

How We Write

Writing as creative design

Mike Sharples



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Chapter 10

Messages in bottles and cultures

A message in a bottle is an evocative and enduring image. It is the vision of a shipwrecked sailor on a deserted island writing a plea for help, placing it in an empty rum bottle and throwing it into the sea. It is the etching on the plaque bolted to the Pioneer spacecraft of a naked Average Man, hand raised in greeting, standing beside his Average Woman.¹ It is also the standard view of how writers communicate with their readers.

In this information processing view of communication, a writer produces a message that captures some information in words and pictures. The message is sent, in the form of a book or other medium, to one or more readers who then interpret the message and so gain the writer's information. Providing that the writer knows how to put information into text, the message is delivered safely through time and space (and the entire postal, publishing and telecommunications industry is dedicated to ensuring that it is), and the reader can turn the text back into information, then the information has been transmitted successfully from writer to reader.

Unfortunately, safe transmission does not guarantee that the writer will be able to communicate anything interesting, useful or even understandable to the reader. When a reader receives a message in a bottle, spacecraft or book, he or she may not be able to make sense of it. The reader may communicate in a different language to the writer or, in the case of Pioneer, may come from an entirely different civilisation. Carl Sagan, the designer of the Pioneer plaque (Figure 10.1), came up with the ingenious idea of basing his message on hydrogen, the most common element

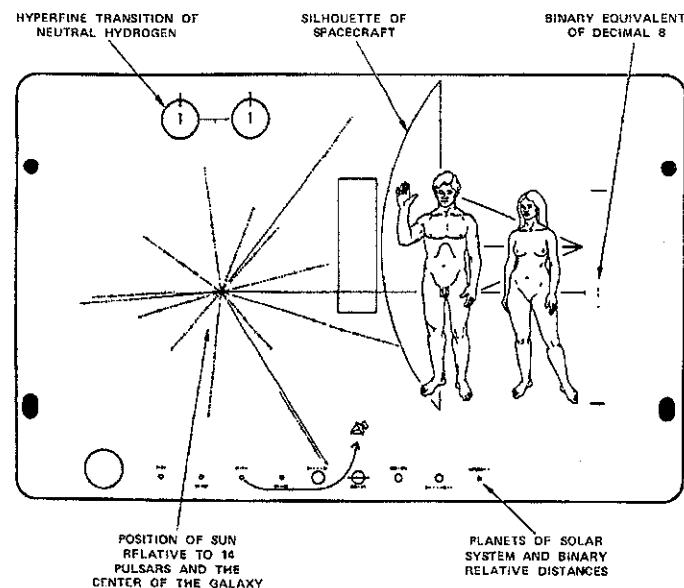


Figure 10.1 The plaque on the Pioneer 10 and 11 spacecraft, the first man-made objects to leave the Solar system (with annotations)

in the universe. In the corner of the plaque is a small diagram that illustrates the structure of hydrogen. According to NASA, anyone from a scientifically trained civilisation having enough knowledge of hydrogen would be able to translate the message. To this we might add that they would also need to be possessed of eyes, to realise that lines etched in gold constitute a message, and to be sufficiently inquisitive to bother to decipher it.

Thus, a message is a message not because it is written in words on paper or etched in gold, but because it forms a conceptual link between different minds. This relationship was shown as a diagram in Figure 6.1. The Pioneer plaque can, NASA hopes, carry a simple message to other possible civilisations because the universe is bathed in hydrogen and we share with an Arcturan Zarg an understanding of the structure of this most common element. If the planet Arcturus has no hydrogen, or Zarg scientists cannot understand its structure, then there is no communication.

