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AUTHOR Miller, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Teachers read student papers with both eager and anxious expectancy about discourse they have caused but not written. Whatever the teachers may have said about what they will look for as they read, they still measure each paper against their ideas about appropriate performances in each of the categories of textual analysis. They are not reacting to the texts as would a reader who had not instigated them. This reading process is also a physical act, insofar as the teacher both marks and writes on the text at hand while continuing to read. During this many-faceted experience, teachers who are reading are taken by many moods. Reading student writing more closely resembles the careful reading of criticism than it does reading for most other purposes. The essential difference, however, is the teacher's supratextual relation to student texts. Teachers should recognize their dualism, seeing that an internal divorce between their roles as composition teachers and literature teachers is perhaps caused by double visions they have about the proper status of a text. Such a recognition--that teachers individually experience tension and frustration when they read student writing because they hold conflicting but unarticulated values that would have them both construct and deconstruct any text--can liberate them from those very tensions. (HOD)

Professor Susan Miller
Department of English
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Milwaukee, WI 53201

Forthcoming: Composition and Teaching

The Student's Reader is Always a Fiction*

The activity that characterizes the difficulty, the professional status, and, perhaps, the perceived "pre-intellectuality" of teaching composition is reading student essays. This distinguishing feature of writing instruction, the one thing that beginning teachers find most difficult to think they do well and experienced faculty justify avoiding when they justify "scholarship" to the detriment of teaching composition, has (perhaps for those very reasons) remained largely unexamined. But that activity, especially in view of the messages of contemporary literary theory, deserves exploration. Recent concerns about the status of a text and the nature of reading suggest that a phenomenology of reading student writing has something to tell both composition volunteers and conscientious objectors. Practice--the ordinary experience of the student text by the composition teacher--makes current theory more vivid to itself and powerfully relevant to us.

The literary theory I'm referring to is decidedly not the New Criticism that separated "us" from "them" until recently. The implications, if not the stated premises, of that theory were that: 1) texts are artifacts that contain meaning; 2) readers discover the meaning of the text; and 3) authors' and readers' particular situations (e.g., in history or in personal linguistic

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experience) make them more or less able to expose the text's meaning.[2] But contemporary literary theory is informed by less certainty about meanings "contained" in words on a page, and thus conflicts with traditional views assuming that written language--apart from writer or reader--is a stable system of meaning. Literary theory and philosophical hermeneutics currently question the status of the text that results from writing.[3] These fields oppose subjective interpretations("reader-response criticism") to the premises of positivistic new criticism. They suggest that "strong mis-readings" are as valuable as discoveries, if possible, of the text's one, privileged (intended) meaning. In sum, the relationship between the marks on the page (the text) and the reader is an insoluble but always stimulating problematic, no longer a neat "problem" with a "solution."

I would be hard put to do more here than summarize new and parallel theoretical propositions about reading before holding them against the experience of reading student writing. In all of the disciplines concerned with written language, it is now commonplace to assert that reading is an act of construction--an active, engaged, creative process. Psycholinguistic and psychological descriptions of the process show that it depends only secondarily on the cognitive ability to decipher written symbols, and primarily on making predictions, perceiving patterns, and playing hunches about what is to come in the text being read.[4] The expectations about and past experiences of texts that we bring to reading allow us to take away a sense of coherent meaning. We could not, in fact, understand written language if we looked at each letter or word as we read; our short-term memories would not hold the implication of each symbol long enough for long-term memory to comprehend sentences. Thus "readability," the relative ease with which a text is understood, depends on that text's predictable, redundant nature.[5] Reading is a supra-textual, active construction of the marks on a page.

But although the reader must make (rather than make out) the meaning of the text, the text is also a fact, if not an artifact, that "makes" the reader's meaning. We are always, in regard to describing texts, both Bishop Berkeley and Johnson kicking the stone of refutation, both idealist and materialist. While reading depends on the process of making accurate, inaccurate, or possibly accurate predictions within the contexts of the reader's past linguistic experiences and present expectations, texts also exist. By writing, we inextricably link an inalterable "content" to the marks on a particular page, as well as to our intentions (which are based on our own linguistic experience and expectations about what we will be thought to mean), and to a cultural consensus about what we meant. So reading is both making and receiving the marks on the page; texts both "make meaning" and are made out by readers.

