

Title of Module: Creating Reader-Based Prose

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Video 1: *Writer-Based Prose vs Reader-Based Prose*

Is Writing Just Saying What You Think?

Have you ever said something like “When I write, I know what I mean, but I don’t know if it’s coming out on paper the way I understand it in my head”? You’re not alone. Everyone feels that way sometimes. But why?

Composition Theory

We often think that the act of writing is simply expressing what you think. However, according to the composition theorist Linda Flower, it’s not that simple. A paragraph that expresses what you mean to YOUR satisfaction may not express that same meaning to your reader. When this happens, Flower calls it “writer-based prose.” She says this kind of writing offers up versions of the writer’s own thought process. To effectively communicate with a reader, it needs to be transformed from private thought into reader-based prose.

Why Do We Create Writer-Based Prose?

Writer-Based Prose serves as a record for you, the writer, of what you are thinking. Consider the way you write when you’re brainstorming for ideas: it reflects your thought process, which means it may be associative, jumping from idea to idea, or narrative, telling a story about your own journey of understanding. Or, consider how you take notes in class. Writer-Based Prose, or WBP for short, is often characterized by private language and shorthand; words and concepts

you don't need to explain because you know what they are. When you're writing for yourself, you don't think to include clues about how the context for what you're writing keeps changing. That's why when a classmate who was absent asks to see your class notes, you might feel bad. You want to help, but you know your notes won't make much sense to someone else. You would have to write them all over again.

What is Reader-Based Prose?

Reader-Based Prose, or RBP for short, is a deliberate attempt to communicate something to a reader. Instead of reflecting your thoughts, the structure and language are controlled by your purpose. You create a shared language and shared context between yourself and your reader.

Video 2: *Signs of Writer-Based Prose*

Writer-Based Prose isn't a bad thing. In fact, it's what we use most of the time when we write. It's what we produce during brainstorming and early paper drafts, and it's a necessary step in the writing process, because it's how you get your ideas out of your head and on paper. The difficulty comes later, when you think you are creating Reader-Based Prose, but your meaning still isn't clear to your readers. How can you tell the difference?

Signs of WBP: Personal Narrative of Discovery

Take another look at the paragraph you wrote for the forced writing activity. Since you wrote it for yourself, it should be a pretty good example of Writer-Based Prose. Pause the video if you need to, and make a list of what you notice about the writing style. Does your writing contain a lot of phrases in which you describe your actions or feelings, such as "When I was first reading, I was surprised to discover..." or "In my opinion, I feel..."? If so, you may be describing how you discovered your ideas instead of arguing for them. This kind of personal response is fine in informal writing, but probably doesn't belong in a formal academic paper. When you write this kind of personal narrative, information is given to the reader in big chunks, summaries, and lists of facts, usually in the order they occurred to you. But that's not necessarily the order best suited for your reader's understanding. What's missing is the explanation of why your reader needs to know all this information.

Signs of WBP: Vague Language

Writer-Based Prose is sometimes characterized by ambiguous pronoun references (such as this or these) that stand in for complex or abstract ideas. You know what you are referring to when you say "This is important because...", but your reader probably doesn't. Also, watch for vague word choices such as "different, interesting, notable." Imagine a sentence comparing two texts in which you say "Interestingly enough, Disney's Cinderella is very different from the Brothers Grimm version in significant ways." What has your reader just learned about these two fairy tales? Nothing specific. You, the writer, may know that Disney's movie is a beautiful, romantic

story while the Grimms fairy tale is a story of violence and revenge, but your reader doesn't have a clue.

Video 3: *Revising for Reader-Based Prose*

It's easy to say that you should revise your writing in order to better communicate your ideas to someone other than yourself. It's not so easy to do it! Of course, the best strategy is to ask another reader to look at your writing, because they're the only ones who can tell you for sure if your ideas are coming across. Also, if possible, it's best to take time between drafts so that you can see your writing with fresh eyes, instead of being distracted by your knowledge of what you intend to say.

Reverse Outline to Understand the Big Picture

Identify the overall message, meaning, or main point of your writing, and organize your structure around supporting that idea. It may help to create a reverse outline, which is just like a regular outline, except that you create it based on a piece of writing that already exists. Reverse outlining may help you understand the big picture instead of getting lost in the details. Other familiar tools of organization such as titles, headings, topic sentences and transitions all help to structure writing and help readers understand the information being presented. Be specific. Provide context, make explicit connections between ideas, and explain concepts.

Ask: What Does My Reader Need to Know?

Writer-Based Prose is guided by the question "What do I know?" Reader-Based Prose is controlled by the question: "What does my reader need to know in order to understand?"

List of References:

Flower, Linda. "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing." *College English*, vol. 41, no. 1, Sep. 1979, pp. 19-37. *Jstor*, [jstor.org/stable/376357](https://www.jstor.org/stable/376357).