In general, the closer in time and culture a writer is to a reader, the more they will have in common and the easier will be the communication. The further apart, the more reading becomes a struggle to understand. To give a simple example, Figure 10.2 shows part of *The Bothie of Toper-na-fuosich*, a long narrative poem written by the nineteenth-century English poet Arthur Hugh Clough.²

And from his seat and cigar spoke the Piper
the cloud-compeller.
Hope with the uncle abideth for shooting. Ah
me, were I with him!
Ah, good boy that I am, to have stuck to my
word and my reading!
Good, good boy to be here, far away, who might
be at Balloch!
Only one day to have staid who might have been
welcome for seven,
Seven whole days in castle and forest — gay in
the mazy,
Moving, imbibing the rosy, and pointing the gun at
the horny!

Figure 10.2 Extract from *The Bothie of Toper-na-fuosich* by A.H. Clough

We can understand what most of the words appear to mean and the most unusual of them (apart from Balloch, the name of a village) is 'mazy' and that is defined in a modern Chambers Dictionary as 'winding or convoluted as a maze; confused, dizzy (*dialect*)'. At the most superficial level the poem (with the aid of a dictionary) has successfully transferred information from the nineteenth century to the present day. But a contemporary reader would find it hard to make sense of the extract (and the poem as a whole), not only because the word 'gay' has taken on a new meaning in recent years and 'horny' has lost any connotation other than as sexual slang, but also because the poem describes the alien environment of a nineteenth-century reading party of Oxford students in Scotland. The reader cannot enter into the writer's world; there is little shared understanding. In most cases, though, a reader shares many aspects of culture with the writer. The reader understands a text and its author by negotiating the similarities and differences between their two cultures.

What this implies is that a message is not a fixed impersonal entity, but is formed by the comparative cultures of writer and reader. The first people to make this observation were a group of Soviet linguists, literary theorists and philosophers in the 1920s, led by M.M. Bakhtin. They argued that the meaning of a written text or a spoken utterance does not lie in the text itself, but in the context of its use. When we speak or write we engage in a situated dialogue.

But it takes two to make a dialogue. How can a writer be said to hold a dialogue with an unknown reader, when there is no obvious channel of communication back from reader to writer? There are three kinds of dialogue that a writer can hold with a reader. At increasing levels of abstraction they are: directly with the reader, with an imagined reader and with the culture shared by the writer and reader.

The first and most obvious means of communication is the reader's direct response to the text. A newspaper prints a critical review of a book that the writer then reads. A teacher gives a student spoken or written comments on an essay. These are highly circumscribed kinds of dialogue, generally restricted to passing judgement on the text. They are also fraught with problems.

The common-sense notion of literary criticism is that the duty of a writer is to 'tell it like it is', to communicate the truth to a responsive reader. The reader, in turn, assesses the text in terms of how well it directs the mind towards objects, people and events worthy of contemplation and how faithfully it represents their essential truth. Telling the truth is the basis of our literary tradition. The nineteenth-century philosopher and critic John Ruskin asserted that 'I shall look only for truth; bare, clear, downright statement of facts; showing in each particular, as far as I am able, what the truth of nature is, and then seeking for the plain expression of it.'³

To Ruskin, as to other nineteenth-century critics, the great writer or artist is possessed of an exquisite sensibility and, through text, can reveal truths about the world not open to the untutored reader. Lesser writers may never be possessed of such insight but must at least learn how to communicate clearly and faithfully. Echoes of Ruskin's words can be found in the response of every teacher to children's writing.

Ruskin accepted, indeed relished, the idea that some ennobled writers and artists can perceive nature differently to the untrained mind, but he did not follow this through to its logical conclusion, that there can be no *ideal* view of the world, free of perception, only *different* ones. There is no single truth for a reader to unpack from the text; rather each reader evokes a different interpretation at each reading. The message is not in the bottle, but in the interaction between writer and reader.

To anyone trained as a scientist, this is deeply troubling. Surely there are some absolute truths, enduring facts that can be communicated across time and culture. E equals mc^2 whatever the context. This is the essence of Pioneer's message, that some truths hold sway throughout the universe.

