Reading for Points and Purposes

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In recent years, prompted by advances in reading theory, cognitive science, literary criticism, and discourse analysis, composition theorists have embraced an interactive, constructivist conception of both writing and reading. In this view, the text is no longer simply an artifact of the writing process but is the primary and essential link between writer and reader. As Louise Wetherbee Phelps notes, writing and reading are seen as a "cooperative enterprise whereby writers and readers construct meanings together, through the dialectical tension between their interactive and interdependent processes. The text is the mediating instrument for that joint effort, and the resulting product is the set of meanings so constructed and attributed by readers to a writer and a text" (14).

A critical ingredient in this interpretive process is the reader's sense of the writer's intentions. Although a purely "literary" reading of a text might choose to ignore any sense of authorial intent (invoking, among other things, the "intentional fallacy"), more "communicative" readings (that is, readings in which we assume the writer is trying to convey certain meanings to us) seem to require such a sense. Indeed, the effort to gauge an author's intent has been the cornerstone of every approach to ordinary-language interpretation from classical rhetoric to linguistic pragmatics, from Aristotle to Grice. Most of the reading (and writing) done by students is of this communicative, or less purely literary, type.

One common type of communicative reading that is especially important for university-level study is the reading of essays, journal articles, and other forms of argumentative discourse. In this type of reading, two forms of authorial intentionality are particularly salient: points and purposes. To understand a piece of argumentative writing, one must have a fairly clear idea of what points the author is apparently trying to make and what his or her main purposes seem to be. Exploratory process-tracing studies by Linda Flower and Christina Haas have shown that expert readers of argumentative essays are constantly evaluating the information in a text against the writer's ostensible points and purposes (Flower, "Acts," "Purpose"; Haas and Flower).

In a more theoretical vein, Douglas Vipond and Russell Hunt draw on sociolinguistic research by William Labov, Livia Polanyi, and others to propose a related type of reading they call "point-driven." Vipond and Hunt
hypothesize that readers engaged in point-driven reading do not simply extract information from a text but focus on the author's points and purposes. In cases where these points and purposes are not explicitly stated or otherwise obvious, such readers will try to go beneath the surface and infer what the author is "getting at." Vipond and Hunt claim that point-driven readers do this according to three assumptions. First, they assume that the text is the product of an intentional being who wants them to interpret it as having a particular point—that is, as constituting a "global speech act." Second, they assume that the entire text constitutes a pragmatic frame within which the author has constructed this point. Thus, they try to process the text in its entirety, incorporating all details into a single coherent structure. Third, they pay close attention to the surface features of the text, especially any unusual features, attributing deliberate authorial purpose to each. Vipond and Hunt contrast point-driven understanding with two reading strategies in which there is little effort by the reader to "read between the lines": information-driven and story-driven reading. Reading a computer manual, for instance, is basically a search for information and is therefore best done using an information-driven strategy; reading a simple narrative can be done in a simple story-driven way, with attention being paid mainly to the conventional aspects of story construction (plot, character, events, and so on).

Vipond and Hunt's description of point-driven reading clearly implicates the text as being the single most important determinant of meaning. Although extra-textual factors such as the reader's knowledge of the author, subject matter, cultural setting, and prior texts can certainly play a role in the process of interpretation, Vipond and Hunt note that "what is taken to be a point for a written narrative will generally be the result of negotiation between the reader and the text," the latter being defined not as marks-on-a-page but as the reader's cognitive representation of it (266). This would be especially true in the case of many school reading situations, where students may be asked to read decontextualized materials (such as anthologized essays) without much knowledge of the writer, the topic, the cultural setting, or related texts.