It is no wonder, then, that at this stage of inquiry psychology, criticism, or philosophy offer global rather than particularized definitions of "reading." The act that both causes and results from a text is rarely understood as a situationally specific, intentional process whose entire gestalt may vary, even for the same reader, from time to time and setting to setting. Although "reading for information," "finding main ideas," "word attack," and "critical reading" are taught separately, few acknowledge that reading fluently for a particular feature of the text is only half of the reading story. "Reading" is as tied to the reader's situation as "writing" is to purpose, audience, mode of discourse, the developmental level of the writer, the physical

media, or temporal constraints. But, lacking catalogues of the varieties of reading experience, the following description of what happens when we read student papers is largely on its own.[6] What is clear is that especially for a literary scholar and teacher whose professional life is devoted to texts, the student's writing for a writing class will present a special instance of "reading."

An account of what we usually do demonstrates this. Teachers do not choose to read student papers as they might select a novel or magazine, nor are they motivated to do so by a desire for entertainment, information, or even the same sense of professional responsibility that might bring them either to the Faerie Queene or a well-received critical essay. They approach this reading, nonetheless (and however cynically) with some sense of excitement. They are reading writing that they themselves caused to be written; approaching the task is for that reason if no other compelling. Typically, a teacher anticipates seeing "what they did" with the assignment, with the newly taught technique, or with individual writing styles. At the same time that the teacher has imagined intentions for the text, the teacher also has realistic doubts that these intentions will be fulfilled and often has a sense of daring the students to have met or transcended his or her expectations. The secret wish to be pleasantly surprised is a desire to be "taken" or "made" by the text--to have the usual, constructive reading experience much like the one you are having now, wherein you generally know what to expect but are concentrating, nonetheless, on what I will say next. The teacher who is reading begins, then, with a semi-Platonic model: Each text to be read is conceived of as only a shadow of the Ideal text, but any embodiment of the Ideal in practice would be a surprise to the teacher who was the originator, or first cause, of this writing.

With both eager and anxious expectancy about discourse they have caused but not written, teachers begin to read. Depending on their particular methods, they actively look for explicit answers to questions readers in other settings receptively await answers to. They check the formal features of each piece: format, medium, and length. They "look at" the way the writer has treated the assigned subject or inventive problem, mentally assessing rather than assenting to a chosen text. As they read on, the process of assessment increases. Whatever they may have said (and honorably intend to hold to) about what they will look for as they read, they nonetheless measure each paper against their ideas about appropriate performances in each of the categories of textual analysis. They separate the writer's content from the writer's prior information about this particular subject (which they usually have themselves either supplied or elicited in discussion). They separate each paragraph from the whole, each sentence from each paragraph, and each of the many surface features of the text from all others. At once they notice and attend to each category a text comprises: the elements of editing (e.g., typos), revisions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, grammar), of writing itself (word choice, syntax, transitions) and of conceptualization (form, voice, tone, content, thesis).

Now "mistakes" or slips in any of these categories would catch the attention, if only peripherally, of most educated readers. But the teacher's reading process awaits, if not actively seeks, such deviations from fluency. Those who expect the best from student writing, who may explicitly tell students they look forward to a normal, pleasant reading experience and have one until a paper demands that they acknowledge flaws, as well as those who role-play a simulated audience of the assigned piece with great success, nonetheless are

actively reading to notice success and failure in each of the categories of textual analysis. They are not reacting to the texts as would a reader who had not instigated them. (Consequently, most teachers are willing to "read" and evaluate writing they are, in ordinary terms, unable to understand. They have, as professionals, a ready-at-hand reading process that expresses Aristotle's principle that rhetoric has no content. They will address any text with a sense that they could make suggestions or discover errors despite only minimal understanding of the text's content or specific conventions.)