Bakhtin tackled the problem of truth and text by distinguishing between the natural and the human sciences. The natural sciences, such as physics and chemistry, study objects; the human sciences study subjects, or the discourse created by subjects. In the natural sciences there is a subject – the scientist – and a mute object, and the aim is for the subject to gain knowledge of the object. Human sciences consist of those disciplines whose primary data are the texts created by subjects. ('Subjects' are not the same as 'people'. We can study people as objects, their anatomy or biochemistry for example. Subjects are people actively engaged in the world as thinkers and doers.)

Texts, according to Bakhtin, can include thoughts, speech, gestures and actions, all of which are interpreted by subjective intellects trying to understand other intellects, in a continual dance of mutual interpretation. The only way we can gain

an understanding of subjects and their unfolding texts is by engaging them in dialogue.

What about texts that address the natural sciences, such as textbooks in physics or chemistry? Are these objects or subjects? Bakhtin and his colleagues would answer that such texts are subjects, they are constructed by minds in society and they can never be read neutrally.

Every sign ... is a construct between socially organized persons in the process of their interaction. Therefore, the forms of sign are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction.⁴

Take $E=mc^2$ for example. A physicist can only make sense of the equation because of an agreement amongst scientists that E stands for energy, c for the speed of light and m for mass, and because these letters are arranged in a mathematical formula whose form and meaning has been socially negotiated. It does not mean that E only occasionally equals mc^2 , or that it only does so in certain cultures. What the formula describes is part of the voiceless and objective world, but the formula itself is a text charged with cultural meaning. To a generation raised during the Cold War $E=mc^2$ evokes the genius of Einstein, the promise of unlimited energy and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

Writing as well as reading is shaped by context. Each writer is capable of creating unique, personal texts, yet each text is wholly determined by the writer's culture and context. It speaks with 'other voices', the subtle influences of society on what we write and the way we express ourselves. As we write, we draw on and are conditioned by both our immediate resources – physical, mental, social – and our wider cultural values and influences.

This is as true of scientific texts as it is of personal expressive writing. Again we must distinguish between the natural world and human texts. We may write about enduring, impersonal entities, such as the structure of hydrogen, but the texts we produce are social constructs.

Here is a paragraph from the first page of the introduction to a computer user manual:

The computer is equipped with a Pentium® processor with Voltage Reduction Technology (VRT). It operates at 133 megahertz and incorporates a math co-processor and a 16KB cache memory. To save battery power, the effective processing speed can be set to Low by the MaxTime and TSETUP program.⁵

The text ostensibly describes the features of a personal computer (the one I am using to write this book). The principles by which the computer works – the properties of silicon chips, the structure of binary logic – are socially neutral, yet the computer itself is a social construct, designed by an organisation to gain profits by selling goods in society, and so too is the user guide. The reason why readers are

being told that they can save battery power with the MaxTime and TSETUP program is not primarily that they need to know, or are likely to be interested in this fact on page one of the manual. It is that the writer wants to, or has been told to, praise the features of the company's new product. It is, in part, a piece of persuasive rhetoric masquerading as technical description.

Some companies employ independent firms of technical authors who are not prey to the need to praise the company product. They may also use methods such as focus groups and user critics to encourage discussion between writer and reader as the documentation is being prepared, to ensure that the text meets the reader's needs. If we accept Bakhtin's analysis that the goal of scientific, technical and other 'objective' writing is not to tell the truth – because words are always filled with meaning drawn from human culture and behaviour – but to communicate understanding, then dialogue between writer and reader is vital. If they are to communicate effectively then both must work together to bridge their differences in understanding and to make shared meaning. That is why attempts by scientists to popularise their work are so important: they build bridges of shared meaning between the culture of a scientist and the (often sceptical) public.

The second kind of dialogue is an internal one that comes from the writer actively anticipating the reader's response. In the process of composing, a writer is continually making adjustments on behalf of the reader, bridging cultural differences by adding explanations, leaving out parts that can be assumed from a shared understanding. A writer is also in a dialogue with things, such as a thesaurus or a style guide, that stand for aspects of the reader. By consulting an English dictionary or a guide to colloquial English, non-native speakers can find ways to reconcile their own inner voices with the expectations of their English-language readers.