Of course, given the inherent imprecision of written language and the usual differences in background knowledge, interests, and goals among readers, it is to be expected that readers will differ somewhat in how they interpret a text. But the range of possible interpretations is severely limited by the conventionality of written language. As Saussure pointed out long ago, linguistic signs (signifiers) are meaningful precisely because they are used consistently and systematically to refer to certain objects and concepts (signifieds). Lexical encodings, stylistic patterns, cohesive features, genre conventions, and other aspects of linguistic structure are identifiable and usable only because the writer and his or her readers "agree," in some sense, on what they mean. It is from these structural patterns (and the intertextual
history they evoke) that a reader without direct knowledge of the writer or the subject must try to infer the author's intentions.

Two Exploratory Studies

The purpose of our research was to explore the type of academic reading situation described above. Specifically, we wanted to see how college students would use a point-driven reading strategy on an argumentative essay whose author and subject matter they knew little about. We were interested in seeing how they interpreted both the writer's main point and main purpose, how this affected their identification of the writer's secondary points and purposes, and how these various points and purposes were interrelated.

To investigate these questions, we carried out two exploratory studies with sixty readers at a small research-oriented university in the midwestern United States—mostly first-year students, but also some seniors and graduate students and a few faculty. These readers represented a range of reading ability and varying degrees of familiarity with the type of text used in the study. The methodology used for data gathering in both studies was cued interpretation: readers were asked to read the text and then respond to direct questions about the author's purposes or points. Since they were allowed to see the questions before, during, and after reading, and were allowed to use the text while answering, this procedure deliberately elicited point-driven or purpose-driven reading behavior and minimized any need for recall.

The text used for both studies was an op-ed essay by Alan M. Dershowitz that appeared in the New York Times (August 18, 1988). We selected this text for several reasons. First, it is a good example (albeit a lighthearted one) of argumentative discourse. Op-ed essays are a well-known, conventionalized type of writing whose ostensible purpose is to make and support some point about some usually controversial issue. Second, it is a form of discourse seen as important within the mainstream culture that university students are presumably being trained to enter. Op-ed essays, especially those appearing in the New York Times, are a powerful vehicle for promoting political viewpoints; sometimes they are written by high government officials, U.S. and foreign. Although the Dershowitz piece hardly qualifies as an important political statement, part of its humorous appeal derives from the contrast it presents to the more serious commentary that one normally finds on the op-ed page. Third, it does not presuppose any prior knowledge of the topic. Unlike some op-ed essays, which treat a subject that has received considerable media coverage, the topic of this essay is quite obscure; indeed, none of our readers was aware of the "deli war." Dershowitz, the author, is clearly aware of this fact, taking pains to explain things so that outsiders can understand them. Thus, the task we asked of our readers was a naturalistic one.

This text also offered another particularly important quality that we had not originally planned for: it is somewhat ambiguous in terms of the main
point it seems to be making. In this respect it brings to mind the texts used by Richard Anderson and his colleagues at the University of Illinois to explore the schema-driven nature of reading. These researchers devised texts that could be interpreted, for example, as being about either a prison break or a wrestling match; they found that readers drew on their background knowledge to “select” one or the other of these interpretations but not both. Somewhat analogous to the Anderson texts, the text we used can be interpreted as having either of two distinctly different macrostructures (to be described below). However, unlike the Anderson texts, which were deliberately contrived for experimental purposes, ours is a “real-world” text, and its language and text structure are much more conventional—promoting, among other things, a conventional main point reading. Indeed, it was only when we noticed many of our readers giving us an alternative main point interpretation that we recognized the existence of an implicit, competing macrostructure.

Study 1: Identification of Main Point Strongly Influences Identification of Secondary Points

The participants in our first study were twenty-three first-year students, none of whom had any prior knowledge of the “deli war.” They were asked two questions: “What do you think is the writer’s main point?” and “What other points do you think he’s trying to make?” They were given as much time as they wanted to read the text and provide written answers to these questions. We blocked out the title and subtitle of the text on the assumption that they had not been composed by Dershowitz and thus should not be used by our readers to determine Dershowitz’s main point.