This reading process is for most also a physical act, insofar as the teacher both marks and writes on the text at hand while continuing to read. This physical activity, which differs from the underlining or note-taking we do as we "study" a text because it requires the teacher to maintain a professional persona in relation to the student writer, makes the student's reader also, at the same time, a writer. The teacher "thought up" the discourse the student wrote but did not write it; similarly, this "reader" is a writer who must assume the professional rhetorical stance toward the student that allows meta-communication on the margins. The teacher cannot edit in the way he or she might if the writing were actually the teacher's own. Doing so would be appropriating the student's text, not teaching. Teachers may not know, in fact, what the student "meant" to say, or if they do they still hope the student will discover that meaning or locution independently.

In addition, reading student writing is evaluative; it results in a grade or some other relative judgment. Consequently, the teacher reading is also measuring the text against an ideal response to the assignment, against the average performance within the group of responses, against all the similar papers this teacher has read previously, against the adequacy of the prepara-

tion for this particular assignment that the teacher provided, against the teacher's standards, stated or tacit departmental and school standards, against one or another of a variety of analytic or holistic rating methods, and, at times, the teacher's own ability to write in response to this very assignment. (Some teachers are also measuring this text against the particular student's other writing, best possible or worst writing, current personal situation, and stated expectations about grades. Some, who read anonymous papers, are not--until they reveal the writer's identity to themselves and then, imaginatively or in fact, re-read parts or the whole against what they know about the person who wrote.[7])

During this many-faceted experience, teachers who are reading are taken by many moods, ranging from disaffected boredom to intense pleasure or anger. Experiencing anger or extreme frustration is particularly interesting. This may occur in response to the whole text, without reference to its errors or other flaws: "This is not what I assigned," or "this is plagiarized." More often, such emotion appears to respond to parts of the text, especially to errors.[8] Considering that the teacher is teaching a course designed to promote (rather than certify) the student's better writing and that the teacher, unlike an athletic coach, expresses such emotions privately, extreme responses to flaws in student writing appear gratuitous and at war with the teacher's pedagogical situation. Such private expressions cannot benefit the student nor directly relieve the teacher.

But showing emotion rarely depends on its having a predictable effect. Teachers who find themselves furious (or perhaps "break up" with laughter at a student's naivete) are, to use sociologist Erving Goffman's term, "flooding out."[9] This sort of reaction occurs when the role a person has

assumed--in this case the role of a student's "normal" reader--is finally insupportable because it is too much at odds with the teacher's sense of reality. From the point of view of the teacher, the plagiarism, the spelling error, the miscalculation of whatever sort is a last straw, breaking the back of the teacher's ability to at once read and not read the student writing.

For this reading experience is neither ordinary fluent reading nor a professional critic's, or student's, reading of a "difficult" text. The latter, it might be argued, is equally "close," equally analytical, equally intended to "make out" a text rather than be receptively made by its "meaning." And certainly reading student writing is, on a spectrum of reading experiences, more like the close reading of criticism than like reading for most other purposes. The essential difference, however, is the teacher's supratextual relation to student texts.

Skilled readers have always acknowledged the difficulty of reading some texts; translators, for example, must read under special stresses. Textual scholars and literary critics have generally assumed that the text is an artifact and have, at least in new criticism, set aside authorial intention and reader reaction to construe "the text itself" in the best possible light. Until recently, the questions of criticism might all be seen to have one purpose: making the text "better." Such reading tries to understand how and why the text is "good"--whole, unified, patterned, allusive, complex, coherent, powerful.

This traditional assumption about the nature of difficult but worthy texts sharply marks the difference between their reading and the reading of student writing. We may not "understand" Finnegan's Wake and may need to be

taught the rules for construing As I Lay Dying or The Sound and the Fury, but we do not begrudge these texts special conditions for interpretation. The reading project is to place ourselves in relation to literature so that it will "make" us--to be or to have been prepared to real it well. We meet it, or any difficult text, on its own terms. But we only assume this posture toward student writing in order to help the writer meet other readers' expectations about conventional codes, forms, and voices. We learn to read student texts in order to normalize them. We understand their special logic in relation to various measures we assume to be above, rather than off, their mark(s).