Our inner dialogues are directed forward to the reader and backward to the words, concepts and actions that have shaped our current understanding. It is as if, as writers, we are forever caught up in a universal conversation about the meaning of words and the nature of understanding. If this is so, then how do we ever manage to write? Why aren't we forever delaying putting pen to paper, while we wrestle with meaning and struggle to communicate with an absent reader?

For some authors, the inner dialogue is, indeed, a constant source of torment. They worry about the way their words will be received and try to out-manoeuvre the reader by expanding and explaining every idea. Just telling a young writer to 'be clear' and 'think of the reader' has the danger that they too will lapse into this pathological dialogism, continually trying to second-guess and adjust to the needs of every conceivable reader.

We survive as writers by being lazy. As part of writing development we have learned to push the dialogue below consciousness, so that it becomes part of the process of finding words to express meaning. We also avoid conscious dialogue by thinking

and writing in set ways, in Bakhtin's terms by subscribing to a particular ideology. An ideology in this sense is not a set of political beliefs, but a package of cultural and social assumptions that influence a person's understanding and action. Ideology is what seems to you to be entirely natural and obvious, but to others appears strange, annoying or threatening.

Ideology also influences the way we act, and believe other people ought to act, as writers. To one writer it is natural that we should make a plan before starting to write; to another it is obvious that people should write from felt experience and so must compose first and organise later. These are both ideological positions. Both can be justified by reference to research findings, but for many writers their source is a deep and inexplicable feeling about how we *ought* to write.

If an ideology is the totality of ways in which we make sense of ourselves in society, then it follows that it is difficult to take on someone else's ideology and to write with another person's authentic voice, because to do so involves adopting that person's unarticulated view of the world. The only way we can appreciate someone else's experience is by observing their signs: their actions and their spoken and written texts. But these signs can never be read neutrally; they are forever coloured by our own experience, our own ideology. This goes back to Bakhtin's distinction between knowledge and understanding. We cannot *know* how someone else feels, we can only try to *understand* their experience.

The struggle to understand the world and to interpret it in writing is a large-scale rendition of the cycle of engagement and reflection that was discussed earlier in relation to a single writing episode. Writers continually analyse their own experiences in relation to the actions of others, internalise these as resources for writing, and then re-analyse the written work to see how it matches up to their understanding of reality.

This is the third type of dialogue: between the writer and society. Each person lives in a complex and changing social environment of many voices and influences. We are moulded by these influences and we, in turn, fashion the social environment through words and actions. We cannot sit outside society, we must always engage with it, through behaviour and ideology. As Bakhtin put it, 'Life by its very nature is dialogic. . . . To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree and so forth.'⁶

What this means for writing is that conceptual spaces are social constructs, coloured by ideology and patterned by the myriad influences of the writer's context and social interactions. The mapping, exploring and transforming of conceptual spaces, discussed in Chapter Three as a source of mental creativity, is also part of a wider dialogue with society, as we struggle to present the world in our own terms and to re-employ language that has been used down the ages for our own purposes and contexts.

Our ideologies are revealed in the words we use and what we make them stand for. Not only do the words change in meaning as society moves on, but people and organisations can also deliberately manipulate words to promote or deny particular ideologies. The Reagan and Thatcher governments endowed the emblems of their ideology of individualism – the words 'enterprise', 'freedom' and 'market' – with almost magical qualities ('leave it to the market', 'free enterprise works'). They singled out other words – 'society', 'union', 'socialist', – to signify the opposing ideology. Repeatedly, in television interviews and advertisements, they placed these words in the company of negative phrases and images ('union demands'; 'socialist dogma') so that the vocabulary of the opposition, and by association anyone who used it or had ever used it, became soiled.

Similar contests are played out on a smaller scale in every conversation and piece of writing. Words are never neutral and by using them for our own needs we deny them to others. As writers, we need continually to think about how others might read and be affected by our words through their own contexts and ideologies. Usually these little differences go unnoticed. If they do emerge then the consequence can be sudden and inexplicable conflict.

