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Intentionality in the Writing Process:
A Case Study

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Everyone agrees that a writer's sense of purpose usefully directs choices about what to say and where and how to say it. Typically, the writer strives to coordinate that sense with an estimate of the needs and expectations of some intended reader in order to convey effective assertions in a coherent sequence. The coordination is most evident in writing that Britton would locate in the "transactional" range, where communication is an explicit goal. But even in "poetic" or "literary" discourse, the writer does not forsake all audience awareness (recall Robert Lowell's remark that he wrote poems for himself and a few friends). Literary writing usually assumes, and either honors or strategically violates, formal expectations in readers which partly condition their responses. It may be that only the most private and idiosyncratic writing remains truly unconscious of the public dimension which ordinarily helps to shape a writer's behavior.

Some researchers consider the sense of purpose, or more exactly, its interaction with an estimate of reader-response, as the cornerstone of any comprehensive theory of discourse. James Kinneavy, most notably, insists that "purpose ... is all important. The aim of a discourse determines everything else in the process of discourse." He adds that "both a theory of language and a theory of discourse ... should be crowned with a viable framework of the uses of language." Several such frameworks have recently been advanced. Britton, for instance, ranges purposes along transactional, expressive, and poetic spectra, differentiating texts according to their perceived functions, whether as means to ends or as ends in themselves. Kinneavy orders intentions within four discrete categories: expressive, literary, persuasive, and referential. Richard Lloyd-Jones, in connection with the theory of primary trait scoring, has suggested a model comprised of explanatory, persuasive, and expressive modes. There are still others, with similarly overlapping categories and terminology. All proceed from the same controlling assumption, which James Moffett has stated precisely: "Beneath the con-

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tent of every message is intent. And form embodies that intent. Intuitively or not, an author chooses his techniques according to his meaning."

The effort to taxonomize discourse according to purpose and reader-expectation has, of course, ancient origins. Aristotle distinguished logical, rhetorical, and poetic statements on the basis of subject, intention, and the requirements of a situation. His categorizing of speeches as deliberative, forensic, and epideictic may differ in scope from the work of Britton or Kinneavy or I. A. Richards, but it does not differ in aspiration or methodological focus. The value of the approach is evident: it seeks to emphasize the motives that animate discourse, not merely its formal constraints, the context of writing as a human behavior rather than merely text-in-itself as a structure of technical features. But these taxonomizing efforts, from Aristotle to the present, share a deficiency as well. As Lee Odell has recently pointed out, their perceptions of discourse derive from retrospective analysis, from surveys of the products of composing rather than the processes. As a consequence, they encourage a static, monolithic view of such concepts as "purpose" and "reader," oversimplifying them after the fact in a way that fails to preserve the vitality of their function in actual composing.

This needs explaining. Certainly, it would be naive to insist triumphantly on what everyone already takes for granted, that a writer may be responding to many purposes, some broad and open to analysis, others deeply personal and unpredictable. It is also naive to assume that the reduction of these purposes to certain general types in Kinneavy or Britton implies an ignorance of that complexity. Britton, for one, concedes the potential diversity of motives for writing, but points out that methodological necessity limits concern "to what is typical within the conventions that govern discourse." The inadequacy lies, not in oversimplification as such, which is inevitable, but in the blurring of an important distinction between the kinds of purposes that actually initiate discourse and those that merely define categories in which completed discourses may be located. Kinneavy's range, for example, does not derive from the observation of how writers behave but from the analysis of a sample of texts. His approach is that of traditional literary criticism, adequate for describing and labelling textual features but inadequate for explaining the rhetorical decisions that account for them. The discrimination of "persuasive" and "referential" intentions is merely generic, yielding broad categories in which to group statements that share similar characteristics. Writers do not look to such lofty purposes as functional support for their choice-making; that is, they do not set out to "be referential" except in an helpfully general way.

The sense of purpose that actually shapes strategy is something more concrete, more immediate, and less encompassing: it is not generic but operational. Generic purposes are ideal and therefore simple: most taxonomies include only three or four. Operational purposes are specific to real situations and often quite complex. Indeed, composing typically entails responding to multiple purposes, the interaction of which motivates and shapes per-
formance. James McCrimmon has suggested the difference: "By 'purpose' we mean the controlling decisions a writer makes when he determines what he wants to do and how he wants to do it. We do not mean anything so general as deciding to 'inform,' 'persuade,' or 'amuse,' since these terms can mean so many different things that they give almost no help."