In sum, reading student writing is not constructive but destructive. We do what they say we do: tear the papers apart. This is not to say that we are ill-willed, that we do not enjoy reading student papers, or that we are not interested--in the ordinary and the scholarly senses of the word--in what they say. Even those who first read without a pen in hand to avoid being only error hunters and those whose honors' classes regularly write relatively delightful prose are encompassed by a phenomena that requires them to be anti-readers. Teachers simultaneously and consciously keep in play all the layers of analysis they know, even while they may attempt assent to the text. This particular kind of reading neither assumes the organic unity of the discourse nor seeks to produce only one best account of it.

Throughout this description, the tension between "normal" reading and this particular kind of anti-reading recurs. Approaching, beginning, carrying through and completing this project all demand that we not-read while reading. Every work, each pattern of development, each allusion and point made is in some measure in quotation marks, as are each error and deviation

from normal patterns. We hold each student utterance up to so many prior, possible, or "better" expressions that we are, within multiple frames of personal responsibility, curiosity, and evaluation, unavoidably exhausted by this reading. No matter how diligently we work to reduce the artificiality of the classroom situation, how adamantly we seek assignments whose responses will surprise or inform our genuine curiosity, or how rigorously we play the role of an intended audience, the student's "reader" is always a fiction, purely if not simply no reader at all, but a teacher. And the student is no Author, but instead a "writer," a person whose authorial character revealed by the text must always, in this classroom context, remain only caricature. We are always constrained by rhetoric's iron law of context, and therefore always doomed to attend dress rehearsals, to be always the reading bridesmaid.

If we have, then, an answer to "what is reading?," we also have one to the question "what is a text?" It is commonplace to call student writing "artificial"; it is in most of its aspects a staged performance, or, usually, itself a dress rehearsal. We may read student writing as this week's set of themes, as the final "treatment" of some aspect of course content (e.g., a seminar paper), as a potentially publishable essay, or as, rarely, the published version of a paper written for our or someone else's course. (Reading a plagiarized paper occasions a special experience of student writing in relation to "publication.") But once we know it as "student writing," perspectives come into play that prevent it from being "real" writing, except within its own school context.

In addition, the student text is, if we define it by its reading, never the last word, the product that reifies an Author's understanding of a subject. It is always, as it is known by its readers, writing-in-process,

writing to be changed or bettered by another attempt. The text remains open; its undecidability is a given condition of its occurrence, neither the product of flaws nor naivete. Writing by students is neither certain nor able to be, for ideally this writing has sought its teacher's reading, not what would be utterly artificial, a "real" reader. Students instinctively move toward their own kind of best reading, the one that accepts their writing as a practice.

Thus each student text is an attempt, an essay, an instance of writing rather than writing itself. Student texts do not have the same status that non-student texts assume, even when written by unskilled writers who may be credited with "folk writing." They are exercises, as the teachers knew who established the classical sequence of school progymnasmata and seriously asked students from Roman to Milton's time "whether day or night is more beautiful?" The student text is only an imitation of academic, personal, professional, technical, or "creative" writing. As we read it, student writing is always written on a mirror that both shows the inscription and something else, a suggested other, behind it.

The answer to "what is a student text?" is an open window on contemporary literary theory. What I have said about the open, undecidable nature of the student text is what post-structuralist critics are now saying about literature and written language.[10] The core doctrine of this school is that texts participate in "textuality." Anything written is so embedded in the history of written utterances that to claim either that it has a fixed (decidable), "best" interpretation or that it is itself a "work of art," either original or unique, is impossible.

