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ABSTRACT

Writing and reading can be viewed as processes in which meaning is gradually constructed, and this description extends to the visual arts as well. Certain process-oriented thinking skills are inherent in both, including comprehending and composing, regenerating ideas, the application of language learning and processing. Five characteristics of effective composing and comprehending can also be identified: planning, drafting, aligning, revising, and monitoring. Three case studies, in which artists and writers discuss the process of composing, provide useful models demonstrating the parallels between composing in painting, writing, and reading. The composition of meaning in reading can be observed through a five-step method of repeated readings: (1) survey the headings; (2) read the introduction and summary; (3) study the graphics and captions; (4) read the first and last sentences in the paragraphs of each section; and (5) read each section phrase by phrase. The parallel between paint and print media provides teachers of novice writers with ways of concretely illustrating the process of constructing meaning. The value of revision and editing in writing can be more fully appreciated by young writers who have experienced its effects in both painting and reading. (Four figures and a table summarizing the five-step method of composing meaning in reading are included, and references are appended.) (MM)

COMPOSING MEANING: WRITING, PAINTING, READING

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COMPOSING MEANING: WRITING, PAINTING, READING

Preface

The seeds of this paper were planted during the presentation of a series of slides depicting the evolution of an oil painting by the late German artist, Diego Voci. The slides showed a sketch, a revised sketch, a re-revised sketch, a revision of the revised revision. Then, a painting. Three youthful human figures. Three expressionless figures. A shift to a mood of melancholy. Then suddenly a clear canvas and three aged figures. Then back to youth again, and cheerfulness. Finally, the figures became three clowns reflecting all the moods of the work's earlier stages.

The similarity of the artist's process of--not experimenting, not searching--but composing the most satisfying expression of his message and the writing process was striking. Just as Voci had shifted form in his work, so had I repeatedly revised the manuscript of a children's novel until the original version of the story was a hardly recognizable fraction of the finished whole.

Witnessing Voci's piece evolve crystallized the parallels between painting and writing. It also led to the discussions and explorations of composition in other human activities, like reading.

R. T. R.

The Composing Process

Education and experience have taught most of us that letters, stories, themes, etc. are written in single sessions. Seldom do we proofread with attention to more than spelling and punctuation. Reality, as evidenced by well known authors, however, is that many of our favorite works are the results of many revisions. Dickens' manuscripts show many crossings out and rewordings. Young readers' author, Richard Peck, tells his audiences that every page they read in his books has been written nine times. Colleen McCollough recalls that The Thorn Birds went through ten drafts before its publication. In a note at the beginning of The Covenant, James Michener gives thanks to South African journalist, Errol L. Uys, for helping the author read the manuscript seven times--twice aloud!

Indeed, writing skills are much more effectively developed when writing is viewed as a predictable process of gradually composing, or constructing, a final product. The work of well known authors is powerful testimony that the writing process is more than a conceptual model. Is it, though, enough to convince a novice or reluctant writer that the product of several drafts is worth the effort? Experience suggests that even more concrete demonstrations of the composing process may be necessary for some young writers.

In this paper, we describe how the composition process can be concretely demonstrated through familiar experiences. Our focus

is on the similarities of composition in painting, writing, and reading, and how these parallels can be illustrated in classrooms. Our method will be to present three first person case studies of composition by an artist, an author, and a reader.

Models of Composing

Perhaps it goes without saying that writing is a process of constructing meaning. Written composition certainly involves complex thinking--reflection and planning (before writing); assembling a first version of the product (drafting); clarifying, amending, qualifying (during/after drafting); polishing, correcting mechanics (after drafting); and sharing the product (after writing). But, are there similar processes at work in other forms of creative intellectual pursuit?