Linda Flower describes a project with inner-city teenage writers at the Community Literacy Centre in Pittsburgh.⁷ College students acted as mentors for the teenagers and the project was supervised by adult literacy leaders. The aim was for the three very different groups to work together to develop writing on issues that affect the lives of the teenagers. One particular task was to produce a joint document for their parents, educators and local politicians on *Street Life: Dealing with Violence and Risk in Our Community*.

As one of the literacy leaders, Linda Flower introduced the teenagers to strategies for writing. In a session on 'revising' she gave a brief introduction to techniques for revising (such as reading out loud, tracking a topic, spell checking) and then reminded the writers that they would need to make decisions about when to use Standard Written English and when to use Black English. She stressed that both codes of language were valued, but that the writers would need to make rhetorical decisions about how they use language, given their audience of both peers and policy makers.

Flower expected her brief introduction to trigger a discussion on which form of language to use. Instead, in the middle of her remarks, one of the student mentors, Drena, an African American, abruptly challenged not the use but the very existence of Black English. As the introduction turned into a discussion it became clear that the teenagers and most of their college mentors had never before met the notion that there might be a label for the way that 'teens really talk'. As one teenage writer put it: 'If this is true, why didn't they [the school] ever tell us we were speaking Black English?'

Furthermore, they had been presented with the label by a white academic. Linda Flower describes the growing scepticism of the group: 'the mentors, responding to

Drena's tone, began to see it as a suspect, potentially racist construct, if not a figment of racist imagination.' Over the following days and weeks the participants worked through the consequences of that encounter: feelings of guilt and anger, miscomprehension and later a more sympathetic understanding.

At its centre was a two-word phrase, 'Black English', that became a totem for many contrasting and intersecting ideologies: African American and White American; teenage and adult; teacher and learner; student and mentor. To Flower the phrase was a useful way to describe a particular form of speaking and writing. To Drena it was an attempt to push her into a white person's category of bad speaker. To many of the teenage writers it may have been a tedious irrelevance: an excuse for academic and mentor to talk over their heads. There is no 'true' meaning for the phrase 'Black English', nor even one that we can assign to races or types of person. Each person who took part in Flower's discussion (and each person reading this chapter) forms a meaning that is both individual and socially constructed. And uttering the phrase, as Flower did in that meeting, draws on and transforms those meanings and so initiates a new dialogue.

This applies to writing as it does to speaking. The writer's dialogue with the world is shaped by other people's past utterances and actions and it results in a text that forms part of the continuing dialogue.

The written text, though, is a strange participant in this universal discourse. As soon as a writer finishes working on a text and places it before readers – by showing it to colleagues or teachers, or by formally publishing it – it dies. It becomes fixed, no longer part of a writing process. (The writer may later produce and distribute another version, but that is a different text.) Although the text cannot change, society does, and so do readers. They interpret the unchanging text in new ways, and from it draw conclusions, about its meaning and its author.

We know about writers of the past mainly through the textual remains that they have left behind. This poses all kinds of problems for both reader and writer. How can we write in a way that will not be increasingly misinterpreted, as society moves on? How can we gain a true understanding of what a writer meant, if the only evidence we have is a text that is continually being re-interpreted?

The answer to both these questions is: we can't. Anything we write will be interpreted in terms of other people's cultures and ideologies. We can never know 'what Shakespeare (or any other writer) really meant', only how generations of commentators have interpreted his words.

The consequence for writers of this *post-structuralist* analysis has been a loss of faith in the reliability of language, and in text as a means of conveying essential truths. Instead of the author being in charge of a text, filling it with meanings to be uncovered by the reader, suddenly readers are empowered to find whatever meanings they wish. Because the reader can question everything, nothing in a text can be taken for granted. 'Characters' in a novel are no longer depictions of real

human beings. They need to be re-cast as 'participants', to be analysed in terms of the effects they have on the plot, rather than their psychological traits. Textbooks do not present eternal truths or unquestionable facts, but are social constructs, representing a view of education and of the world that can be interpreted only by reference to the cultural and ideological assumptions of the author.