Jacques Derrida, whose Writing and Difference and Of Grammatology are

primary sources for various applications of this view of the text, points out that writers' texts "signify" according to their differance from other texts, not only according to their representation of mimetic or symbolic congruences with experience or reality.[11] Thus "absence," neither authorial nor art's presence, creates meaning. We seek, as readers or as auditors, the author or art that has inevitably disappeared when language is uttered, the vanishing statement that is (perhaps) everything but what has just been said in writing. As soon as language combines with and reifies history and the moment of its utterance, "truth" disappears into context, taking with it the author, content, and meaning.

"Deconstruction" is in this view all we can do with writing--we may only search out the elements of, allusions to, and layers of probable intention to destroy or explode the text. Everything is in quotation marks, or will be misunderstood. The play of meanings, of language, inscribes the author. We cannot juxtapose images, or allude, to escape the freeplay of prior meanings, only to transform them. Whatever we write, juxtaposes us against all other uses of the same forms, words, even letters; language alludes to us and becomes the black box we can neither break out of nor into.

Obviously such a doctrine may upset those who depend on written language.[12] All of the premises that have guided the study of literature are called into question. And all of the promises we thought we had to keep (to art, to history, to students) become "promises" when only the road not taken is on the page (and itself unavailable--absent). Reading is itself a fiction.

But unlike critics who argue on the one hand that accepting the fluid, uncertain nature of writing will loose anarchy on the world (by making it impossible to, e.g., state a thesis and support it) and those on the other

who imply that the text's uncertain nature is a good, slightly naughty joke on insufficient philosophies of absolutism, hierarchical structures of value, of Meyer Abrams, we teachers of writing students can comfortably accept the play of order against accident, of thesis against only traces of other people's theses. We are able to hold the tension between so hierarchical a system as A, B, C, D, F grading and the individual writer's development; we can decide to fail a paper even while telling a student that it is an effort superior to all earlier attempts. (We can also give A's for "effort," but I am arguing, of course, that we do not teach effort but instead participation in the history of texts, in textuality itself.)

The student text is and has always been, at least in the teacher's reading of it, a "factitious" embodiment of the newly recognized undecidable and uncertain writing (écriture) that is the object of post-structuralist poetics. The student, like the disappearing Author whose death and dismemberment were proclaimed by Roland Barthes,[13] is written by writing. A student writer's identity is inscribed by the manifold layers of evaluation, by the teacher's professional experience and role-related anxieties, by the assigned problem's solutions, and by all of the other students' writing that the teacher unavoidably brings to bear on the text.

In sum, teachers are neither betrayed nor startled by texts whose unique, original congruence with personal meaning we never expected. Nor are we unable to hear the innocence of the first time this writer has dared use (what we must call) the world's most tiresome cliché. Let mot juste swings, for us, both ways.

Recognizing this offers more than an open window on our colleague's theoretical proposals and arguments, although what we see through that window might enlighten us about the tension felt between teachers of composition and their colleagues. Understanding the activity that defines that difference for them, reading student papers, shows us how essential holding a vision of a stable text is to unreconstructed new critics and formalists. It suggests that participating in our primary activity would not only take, but also waste and in fact threaten the time of a colleague committed to text as artifact, and therefore to reading to make the text "better." Through this window of understanding we also see that student writing is a source for testing current ideas about the nature of the text and textuality. Theories of the text may be tested against our experiences with and knowledge of the nature of obviously uncertain and fluid writing. Within the limits of the classroom,[14] the complexity of reading other texts may be laid bare, acted out, empirically experienced. Those who would find the limits of Derrida's, or Barthe's, or Foucault's notions of the textuality within which no text may be unique or original would volunteer to teach composition, if not fight for the chance. They would, of course, learn from us, who know both <u>how</u> to read student writing and that this reading is properly exhausting because it is much less comfortable than reading writing that is "certain," or "art," or "expert."

But while we wait for such inevitable participation, disclosing the nature of reading student writing and spelling out its relation to reading theories also serves us as composition teachers. We may recognize our own dualism, for instance, seeing that an internal divorce between our roles as

composition teachers and literature teachers is perhaps caused by double visions we have about the "proper" status of a text. Such a recognition--that we individually experience tension and frustration when we read student writing because we hold to conflicting but unarticulated values that would have us both construct and deconstruct any text--can liberate us from these very tensions. Once we spell out the troublesome but essential oppositions we must encompass while reading student writing--of art versus nature, achievement versus apprenticeship, freshness versus cliché, risk versus error--we may continue without frustration, and with a curiosity that may overcome exhaustion.