Squire (1983) draws specific comparisons between writing and reading as processes in which meaning is constructed by writers and readers. He describes the process-oriented thinking skills inherent in both composing and comprehending. Language processing is evident in both, because learning language involves learning to think. Regenerating ideas is essential to comprehending and occurs naturally in composing. Both composing and comprehending involve the application of language learning and processing in various subjects. Composing and comprehending both require training in varied forms of discourse --description, exposition, and narrative, for example)--for

understanding and communication to be complete. In each process, instruction should focus on constructing and reconstructing ideas. Finally, Squire observes that prior knowledge is critical in shaping the quality of composing and comprehension; knowledge of story grammars, ideas, concepts, and metacognitive factors influence both writing and reading.

Tierney and Pearson (1983) identify five characteristics of effective composing and comprehending: planning, drafting, aligning, revising, and monitoring. These characteristics are not necessarily sequential, and may occur at more than one stage of the composing/comprehending processes; pre-writing/reading, drafting, revising, editing. The table, Similarities in the Processes (Predictable Stages), shows parallels between composing in writing and reading, and compares them with the painting process.

Demonstrating Parallels in Composing

The relationships between composing in painting, writing, and reading can be concretely demonstrated. Case studies, like those presented below, provide useful models. They allow novices to see how "experts" compose.

An Artist on Composing

The visual arts offer a concrete starting point for understanding the process of composing. From my artist's point of view, the creative process is cyclical, if not a bit mystical. For convenience, I will describe it here as a series of steps, but

you should recognize that these are very often difficult to separate from one another during the emergence of a work. Please recognize, also, that the paintings used to illustrate the composing process lose a lot in photographic representation.

There is, first, a need or stimulus which starts the creative process. Stimuli may be conscious or subliminal. Conscious stimuli may take the form of specific composition or design problems. Subliminal stimuli may express an emotional reaction to some frustration which can only be perceived through the product itself.

Response to the stimulus brings internalization and improvisation into play. Artists internalize the stimulus through sketches and studies, making it part of their artistic vocabularies. Vocabularies affect the representation of the stimulus and are themselves expanded through improvisation. Improvising leads artists to learn the capabilities of media. This experimentation is sometimes done intentionally, but more often "experiments" are mistakes from which new methods are learned.

Internalization and improvisation in art occur during what can be likened to the prewriting/prereading and drafting stages of written language processes. They lead to fluency with media and with expression of subject content. As fluency is attained, a product emerges.

As with that of other artists dealing with two dimensional materials, stimuli for my work stem most often from everyday life experience. I trace, for example, the prevalence of natural themes and the repetition of color, line, and form in my work, to my upbringing in a coastal community. The ocean's movement, which dominated my early years, is now pictured in "frozen moments" on paper or canvas.

When working, I internalize and improvise through a variety of media: oils, pastels, graphite, etc. I compose series of works which are unified by subject content while meeting the demands of different media. This process parallels that of a writer focusing on a specific subject while working in different genre.

Lately, my work has been made by cutting and collaging my ear ier works; current pieces often transform realistic studies into abstractions having no resemblance to the original works. Beginning with several early studies of trees (Fig. 1), I moved directly into figure compositions.

The first trees were a simple study of actual trees, as viewed from my apartment window in Texas. The brown hills of my desert home in Wyoming, instead of the neighboring apartment buildings, formed the background. I was very homesick. The second study of trees grew out of the first as a simple negative space drawing of the original study. Five or six more tree studies emerged as enlarged parts of the first study.

Unhappy with the depth of involvement with these trees, I began cutting up these studies, gluing the pieces on other pages and adding drawn line. What occurred, quite spontaneously, was the emergence of human female forms. Dance, both ballet and modern movement, is part of my everyday experience and these partial figures related this movement.

I glued a successful single figure and tree top on a larger sheet of paper and constructed other figures around them, abstracting rectangular portions of the delineated form to fit with the attached drawing (Fig. 2).

From Figure 2, "Original Nudes," I progressed to a series of pastels in which the female form, in singles and multiples, was squared off for design purposes and eliminated those within the squares.