Post-structuralism is a giant step into the unknown. Concepts that seemed intuitive suddenly become complex and uncertain. Consider genre. In Chapter Six we described genre as a combination of content, style and structure that allows us to place texts into categories, such as 'romance', or 'science fiction'. It is how we classify the message in the bottle. But if there is no stable message, if content, style and structure are determined by the relative cultures of writer and reader, then genre dissolves into uncertainty.

One approach to genre is to argue that the everyday categories may be unstable, but they are nevertheless helpful. Libraries manage to place books on shelves according to genre and the library classification generally helps readers to find the books they need. If it works, why decry it? The problem is that books seldom fall into a single category. By selecting one aspect of the book as its shelfmark, a librarian is denying its other characteristics. Take, for example, the book shown in Figure 9.10 of Chapter Nine. By classifying it as a 'children's science book' we ignore its use of cartoon imagery. The combination and subversion of traditional genres is often what makes a book interesting.

Figure 10.3 shows three verses of a typical moral verse for parents and children from the nineteenth century.⁸ Its aim of encouraging parental love and tolerance may still be seen as laudable, but most people nowadays would balk at its sickly expression of the sentiments. Even in Victorian times the poem was ridiculed as over-sentimental, and Lewis Carroll included a wicked parody of the poem in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Figure 10.4).

Speak gently! It is better far
 To rule by love than fear;
 Speak gently; let no harsh words mar
 The good we might do here!
 Speak gently! Love doth whisper low
 The vows that true hearts bind;
 And gently Friendship's accents flow;
 Affection's voice is kind.
 Speak gently to the little child!
 Its love be sure to gain;
 Teach it in accents soft and mild;
 It may not long remain.

Figure 10.3 The first three verses from 'Speak Gently'

'Speak roughly to your little boy,
 And beat him when he sneezes:
 He only does it to annoy,
 Because he knows it teases.'

CHORUS.

'Wow! wow! wow!'

'I speak severely to my boy,
 I beat him when he sneezes;
 For he can thoroughly enjoy
 The pepper when he pleases!'

CHORUS.

'Wow! wow! wow!'

Figure 10.4 The 'Duchess' Lullaby' from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

To classify Lewis Carroll's verse as, say, 'children's poetry: nineteenth century' is to miss its point. Carroll wrote it as a satire on the moralistic verse of the times. Like all good satires, it communicates on many different levels. Children enjoy its violent imagery, and adults in the know can appreciate its clever inversion of the moral verse. Many nineteenth-century readers were shocked that such subversion might issue from a clergyman. Nowadays, we can interpret it not only in those ways, but also in relation to the effect that Lewis Carroll had on children's literature in general, imbuing it with a sense of adult satire and irony. Carroll hijacked the traditional genre of children's literature to carry a gamut of adult messages (about celebrating and provoking children's curiosity, about logic and scientific enquiry and about the cloying Victorian morality).

So we arrive at a more sophisticated notion of genre. We can define genre as a set of expectations shared by writers and readers and codified by society into categories. To a writer, the traditional categories are important. They are how books are displayed in libraries and bookshops, and how readers will describe the text, to themselves and others. Writers can use these categories to their advantage. By writing to a familiar genre we meet readers' expectations; by altering or subverting the genre we draw readers' attention to it (as Lewis Carroll did) and to its rôle in organising literature to suit the purposes of writers, readers, teachers, booksellers, librarians and critics.

Genre, therefore, is culturally determined and forever changing. What makes people in one culture laugh or cry may leave others unmoved. A book such as Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* may be read in one context as a children's story and in another as a political satire. Literature that a hundred years ago seemed poignant and moving may, in our more ironic times, be interpreted as trite or melodramatic. The

traditional categories of 'romance' or 'science fiction' are the ways in which an organised society at one point in time attempts to contain this slippery substance, to arrange it on the bookshelf or the school curriculum.

