, opportunities include access to a specialized or particularly good library, personal experience with and knowledge about a topic, access to people who are experts on a particular topic, and access to hardware or software that can help you produce your document (such as desktop publishing software, a good color printer, and Web development software).

**What is the Reader's Purpose?**
Like writers, readers have purposes. Most readers don't read something unless they see some sort of benefit in doing so. Perhaps they want to be entertained; perhaps they want to learn something new; perhaps they need to review someone's work in order to write a report or assign a grade. Understanding the purposes readers bring to a document can help you anticipate how they will react to a particular document.

As a writer, understanding the purposes of your readers can help you create a more effective document. If you are working on a writing assignment for a class, for example, one of your most important readers will be your instructor. But your instructor will not necessarily be the only reader of your document. Other readers might include your classmates, people who have a professional or personal interest in your topic, or, should your research project be published in print or online, the readers of a particular magazine, journal, or Web site. If you are writing in a business or professional setting, your readers might include your supervisor, his or her supervisors, customers, or other people associated with the organization. In addition, it's possible that your readers will include the writers of sources you might use in your document — writers who share your interest in your topic and who might want to respond to what you will eventually write.

What Influences the Reader?

Readers will be influenced by a number of factors as they read a document. Their interest in a particular topic will affect their decision to read -- or not read -- a given document. Similarly, their needs will also affect their willingness to read a document.

Reader's values and beliefs will also influence their reading of a document. Writers who do not take their readers' values and beliefs into account might miss an opportunity to create a more convincing, useful, or acceptable document. Worse, they might offend their readers -- and increase the chances that their readers will not finish the document.

Readers' knowledge of a particular topic will also affect their reading of a document. When writers assume that readers know more about a topic than they actually do, they can create a document that is difficult to understand. When they assume their readers know less than they actually do, they risk creating documents that repeat information readers already know. In both cases, readers are likely to stop reading the document.

What do Writers and Readers Know about Each Other?

One of the most important factors affecting the writing situation is writers' and readers' representations of each other. When writers understand their readers well -- that is,
when they know a fair amount about their readers' purposes and influences -- they're likely to create more successful documents. Similarly, when readers have an accurate understanding of the writer -- his or her purpose, needs, interests, values, beliefs, and knowledge of a topic, among other things -- they are likely to be more successful at interpreting the document in a way that the writer intended.

In many cases, the lack of an accurate representation of readers will result in a "poorly written" document -- that is, a document that doesn't help either the writers or the readers. As you consider writing your document, reflect carefully on what you know about your readers. If you know relatively little about them, or if you're missing important information (such as an understanding of why they would want to read your document or what they would hope to gain from it), consider spending some time learning about them. It will be time well spent.

What is the Context?

The remaining elements of this model of writing as a social activity deal with the setting in which the writing takes place.

*Physical context* refers to the context in which a writers and readers interact with a text. Writers compose texts in a variety of physical settings that can affect what and how they write. For instance, a writer might not be able to do his or her best work in a crowded library or in a noisy corporate cubicle. Similarly, readers might react differently to a text depending on where they read it. Whether a document is read on a crowded bus or train, for instance, rather than in a quiet office, might affect how a reader feels about the text. Even factors such as the lighting available to a reader or the quality of the printer and paper used to create a document can affect the reading of a document.

The community - or *social context* - to which readers and writers belong can also affect the reading and writing of a document. Writers and readers from the same or similar communities are more likely to communicate effectively with each other via a document than writers and readers who come from different communities. Readers familiar with specific political and social issues, for example, are less likely to expect a writer to define those issues in detail. For instance, readers familiar with violence in American secondary schools will not need to be educated about the issue - they will already know the key points. This reduces the amount of time and effort writers need to devote to providing background information about the issue. Rather than going into detail about the causes and effects of school violence, writers can spend more time developing other aspects of a document.

*Cultural context* refers to a larger set of similarities and differences among readers. For instance, readers from the American Midwest might find it easier to understand the allusions and metaphors used in a document written by someone from Oregon than those in a document written by someone from Peru or Sri Lanka. Similarly, modern teenagers might find it easier to follow what's being said in a document written one month ago by a high school senior in Milwaukee than a document written in 1897 by a retired railroad engineer from Saskatchewan.
The Role of Context in Shaping Purpose and Constructing Meaning

At best, any model of a writing situation will be inexact. The value of the model discussed in this guide, however, lies not in its attempt to be exact, but in its attempt to call writers' and readers' attention to the factors that can shape their interactions with texts - and, through texts, with each other. Of critical importance in this model is the role played by context-physical, social, and cultural-in shaping the decisions writers make as they compose a text and that readers make as they construct meaning from a text. For writers, context shapes -- some might argue that it actually causes -- the purposes for writing. Moreover, context affects the opportunities, requirements, and limitations that affect the choices writers make as they compose their documents. For readers, context shapes their attempt to construct meaning as they read. Physical context can enhance or diminish their ability to read the document. Social context can affect the extent to which writers and readers share common experiences and expectations about a text. Cultural context will affect the fundamental assumptions, beliefs, and aspirations that they bring to the reading of a text.

It might be tempting to consider the elements of this model -- purposes, influences, representations of readers and writers, and the various levels of context -- as relatively distinct. But the most effective use of this model of writing as a social activity lies in recognizing that these elements are intimately related with each other. As you consider the role that text plays in the attempts of writers and readers to create shared meaning through text, remember that no single element of the model can stand completely separate from the others.

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