The next series of studies utilized the rectangle of a lithographic stone to insert a portion of the female form. Five different editions made up this series.

Returning to pastels, I began to utilize graphs--usually irregular--in which to place portions of the female form (Fig. 3). This was concurrent with work in oils on canvas which, unlike the pastel works, employed regular graphs and complete body images (Fig. 4).

Design problems internalized through my personal experiences prompt my particular artistic work. I have tried to show, here, how different techniques and media are used to compose the evolving visual expressions of my experiences. It seems that those who work in word craft participate in a similar process as they compose meaningful works.

A Writer on Composing

More and more, teachers are realizing that written discourse is the product of a building process. It certainly is for me. Here is what happens as I write. I think you will see some of these elements in the subsequent excerpts of one of my stories:

1. I build on my personal experience and knowledge, pieced together from a variety of sources, using that personal background plus imagination and intuition to construct my own reality in print;

2. I tend to try several approaches, viewpoints, or genres, in the early stages of my writing;

3. I revise a lot, in both large and small increments;

4. I listen to other people, whose opinion and expertise I value, when considering revision possibilities;

5. Repeated re-readings, to myself and others, as I write, help me to sense the total flow of the writing;

Let me give you an example of how the process worked in the emergence of a story of mine.

Eight or nine years ago, as an assignment for a writing course, I developed a character sketch of an eight-year-old girl named Lisa. It was based partly on a child I had taught, and partly on my imagination--on what I wanted the child to be like. In reality, an imaginative third-grade student of mine had been a pony one day until milk time. I took that incident and reconstructed and elaborated it until the entire piece fit the vision I now had. I called it "Last September, Nobody Liked Me," and wrote it like this:

> Lisa is a never-ending source of delight to her classmates. "Every Monday morning," one boy confided to us during a conversational period before the tardy bell, "Lisa isn't Lisa. She's something else. Wait 'til she gets here. You'll see!"
>
> "Last week," another pupil chimed in with obvious admiration, "she was a pony! She didn't walk into the room. She trotted. And made noises like a pony all morning. She didn't say a single word until milk break!"
>
> The bell had rung and the children were sitting quietly, about to begin the day's work, when the anticipated arrival occurred. Lisa's entry left nothing to be desired. She paused momentarily at the threshold. Then, waving her arms up and down slowly and gracefully, as if she were flying,

she came into the room. Pretending total unawareness of the sensation she was creating, but obviously knowing that all eyes were upon her, Lisa glided, arms continuing to wave, on a roundabout route to her assigned seat. She sat down, placed her feet primly and precisely together, clasped her hands on the desk top before her and met the amused eyes of her teacher with quiet confidence.

My teacher in the writing class said that this description sounded too much like "teacher-talk," and that I should try again. I did, finding a different point of view--this time through the eyes of another eight-year-old.

"Hey, Mom! You know that new girl? Lisa? Well, you'll never guess what she did this morning. She came in the room like a butterfly! Only we didn't know that's what she was then. We guessed about her being a butterfly afterward."

"What did she do to be a butterfly?"

"Oh, she waved her arms up and down - like this - and sort of floated to her desk. I can't do it like she did. She was really good.

"I'd have been scared to do something like that. But Lisa wasn't. It seemed like she enjoyed being noticed.

"Miss Mackey didn't mind. She just said what did we think Lisa was pretending to be, and we all guessed. Bobby was

the one who said she was a butterfly.

"You know, Lisa is kind of nice after your get to know her. At recess us girls asked her what gave her the idea about being a butterfly, and she was real friendly. When she first came, we didn't pay her much attention, but now I think we're going to like her just fine."

The assignment was accepted, and an additional requirement was made. Now I had to describe the same situation from the point of view of the participant herself--Lisa. At this point, I suddenly began inserting my own personal feelings into the character's perception. I was beginning to own the piece. It was no longer an assignment.

When a child, I was much younger than the others in my grade at school and spent a lot of time feeling that nobody liked me. So, it was easy to put Lisa into a similar predicament.

