Commentary on Practice: What Writing Is

Acting on Words, 2nd ed., 5–6

Pages 5–6 introduce a practice activity in understanding what writing is. Here is our introduction to that exercise followed by our commentary on what this exercise represents about the challenges of written communication.

> To put yourself in the place of a writer, try the following exercise. Your goal is to describe the design in Figure 1.1 (below) to another person in such clear descriptive language that your partner in the exercise is able to draw a close facsimile of the design.

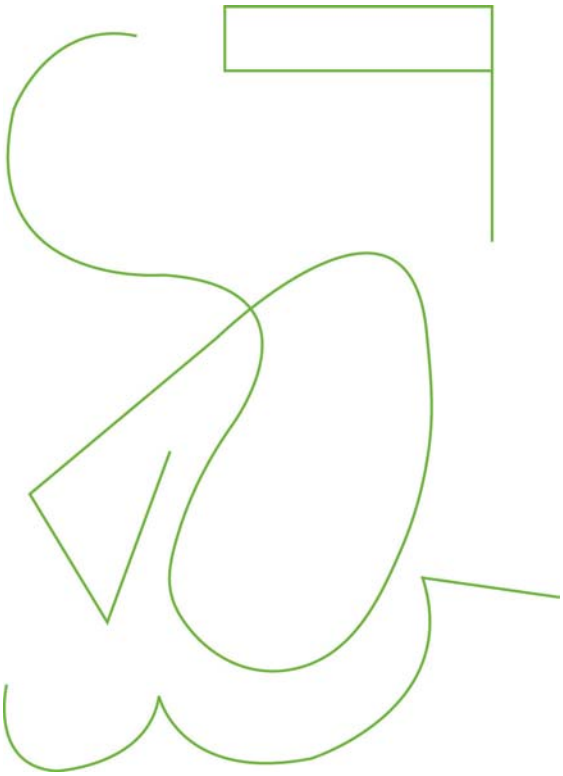


Figure 1.1

> To gain from this exercise, you must follow certain rules. Your partner must not have seen the design in Figure 1.1. So if your partner is a class

member who has already looked at the figure, simply draw or obtain another design of your own. Try to match the irregular nature of Figure 1.1 in your own drawing. Don't make it too complicated or too simple; note that Figure 1.1 is neither too "busy" nor too regular. It does not contain numerous details, but those it does contain tend to be irregular and abstract. Having decided on the drawing you are to describe, sit back-to-back with your partner. He or she is not allowed to ask any questions whatsoever. Take no more than three minutes to describe your design to your partner. Remind yourself and partner that there are no questions allowed.

When your three minutes are up, compare your design to the one your partner has drawn according to your verbal directions. If the communication was not entirely successful, discuss why that may have been. Consider and discuss the implications of this exercise for the act of writing. Then see our commentary, which follows.

Commentary

In 1966, psychologist Albert Mehrabian presented findings of his study into factors that most contribute to the impact of face-to-face communications (Chapman)..By impact, Mehrabian meant the force of generating meaning; he was interested in determining which attributes are most influential in communication: body language and facial expressions; tone of voice; or the words themselves. He found that when we receive a face-to-face communication, we are influenced most by body language and facial expressions, then by tone of voice, and lastly by the words themselves. According to Mehrabian, the words themselves carry only 7% of the impact of an in-person communication. If someone says to you, "I like your new jacket" in a manner that expresses the opposite meaning, you will respond to expression and tone of voice and ignore the denotative meaning of the words. It would be a gross oversimplification (see *Acting on Words* 2nd ed., "Logical Fallacies," 38) to conclude that writers—restricted to words only--.can therefore communicate only 7% of possible intended meanings. But

Mehrabian's research does suggest (among many other important things) that writers must work especially hard to place on paper or computer screens the clarity and impact that are naturally conveyed by visual and oral channels in face-to-face conversation.