Kinneavy explicitly rejects the notion of operational purpose by invoking the intentional and affective fallacies, in which the "actual" intent of a discourse is mistakenly assumed to be equivalent to the intent of its author or its impact on some intended reader. He argues that neither encoder nor decoder can reliably characterize actual intent, so that "it seems better to find the aim which is embodied in the text itself." Possibly, if "text itself" were as important in composition theory and teaching as it is in literary criticism, Kinneavy would have a point. And, to be sure, as long as mere taxonomizing is the goal, the features of completed discourses are more dependably accessible to analysis than their creators' complex motives. But in composition theory, writers' behaviors and what stimulates them are at least as valuable as generated texts. Indeed, in writing courses those behaviors are primary, since one concern is to reduce disparities between what writers set out to do and what their completed discourses actually achieve. The composer's own sense of purpose, however tentatively conceived or even misapprehended, is a crucial reference for measuring writing effectiveness. Kinneavy's objections notwithstanding, therefore, a comprehensive theory of discourse must account for operational purposes if it is to achieve more than a static cataloguing of documents.

A recent practical experience underlies my argument. For the past 14 months I have served as a communications advisor with a large, New York-based consulting agency specializing in business management, systems planning, and computer software. The firm's success depends significantly on the effectiveness of its writing, which can be readily defined as transactional or referential-persuasive. Executives write proposals within competitive-bidding situations and win or lose contracts from businesses and corporations depending on the pertinence and persuasiveness of their recommendations. I have interviewed some 250 executives on three levels within the firm, partner, manager, and staff, and have evaluated as many proposals. The results make an interesting case study supporting my distinction of generic and operational perceptions of intentionality.

These writers set out to achieve several conflicting purposes simultaneously while responding to the needs of several, quite different, intended readers, each with different expectations of the writing. One evident purpose, for example, is to sell a service, to put the company's expertise in the best possible light. In order to accomplish this objective, proposal-writers must impress prospective clients with the firm's understanding of their business problems. The writer's knowledge and credentials must be expressed in the engaging, informal language of persuasive discourse. It would be inadequate to browbeat a client with the technical jargon of computer science,
although the writer's skill lies chiefly in this area and although the client's problems will be approached through systems analysis. The experienced writer knows that accuracy is futile in the absence of comprehension; that intricately reasoned arguments do not in themselves guarantee successful communication and the winning of a contract. One measure of the firm's commitment to translating their expertise into an unintimidating, client-focused language is their enthusiastic advocacy, rightly or wrongly, of Robert Gunning's "Fog Index," which they apply quite rigorously in their internal evaluation of documents going out to customers.

If this process of translation were the proposal-writer's only concern, the task would be complicated enough. But it is not. Another purpose, as important as the first, is to define a contractual obligation between firm and client, one which is sufficiently detailed to withstand a court test if the work is not done to the client's satisfaction. If this purpose is to be served, the language of the proposal must have an appropriate technical accuracy so that the firm's diagnosis of business problems and its recommended solutions are coherent to professional systems analyst and client alike, with none of the ambiguities that a looser language might encourage, for all its persuasive advantages. A rather complex rhetorical situation results: the writer seeks to mediate between two opposed communicative purposes, making choices about what to say and where and how to say it according to the dominant pressure of one motive or the other at different times. Usually, a proposal begins with a paragraph that establishes contact with the client and an agreeable atmosphere for the more technical discussion to follow: "Thank you for inviting us to submit this proposal to assist you in developing a General Ledger functional design . . ."; or "We very much enjoyed our recent meetings with you to discuss the development of auditor-oriented documentation for your XYZ system . . ." The writing will grow more neutral in tone and complex in language, but will never entirely lose sight of the needs of the non-specialist client.

It is accurate, then, but not very helpful, to describe proposals as transactional in aim. The fact is, operational purposes, such as the two mentioned above, dictate rhetorical choices, while the generic purpose that Britton or Kinneavy might describe is plainly irrelevant as a motivating agency in the writing. Identifying operational purposes is, therefore, a valid, indeed essential, goal in company writing seminars, but not the static designation of referential versus persuasive modes. I might add that the analysis of this kind of rhetorical problem, the conflict between selling a service and making a contract within the same statement, is a more fruitful activity in business and technical writing courses than the acid discrimination of superficial constraints such as the form of a business letter.

But to continue: the flux of authorial intentions in this writing is not exhausted in the two communicative motives just described. Other, more "expressive" concerns are also at stake and have a determinable impact on strategy. For example, since staff-level writers' promotions depend partly on
managers' judgments of their effectiveness, and managers' promotions depend similarly on partners' judgments, they will wish to impress superiors through the skill of their verbal performances—typically measured in terms of the amount of praise or criticism the writing attracts. Extensive review goes on at each level, staff through partner, before a proposal is passed to a client, and this review becomes intolerably costly and time-consuming if a document is so poorly prepared at the start that it requires major rewriting at each later stage. Hence, writers know that a favorable internal reception is at least as important as communicating to a client: they are revealing themselves as bright, capable, promotable people. In fact, the pressure to create a beneficial self-portrait will sometimes override the concern for effective communication, depending on how writers perceive the expectations of their superiors. Despite the firm's effort to recommend simplicity and directness, it has not yet managed to convince junior staff members that insinuating their technical expertise (through inflated style and trade jargon) is really less important than addressing a client's needs. These writers sometimes equate simple language with naïve thinking, regarding it as inadequate to their professional self-image and potentially damaging to their hopes for promotion. The impact of an "expressive" purpose on choice-making is substantial in this instance, though it is also, from a stylistic point of view, unfortunate.