Out of this new sense of identification and ownership, I found renewed purpose in the writing. In fact, I had begun to like the character and the situation so much that I wanted to turn Lisa's story into a book. I planned it as a picture book because that was the only genre I knew how to do. I kept revising and trying it out in first and third persons--switching back and forth, trying to get a feeling of "rightness."

Several times, I hid the manuscript away in a drawer, thinking it would never be right. But I continued to feel that there was a book there somewhere. Several years later, I sent what I thought was the final version to the editor.

In the story, Lisa's family has moved to a new town and Lisa is having a hard time making friends. The don't even know the same jump-rope rhymes. It's just awful!

> I might never have gotten things straightened out, but one day Miss Mackey - that's my teacher - came over and talked with me at recess. She understood exactly how I felt - about the lonesome lump, and everything.
>
> She explained that the kids in this school weren't all that much different from the kids in my last school. And she said that I should think of something that I liked to do real well, and she would let me show it off in front of the class. (She didn't say it quite like that, but that's what she meant.)
>
> So I came up with the idea of acting something out. I like to do that. Momma says it's my "gift." When I make out like I'm a pony or something, people nearly always know what I'm trying to be.
>
> This time, I wanted to be something I hadn't done before. Something special. Finally, I decided to be a butterfly.

And it worked out perfectly. I wore my pink dress, with embroidered sleeves, and my Sunday shoes. Momma even bought me some new pink leotards.

Then, just before I went into the room that morning, I squinched my eyes and thought about the butterflies I knew...how they floated, with sunshine on their wings.

And, suddenly, I wasn't Lisa anymore! I truly felt like a butterfly. It showed, I guess, because they figured it out right away. Miss Mackey even hugged me, later on, when nobody was looking.

I was happy with this version, but my editor wasn't. She suggested that I consider the picture book as the synopsis for a longer book. I had developed the character; I just had to keep elaborating.

Again, it would have been easy to give up. In fact, I almost did. It takes a lot of "stick-to-it-ive-ness" to be a writer. Sometimes it comes easy, but usually it is hard work! That's why it's best to write something you care about enough to hang in there.

Here is part of the present version, which has been expanded to six short chapters and is called a "transition novel." I didn't change the butterfly incident. I just added other parts around it, much as Florence McEwin takes a piece of one painting and

uses it as a part of another composition. This, now appears before the butterfly incident:

Chapter 6 - Butterfly Day

Over the weekend, I told Momma what I was planning. She was a little put out with me for not telling her about things sooner.

"Why didn't you tell me what was happening before?" she wanted to know.

"I just didn't," I said. "Besides, Daddy likes for me to take care of things myself."

"I remember when I was in grade school," she said. "Your Uncle Rob had a fight with a bully every afternoon after school for a week. We never did tell your grandma. We figured we could handle it, and there wasn't any use getting her stirred up."

"Did you?" I asked. "Did he - handle the bully I mean?"

"Oh, I think so," Momma said. "I don't even remember what they were fighting about anymore. But we sure thought it was important at the time."

We decided I would wear my pink dress with embroidered sleeves and my Sunday shoes. Momma even bought me some new pink tights. Daddy said I looked as good as a strawberry ice cream cone.

And to the end of the butterfly episode, I added:

"SHE'S A BUTTERFLY! everybody said together.

All except Justin. He said, "I never saw a pink butterfly. I' bet there isn't one."

But no one paid him any attention. They were looking at me!

At recess time, everything was great. Three girls talked to me and I talked to them. I even told them one of my jump rope rhymes.

Justin hung around and listened. He said jump rope rhymes were silly. Then he ran away.

I don't care what he thinks. Besides, he'd better watch out. Someday, if I'm not jumping rope, maybe I'll lean against the playground wall again for a for a little while. And, next time, when I'm leaning on the wall and Justin Miller comes running by, maybe I will stick my foot out and trip him. Just you wait!