Post-structuralism unsettles not merely the traditional categories of text, but the fundamental tenet of writing as the communication of meaning. Meaning, like genre, say the post-structuralists, is formed by the reader's cultural expectations. A writer can make a text 'easy' by ensuring that it meshes with the expectations of its assumed readers, or 'difficult' by confronting their assumptions through disorienting techniques of style and structure. Writers can play games with texts, by using familiar styles (such as the detective novel in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*) to raise deep issues, or by including an unreliable narrator whose views and values diverge from that of the story.⁹

Some people have taken this to be an agenda for despair. If writers cannot tell a universal truth, then one piece of writing is as valid as any other. Writing is just the pursuit of ideology. Furthermore, if texts can mean what we want them to mean, and if texts are the main evidence we have of the past, then the past can mean whatever we want it to mean. This is a looking-glass world, in which the past is unknowable and writers are villains who seek to defend their interests by creating the world in their own ideological image.

We cannot simply agree or disagree with this position; it calls for analysis. Writers do promote their own views of society and in some cases they can seem extremely narrow and one-sided. The textbook account of history has been formed by (mostly male) academic writers. Until recently it has mostly been a parade of kings and queens, battles and power struggles, in which workers, women and minority groups are absent or are reduced to 'bystanders', 'heretics' and 'dissenters'.

Fiction writers, too, can create a lop-sided view of the past. Some particularly influential ones have moulded entire societies to fit their own ideology. Walter Scott was celebrated in his own time not just as a writer but also as the voice of Scotland. It was Scott who created the 'tartan and bonnet' image of Scotland, striking a chord with a downtrodden nation by inscribing a past in which heroic and romantic Highland clans battled against the English oppressors. In 1822 his association with Scottish nationhood was such that he was put in charge of organising the state visit of King George IV to Edinburgh. Scott arranged a royal reception for the clan chieftains and ordered each chief to appear in his clan tartan.

At that time tartans were the trademark of individual weavers, and thus were associated with towns rather than individual clans. Each chieftain hurriedly commissioned a weaver to put together a clan tartan and the clan chiefs duly paraded in front of the King wearing their team colours (the portly King was also bedecked in what he was told was a Royal Stuart tartan). Nowadays, visitors to Scotland who purchase their 'ancestral tartan' from the Highland Gift Shop are themselves participating in Scott's elaborate literary fiction.¹⁰

All this adds weight to the idea that writers do not describe society; rather they invent it, and invest it with their own moral, aesthetic and political preferences. This idea needs to be countered.

First, the past did happen. As the historian Richard Evans points out:

the insistence that all history is discourse diverts attention from the real lives and sufferings of people in the past. Auschwitz is not a text. The gas chambers were not a discourse. It trivialises mass murder to see it as a text.¹¹

We do not need to rely on a single writer to find out about history, we can uncover many sources of evidence including contemporary writings, such as diaries and tangible products (the radioactive remains of Hiroshima for example), that have survived into the present day.

Second, writers do not generally set out to corrupt the minds of readers or to invent history. Even if they had that intention, it is unlikely that their writings would be published: there are too many checks and constraints in the business of commercial publishing. There are, however, real dangers in the kind of writing that blurs the boundaries of reality, such as stories of miracles or alien abductions recounted as fact, or theories of history founded on pseudo-science. Such writing can be persuasive, particularly in a culture where strength of belief is valued above the need for proof or justification. It is, however, at odds with writing as design.

An architect who designs a building on the basis of popular belief or pseudo-science would not be employed long. The Challenger Space Shuttle disaster was, in part, the result of engineering designers putting consensus before professional judgement. Architects, and every other type of designer, adhere to sets of design principles, the 'rules of the trade'. These principles are not arbitrary, or the product of a personal ideology, they are based on the collected knowledge and practice of the profession about what kinds of designs are known to be sound and well-founded and how the integrity of a design can be checked and justified.