Just as these compound purposes interact to direct the writer's choices, so the needs of diverse readers affect strategy as well. Two readers have already been mentioned, the client and the writer's own superior. But these are oversimplified. In fact, more than one client-reader will react to the proposal and more than one internal reader will review it. The writer knows that the senior executive who decides whether or not to approve the engagement (and its costs) will ordinarily not be the same person, for instance, a computerized-records specialist, who will actually cooperate on the project. Often, therefore, a proposal will contain a cover letter pertinent to the concerns of the chairman of the board, followed by appendices with detailed information appropriate for the specialist employee. Other times, though it is a more problematic alternative, different sections of a single document will emphasize the concerns of one reader or the other. Meanwhile, the writer is also aware that several internal reviews can be expected and that different readers will concern themselves with different features of the text. A manager may be more interested in its technical accuracy, while a partner will concentrate on its legal implications or its selling effectiveness. Obviously, the writer cannot accommodate all the quirks of these anticipated readers, but an awareness of their presence and their different needs nonetheless affects rhetorical choices. In my seminars with these executives, we have frequently crawled word-by-word through a document in order to evaluate its impact on one or another client or internal reader. For example, in a case where the client has not yet accepted an engagement, the question often arises whether the proposal should be written conditionally: "We would perform the following tasks . . . " or in the future: "We will perform . . . " The
future is presumptuous but more energetic; the conditional is more accurate but sounds indecisive. How will one reader or another respond?

Some special complexities of intention and response can also arise: for instance, when the client is persuaded that, say, zero-based budgeting is the answer to a problem while the consultants have determined that management auditing would be preferable. To what extent should the client be accommodated and to what extent (and in what manner) disabused? Another case is the client who is determined to purchase a computer system that is more elaborate and expensive than the company requires, while the consulting firm's own, much cheaper software package is more appropriate. The writer must steer a hazardous course between potential accusations of self-interest in one direction and dishonesty in another. In such circumstances, ethical as well as legal considerations complicate the rhetorical environment and the writer's sense of purpose.

It may be that the fascinating difficulties these business writers face exaggerate the conditions that an "ordinary" writer experiences. But I would argue that they are not idiosyncratic, that the process of mediating among conflicting purposes and the anticipated needs of more than one reader is a typical feature of composing, the recognition of which can have valuable research and pedagogical implications. Odell has suggested that we must further investigate the reasons writers give for the choices they make, noting that students, sometimes, "seem to be working toward contradictory purposes or establishing different speaker-audience relationships within what would appear to be a single writing task." It seems to me that this rhetorical adjustment to competing purposes is normal. But Odell is surely right to imply that we teachers often set up presumably simple exercises that are actually loaded with hidden problems of intentionality and reader-focus that we neither control in advance nor consider during evaluation. Probably, several purposes intrude with sufficient intensity in classroom writing to deserve notice, among them these: (1) solving a problem or performing a task according to the instructor's directions and anticipating that instructor's expectations; (2) impressing (or refusing to impress) the instructor; (3) receiving an acceptable grade (that is, acceptable to the student, not necessarily a high grade); (4) revealing or concealing real attitudes, opinions, and beliefs; (5) creating or sustaining an acceptable self-image; (6) receiving peer approval or avoiding peer disapproval. The point is, even a classroom exercise is a writing situation, however contrived, and activates the writer's entire range of expressive behaviors, not merely the ones a teacher has specified in the assignment or has decided to emphasize in the evaluation.

Perhaps we deceive ourselves if we suppose that the generic purposes which may be theoretically adequate for a taxonomy of discourses are also pedagogically useful to initiate writing or to assess its effectiveness. A theory of discourse that presumes to offer adequate conceptual bases for teaching and scholarship alike must be able to accommodate an operational perception of intentionality as well as the generic, that is, its focus ought to be be-
behavioral as well as textual. The elementary case study I have offered suggests the complexity, but also the definability, of operational purposes, and I believe that this line of inquiry deserves extension. Odell has submitted some procedures that can guide additional research, including, in the case of academic writing, a set of questions designed to probe the motives that students bring to composing. The same questions could be adapted to many different writers and situations: What reasons do the writers offer for their choices? Do they justify those choices with reference to some "basic purpose"? What other justifications do they give? Does current theory adequately anticipate their explanations? Do the explanations vary with the kind of risk involved or according to the competence of a particular writer?¹³

The accumulation and analysis of answers to such questions may eventually lead to significant advances in both theory and pedagogy: a deeper awareness of how and why writers behave as they do, and a better understanding of how to develop those behaviors advantageously in the classroom.

Notes

2. For an interesting account of the role that readers' formal expectations played in conditioning one writer's behavior, see Paul Russel, Samuel Johnson and the Life of Writing (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971).
5. See Kinneavy, passim.
12. Odell, p. 41.