

INTRODUCTION

Writing can seem an amorphous task. Writers seem to fill blank pages with inventions of endless possibilities—from cookbooks and instructions for the latest electronic gadget to prayer books and legal codes, from corporate reports on emerging markets and botanic treatises on leaf veins of deciduous trees to undergraduate papers for history courses and personal diaries of self-doubts. How do people do this amazing variety of things through writing? What can we say that would help us do these things more effectively?

Indeed the variety seems so great that general advice or analysis seems quixotic, and we ought to focus only on specific kinds of writing. One might be able to say something useful about historically-evolved cookbooks, and how one might go about producing one that speaks to the commercial market in the United States in the early twenty-first century. We have learned things about technical writing, business, and legal writing that have helped inform writing education of professionals in each of these domains. Research and pedagogy in *Writing Across the Curriculum*, in the *Disciplines and Professions*, and in the *Workplace* have guided approaches for developing writing of many specific types.

If the writing task is specific enough, detailed instructions can direct the text's completion, such as filling out a government form properly (at least in the particular version of the form used in a particular year)—very detailed specifications tell us what we should write in each box and our writing choices are limited as to which address or ethnicity we might report. Even if the form contains a more open-ended narrative, such as in a grant application, often the material that needs to be covered and the order it should be covered in are directed by instructions and regulations. Such narrowed focus helps direct our work, but it also limits our thinking, expression, identities, and commitments. In the extreme cases of filling out forms we can become powerless subjects of bureaucratic definitions and regulations.

Yet writing can be a powerful tool of thinking, feeling, identity, commitment, and action. In turning our impulses into words, we can reveal ourselves to ourselves and to the world, and we can take place in important debates, movements, and activities. Writing forms the playing fields of our literate times and each piece of writing we do claims a place, identity, meaning, and action on those fields of life. The more we can write beyond the bounds of constrained bureaucratic prescriptions, the more we gain power to define and represent ourselves in the literate world.

But the problem of writing seems so amorphous that once we step out of highly directed, highly instructed writing situations we may quickly feel at sea, not knowing which direction to take and without signs to help us gain our bearings and make decisions. Even if we are released on a small confined, pond, such as writing a paper for a university political science course on political parties where we are told what ideas to refer to and which cases to discuss, we may still struggle to know which direction to go in.

Of course, in writing an essay for a political science course, the more we know about political science, the longer we have been in the course and have known the professor, the more political science papers we have read and written, the more we have learned the vocabulary and read the literature of political science and the historical accounts of political parties, and the more we know the genres of the field, then the more effectively and efficiently we can address the task. Yet underlying questions remain about what we want to accomplish and how we can do it in more deeply effective ways; that is, we cannot reduce our writing just to type, but must create it anew from our interests, resources, thoughts, and perceptions.

What would be useful in this and many other circumstances is a way of understanding our writing situation and what we might do with it—not just how writing is generally done in these circumstances but how we might transform the circumstances through our participation. This volume, *A Rhetoric of Literate Action*, offers an approach to understanding writing situations and how we can respond creatively in deep and transformative ways, because we understand the game and our moves more deeply. The first four chapters of this volume provide a framework for identifying and understanding the situations writing comes out of and is directed toward. The next four chapters then consider how a text works to transform a situation and achieve the writer's motives as the text begins to take form. The final four chapters provide more specific advice of the work to be accomplished in bringing the text to final form and how to manage the work and one's own emotions and energies so as to accomplish the work most effectively.

The advice of this book is for the experienced writer with a substantial repertoire of skills, and now would find it useful to think in more fundamental strategic terms about what they want their texts to accomplish, what form the texts might take, how to develop specific contents, and how to arrange the work of writing. While the book contains some comments identifying challenges of developing writers and writers at social margins with an eye to how a writer can strategically address these challenges, those topics will not be at the center of discussion so as to maintain focus on strategic choice-making experienced writers,

Likewise, I will from time to time discuss collaborative writing processes, problems of multiple audiences, and the effects of changing technologies on writing, how to accomplish it, and what its impact is. To keep an already complicated and multidimensional subject as simple as I can, however, I will predominantly attend to the actions of individual experienced writers expressing their views and interests to readers, who each read one at a time, though from their social and organizational locations and interests. As should be evident from the presentation in this and the companion volume, the view of writing presented here is deeply dialogic, interactive, and social, but still writing and reading are done predominantly in semi-privacy, as readers and writers engage in their own thoughts in relation to the text, often for extended periods. Even in highly interactive collaborative processes, each participant must look inward to understand and evaluate the meanings evoked by the inscribed words. Further, writers aim to evoke meanings in individual readers, even though readers may be parts of teams or organizations, and readers attribute those evoked meanings as the expression of a writer, even if that writer is buried within complex corporate processes. In any event, what is here said about individuals can be, with care, extrapolated to more complex group processes.

Finally, while I will make some mention of multimedia and other communicative changes that are part of the digital age, the focus will be on the written word. The written word still maintains importance in digital environments, and we live in a world given shape by literacy. While the digital revolution is transforming our communicative and social environment, it is hard to know exactly what these changes will look like in even a few decades. What does seem clear though, is that the written word will maintain an important role for the foreseeable future and that the social changes will grow on a foundation established by the literate transformation of the past centuries. So it is of value for us to get our bearings in the written world as we venture forward into new communicative environments.

In providing advice about how to understand one's communicative situation and respond strategically to it, this volume follows in the long tradition of books of rhetoric, from the time of Aristotle until today, but with some substantial differences, as I will discuss at the end of the first chapter. So as not to encumber the practical orientation of the book, I will keep references to a minimum and cite sources only when they will directly contribute to exposition of the advice. A fully-documented companion volume, *A Theory of Literate Action*, examines the sources and theoretical reasoning behind the rhetoric and places its understanding of language, utterance, and writing within a wider social scientific understanding of humans, society, knowledge, communications, and literacy. While there is not a one-to-one match between the topics and chapters

of the two books, the introduction of the companion volume identifies chapters where some of the ideas from the first volume are elaborated in the second.

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