Novice writers should understand that there are intangible things that affect the writing process. Important intangibles affecting my writing are that:

1. My understanding of the piece I am writing grows cyclically, as I write and rewrite to clarify my vision of where I'm headed;

2. The more thoroughly I identify with my writing - the more completely I feel ownership - the more purpose and motivation I have for the piece;

3. I seek that special sense of satisfaction that comes when I am able to convey my vision of reality in such a way that it finds an answering response from my audience.

4. I rarely have the sense that a piece is completely finished. I simply stop at some point for the sake of publication. My understanding of the piece also grows over time.

So far, we have shown that the work of artists and writers can be used to illustrate the similarities of composition in painting and writing. The final section presents a method of showing how meaning is constructed in reading.

Composing in Reading

The parallels between composing in painting and writing apply also to reading comprehension. The composition of meaning can be observed (and demonstrated to students) through a five step method of repeated readings. Table One shows the method I use and its relationship to models of composition/comprehension.

Insert Table One about here

In the example below, note how information is added and elaborated at each step of this reading method. Step One shows information I gleaned from headings, Step Two shows information added by reading introductory and summary paragraphs. etc.) When applied to an article which appeared not long ago in Language Arts, "A Writing Approach to Reading Comprehension--Schema Theory in Action" (Hennings, 1982), the method produces the following evidence of meaning being composed through a building process:

Step One - Headings

"This article will describe a method of using writing activities to enhance reading comprehension. The method involves brainstorming, classifying facts, writing drafts of paragraphs, sequencing the paragraphs, writing good introductions and conclusions, and making a cohesive whole

of the parts. This procedure is part of a larger approach to integating writing and reading."

Step Two - Introduction and Summary

"This article addresses the need for reading and writing activities which help elementary school children build schemata for understanding expository prose like that found in social studies and science. It is not difficult to prepare and conduct lessons which deal with common informational structures. The way to teach children about how information is structured in writing, is to have them write."

Step Three - Graphics and Captions

"The first activity of the recommended sequence, factstorming, has children brainstorm a list of facts about a topic under study. Then, they prepare a chart in which the facts are grouped in categories. Paragraphs are written about the grouped facts. Paragraphs are logically sequenced. Introductions and summaries are drafted. A cohesive whole is assembled. Reading of similar subject matter is done for purposes of comparison. Writing is evaluated."

Step Four - First and Last Sentences

"The use of basal reader programs as the nearly exclusive format of elementary school reading programs is unfortunate because such materials do not develop the kind of conceptual

skills necessary for reading the long, complex passages found in informational writing. Learning to organize information for writing, aids children in developing mental structures--schemata--for comprehending informational prose. Unfortunately, few social studies or science classroom materials direct teachers in methods of helping children to develop information schemata. But, there are methods available to teachers who want to teach such skills.

"Factstorming (like brainstorming) is the basic process for teaching about the structure of expository prose. Factstorming is based on knowledge of information about a topic. Categorization is the next technique. It requires that students organize facts into meaningful categories. Drafting of paragraphs based on categorized facts follows. The teacher directs this phase, of drafting and revising. Group writing of paragraphs or writing by individual students may be used, depending on the sophistication of the students. Sequencing of paragraphs is arrived at through class discussion and agreement. Introductory and summary paragraphs are developed through discussion. Development of a cohesive final draft is done by small editorial groups of students. Finally, students read similar pieces of prose in order to identify the structures which have just been used in writing."

Step Five - Phrase-By-Phrase

Phrase-by-phrase reading adds specific, practical detail and examples for implementing this sequence of activities in classroom settings. The notes derived from phrase-by-phrase reading of Hennings' article filled nine paragraphs. Journal space is not adequate to include them here, but they emphasize the constructive character of reading comprehension.)