Another advantage of normal conversation over writing is back-and-forth clarification and explanation. You say something, your listener asks a question, you explain, and so it goes. The writer, however, typically works at a distance, unable literally to ask readers whether they understand one point before proceeding to the next point. The writing must be solid enough to anticipate questions, satisfy those questions, and link point to point accordingly. As writer, you must keep your readers in mind to such an extent that they virtually appear in your writing space, with their questions, limitations, preferences, learning styles, and so on. Writing professor Wayne Booth has observed that effective writers need, above all, a "listening rhetoric" (Booth 378), allowing them to anticipate and answer their readers' questions and possible objections. When sitting back-to-back with someone you may have met only for the first time, someone who is not allowed to speak to you, your "listening rhetoric" must enter the realm of "ESP rhetoric." In short, you must be exceptionally sensitive to your proposed reader.

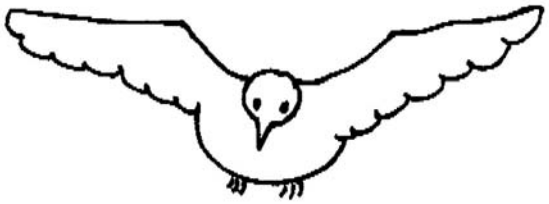
The fact is, readers may easily head down a path of understanding quite different from the one that you, as writer, intended. For instance, in your excitement to begin describing a particularly difficult part of the design, maybe you forgot to tell your partner in the exercise which way to orient the piece of paper: landscape mode or portrait mode. Consequently, the design drawn will be in the wrong location and relationship to the page as a whole. A fundamental inaccuracy or mistake will have occurred as a result of a basic oversight caused by your enthusiasm for getting the hardest part right. This might be considered analogous to an essay that lacks a clear overview. You must begin most pieces of writing by providing logical perspective. In the formative stages of writing, however, it is natural for a writer to leap in and begin dealing with certain parts of the matter before others; when you have only three minutes to handle the entire process, of course, important things will be overlooked or distorted. You won't have time to

represent your thinking in a way that makes it comprehensible. You won't have sufficient time for reader awareness.

To complicate matters, different readers—whether as individuals or entire communities—will have different ways in which they expect, prefer, or need to receive information. Some will want the information at a faster pace, some at a slower pace. Some will favour a direct approach, some an indirect one. If you are describing your design, for instance, to an older Canadian who grew up conceptualizing short distance in inches rather than centimeters, then your use of the word "centimeter" could cause your listener to falter and lose the thread of your description. If you are describing your design to a "scientific" thinker who prefers road-map-type directions to artistic-sounding images and analogies, then your omission of precisely calculated distances and angles could be frustrating. But someone uncomfortable with references to angles and geometric shapes will be frustrated if you rely too heavily on those. If your partner in the exercise (perhaps unknown to you) is new to your community, then comparing a certain shape in the design to the logo of a local company will probably not work. The challenge of communicating even the simplest idea or observation in words alone can be much greater than we imagine.

Misunderstandings often occur at the level of individual words. Even the simplest, everyday concrete noun (see *Acting on Words*, Handbook, Section 2, "Forms," 518) can send different readers in different directions. Here is an actual example from a previous use of the exercise in what writing is. Someone was trying to describe the following shape to her partner in the exercise:

She told her partner to go to the top right portion of the page and draw a bird. Here is what her partner drew:



The moral of the story is that words—even the most so-called descriptive, neutral words—do not have the same meanings for any of us. We imagine neither the same images of the object in the universe nor the same symbols for the object in our mental universe, and we experience different types and degrees of emotion connected to the subject. In her memoir *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Eva Hoffman gives the example of how differently she is moved by the word "river" when she hears it in her Polish mother tongue (106).

Works Cited

Booth, Wayne. "The Limits and Alternatives to Skepticism: a Dialogue." *College English* 67. 4 (March 2005): 378- 388.

Chapman, Alan. *Mehrabian Communication Research*. 2004. 4 April 2006. http://www.businessballs.com/mehrabiancommunications.htm

Hoffman, Eva. *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989.