Understanding Writing Situations

(From the Colorado State Writing Guides)

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 you 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.

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. 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.

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.

### Writing as a Social Act: Graphic Model