Summary

Squire and Tierney and Pearson present convincing arguments for the view of writing and reading as processes in which meaning is gradually constructed. We have tried to show that their descriptions can be extended to the visual arts. Just as writers and readers "compose" meaning with the written word, artists prepare a draft, "read" it, revise, reread, and revise again, until a satisfactory product emerges.

It is this parallel between paint and print media which provides teachers of novice writers with ways of concretely illustrating the process of constructing meaning. The value of revision and editing in writing, can be more fully appreciated by young writers who have experienced its effects in painting and reading.

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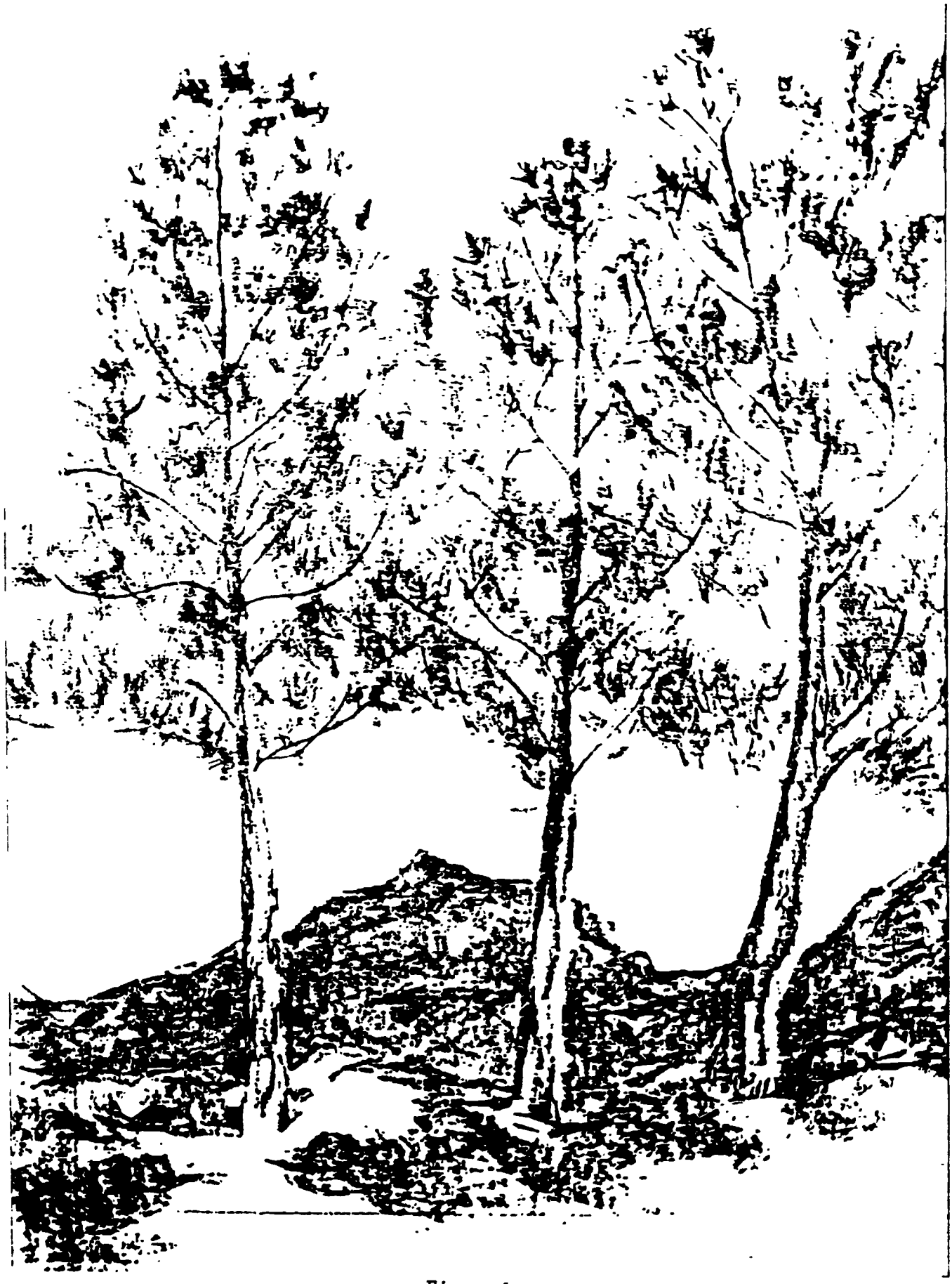