At the same time, we may as teachers become at once more supportive and more demanding of students. If we accept their writing as properly imitative, as an instance of the practice in a developmental sequence that has touched each fully independent writer in Western history, we may become writing coaches who are as understanding of achievement and failure as any of the great athletic coaches. We can make assignments that allow the student to be written by conventions, rhetorical stances, and inventive problems that are necessary stages in a normal progression toward independence and the student's own chance to "write." We can acknowledge the artificiality of class writing and own up to ourselves as readers in perhaps multiple roles, but nonetheless always the teacher for whom students write.

Primarily, of course, the business of the writing course and its teacher is, as the business of rhetoric has always been, prescriptive. Unlike poetics, which is descriptive, rhetoric assumes that composition may be learned when its rules are explained and incrementally difficult practice follows. It is one thing to worry only over the status of a literary text and another to assent to both literature and a student text that is always Becoming and will, for us, never Be. If we argue (or collapse) on one side or another of the positions now opposed in discussions of the nature of texts, we mistake our special opportunities to unite language, understanding, and learning. The very difficulty of reading student writing is also its necessary condition: we can say about student writing neither "this is not perfect" nor "this is perfect." And we can, with both rhetoric and poetics in hand, say both.

[1]This essay is about reading students' expository writing, but its description would apply as well (if not, more accurately) to reading their "creative" writing.

[2]For instance, the text would "contain" a pun if two meanings of a word were "in the language" at the time, whether or not the writer intended or the reader "got" it.

[3]See E.D. Hirsch, The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 82-5, 92-137 for a discussion of "readability."

[4]See, e.g., Frank Smith, Understanding Reading, 2nd ed. (N.Y.: Hold, Reinhart, Winston, 197); R. Tierney, P. Anders, J. Mitchell, eds., Understanding Reader's Understanding (London: Longman, 1980); E. Gibson and H. Levin, The Psychology of Reading (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1975); R. Spiro, B. Bruce, W. Brewer, eds., Theoretical Issues in Reading Comprehension (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1980).

[5]See Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class?:The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980) and Susan Suleiman and Inge Ordsman, eds., The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980) for an overview of literary reader-response criticism. See also Richard E. Palmer, Hermeneutics (Evanston: Northwester U. Press, 1969).

[6]It would be possible, of course, to conduct emperical research about this reading process. I am at present only reading "the text" of experience.

[7]I have assumed that reading each paper is like reading the others and have thus omitted describing the continuity or order of reading and the inevitable effects of duration and sequence. See, e.g., Menukhem Perry, "Literary Dynamics: How the Order of A Text Creates its Meanings," Poetics Today, 1, (Autumn, 1979), 35-64.

[8]See Joseph Williams, "The Phenomenology of Error," CCC (May, 1981), pp.

[9]Frame Analysis (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1974), pp. 350-59.

[10]This view of writing is that of the by now notorious "Yale Critics" (J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, and Geoffrey Hartman) and the French school of Roland Barthes, Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

[11]David Bartholomae, in "Derrida: Writing, Underwriting, and Unwriting," unpublished paper, MLA, 1979, lays out Derrida's views (e.g., in Writing and Differance, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978)) in relation to teaching composition and raises many of the same issues this essay relates to reading student writing.

[12]A good summary of the debate this anxiety has caused is by George Levine, in a review essay of Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself and Frank Lentricchia, After the New Criticism, in College English, 43 (February, 1981), 146-80.

[13]"The Death of the Author," Image-Music-Text, trans. Stephen Heath (NY: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 142-48.

[14]cf. David Bleisch, "The Identity of Pedagogy and Research in the Study of Response to Literature," College English, 42 (December, 1980), 350-67.