Writers, too, are bound by design principles. They specify that, for scientific and factual writing, although we cannot tell the truth we can, and should, do our best to promote understanding. We should, for example:

- not present unwarranted belief as fact;
- provide justification for assertions, by reference either to the publicly observable world or to an acknowledged authority;
- reference the sources of ideas;
- not selectively ignore facts, but offer all the information that is relevant to an argument;
- acknowledge the limitations of an argument;
- present the text in a form that is designed to assist, not mislead, the reader.

Fiction writing does not escape the bounds of professional design. For example, a writer should not mislead a reader into treating fiction as fact. (The broadcast of

Orson Welles' adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*, which caused mass panic amongst listeners who thought that the United States was being invaded by Martians, is an indication of what can happen when fiction is dressed up as fact.)

Most writing does not directly affect the material world and so its design principles are not formulated by governments, standards organisations or professional associations. They are the result of centuries of scholarship, passed on by the apprenticeship of essay and report writing in college and university. Because they have evolved through consensus and the success of writers in communicating ideas and explaining the world, design principles for writing are more powerful than any government regulation.

As with a writer's mental constraints, the purpose of design principles is not to stifle creativity but to make a writer aware of what readers expect from their product. Writers are at liberty to ignore the principles (though as many experimental writers have discovered, they may not be able to find a willing publisher or a receptive audience) and the more a writer understands these 'social constraints', the more breaking them becomes an act of creativity rather than ignorance.

We need to distinguish between two types of social constraint: those that make the product more comfortable, and those that maintain the integrity of the design. A furniture designer may produce an uncomfortable chair for good reasons – to be provocative, to exhibit a product that is visually appealing rather than useful or to challenge assumptions of what constitutes a chair by creating an unusual example. A writer might create a text that is difficult or uncomfortable to read for similar

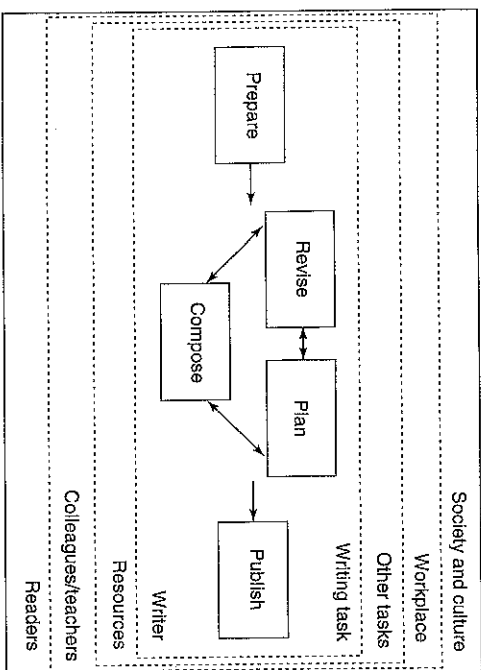


Figure 10.5 An extended model of the writing process

reasons – to provoke people, to display the art of writing or to break the bounds of convention.

But a furniture designer who sells a chair that is unsafe, that collapses when someone sits on it, is simply a danger to the public. In this case the designer is breaking an integrity constraint: the chair just doesn't hold together. That too is the case when a writer presents falsehood as truth, neglects to check sources or writes in a way that simply fails to communicate with the reader. There may be no objective way of detecting such writing, it may depend on the discernment of an educated reader, but that does not exonerate it. Post-structuralism is no excuse for bad writing.

We can now put together a complete picture of the writing process. Figure 10.5 shows the writer within a context of resources (including other texts), colleagues and teachers, and readers. All of these are in a more or less explicit dialogue with the writer, offering ideas and criticism, and providing a context for writing. The writing task is interleaved with many other activities, within the writer's workplace, which is itself situated in a society and culture. The task itself consists of an inter-linked cycle of planning, composing and revising, preceded by preparation and followed by a process of publishing (in the broadest sense – it might just involve handing the text to a teacher or mailing it to a friend).

So far I have covered all these aspects, apart from the influence of colleagues and the activities of preparing and publishing. These are the topics of Chapter Eleven.