Figure 1
Tree Sketch I
Pastel/Graphite

Figure 2
Original Nudes
Pastel/Graphite

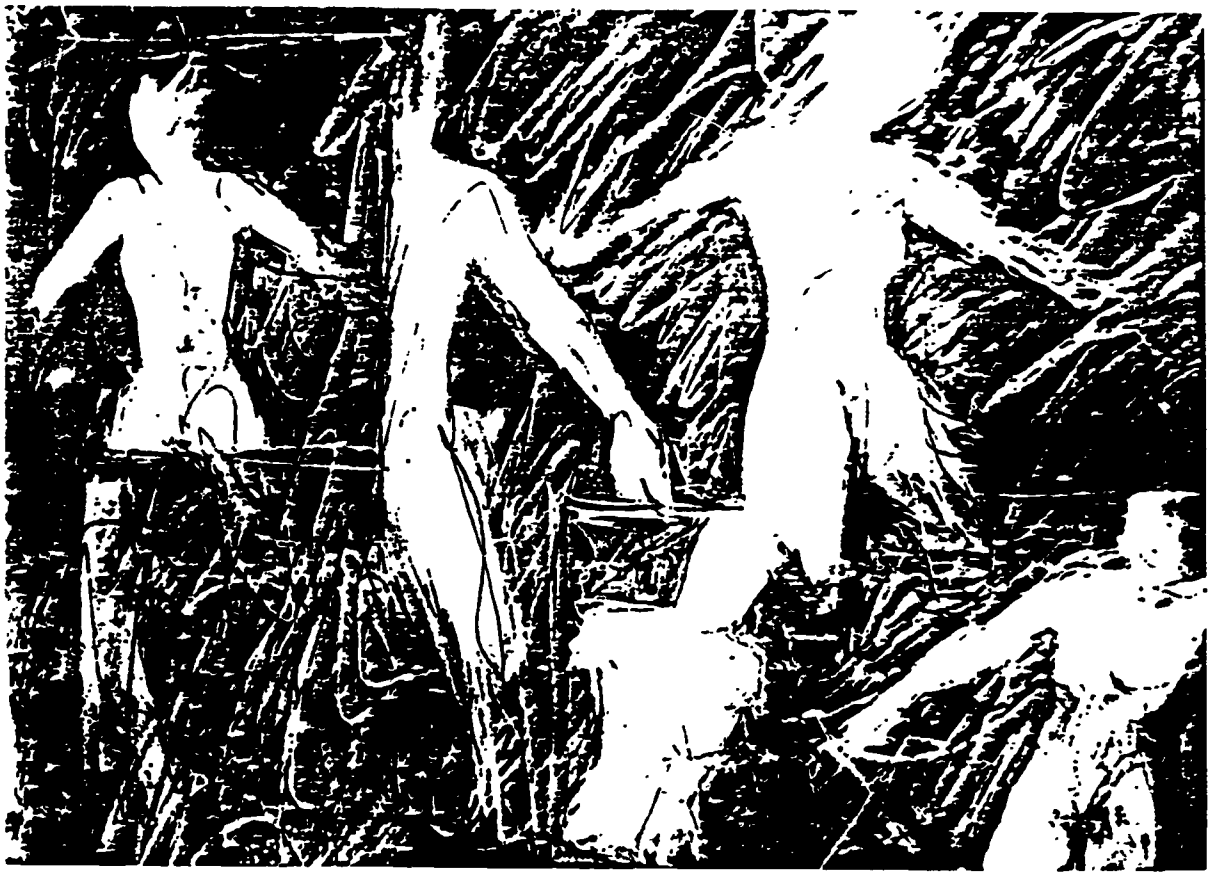

Figure 3
Graph Nudes
Pastels

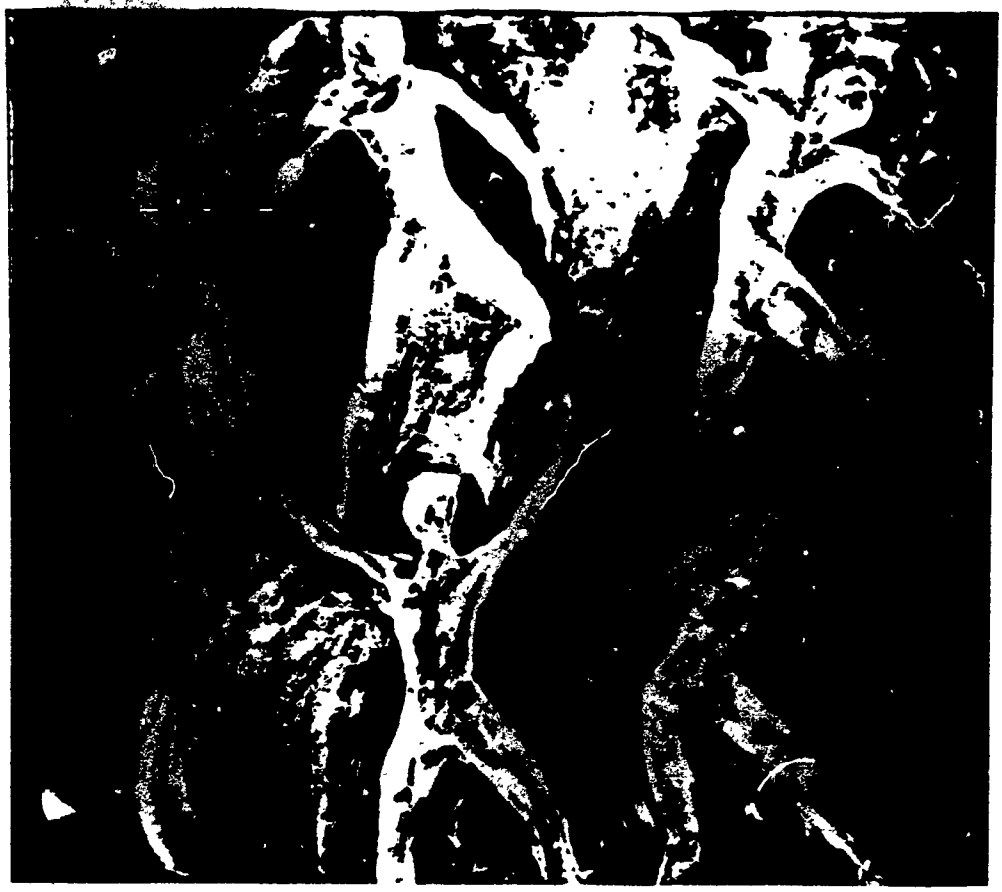

Figure 4

Table 1

A 5-STEP METHOD OF COMPOSING MEANING IN READING

STEPS:	SQUIRE	TIERNEY/PEARSON	
1) SURVEY HEADING	PRE-READ	PLAN	M
2) READ INTRO/ SUMMARY		PLAN, DRAFT	O
			N
3) STUDY GRAPHICS/ CAPTIONS	READ	PLAN, DRAFT	I
4) SECTION-BY-SECTION READ 1ST & LAST SENTENCES OF PARA-GRAPHS		DRAFT, ALIGN, REVISE	T
			O
			R
5) SECTION-BY-SECTION, READ-PHRASE-BY PHRASE	POST-READING	DRAFT, ALIGN, REVISE	I
			N
			G