A variety of standard textlinguistic signals led us to believe that almost all of our readers would identify the following as the main point: the best delis in New York are not the Carnegie and the Stage but the downtown delis. For example, Gregory Colomb and Joseph Williams state, “The centerpiece of our perceptions of form, and in some sense the reason for all this structure, is the Point—that information that controls the whole, establishes the canons of relevance, and draws all else together, that information which all the rest was written to convey. A point is expressed in a Point sentence (or Point paragraph)” (109). After asserting that all well-formed units of professional discourse fall into two well-defined constituents, the “Issue” and the “Discussion,” they claim that “there is a consistent and recognizable pattern in how and where Points are made: . . . either at the end of the Discussion or at the end of the Issue” (109).

Using Colomb and Williams’ method, the highest-level structural analysis of the Deli text would divide it into two parts, the “Issue” and the “Discussion.” Since most of the essay deals directly with the deli war, it would be reasonable to categorize that as the main part of the essay, with the
remaining paragraphs (the first and the last three) being little more than a toastmaster-style opening and closing. The Issue (which delicatessens are best) would appear to be in the first two body paragraphs; the Discussion would take up the remainder of the piece. As for the Point, it would have to be either at the end of the Issue (somewhere in the third paragraph, just before the beginning of the Discussion) or at the end of the Discussion (just before the closing anecdotes). We can probably eliminate the latter, since the author makes references to Seventh Avenue tailors, and this hardly seems to qualify as the main point of this essay. This leaves the third paragraph. The main point of this paragraph is clearly implied in the first two sentences: "Sure, the Carnegie and the Stage, which are feuding over supremacy, are good—for uptown, nonkosher, celebrity delicatessens. But neither holds a Sabbath candle to competitors downtown and across the East River." The qualifier at the end of the first sentence plus the reference to "the real deli rivalry" in the third sentence of this paragraph suggest that Dershowitz's point here can be paraphrased as follows: A casual observer might think that the Carnegie and the Stage are the best delicatessens in New York, but more knowledgeable people know that the delis downtown and across the East River are far better. Presumably, the Colomb and Williams scheme would identify this as the Point of the entire essay.

The rhetorical form of this statement—noting a common perception A but then countering it with a more informed perception B—gives us additional reason to identify it as the Point statement. This A-but-B pattern is by far the most common way in which main points are signalled in New York Times op-ed essays. In a random survey of twenty-two such essays, for example, we found that seventy-three percent of them used this pattern explicitly to signal their apparent main points, while another nine percent used it implicitly. E.O. Winter calls it the "Hypothetical-Real" pattern, and claims that it is one of the two fundamental patterns of development in expository discourse. Michael Hoey, describing it as "a common pattern in letters and articles," says that in the first part of the Hypothetical-Real pattern, the author "merely reports what has been written and does not give it his assent as the truth," while the second part expresses "what the author himself believes to be the truth" (128-29). David Bartholomae describes it as a formulaic strategy for writing successful essays in school: "I had a teacher who once told us that whenever we were stuck for something to say, we should use the following as a 'machine' for producing a paper: 'While most readers of ________ have said ________, a close and careful reading shows that ________'" (153).

Another set of textual signals supporting this Point identification is the author's use of given-new ordering and presupposition marking. Generally, the text adheres quite strictly to the convention of putting given information before new information (Weil). Through the first two-thirds of the essay, the grammatical subjects of all but two sentences consist of textually-evoked
given information. Interestingly, the two exceptions occur just before the statement of the Point: “Permitting me, an out-of-town lawyer, to intrude into a Manhattan delicatessen war risks proliferating the conflict beyond Seventh Avenue between 53rd and 55th Streets. Sure, the Carnegie and the Stage, which are feuding over supremacy, are good—for uptown, nonkosher, celebrity delicatessens” (emphasis added). The first of these two sentences strongly topicalizes “Manhattan delicatessen war” by introducing it as new information in the grammatical subject of the sentence (instead of in the grammatical complement, where new information is more commonly found). Then, “the Carnegie” and “the Stage” suddenly appear, also in subject position. Up to this point, there has been no mention of these two delis; they seem to be, in Ellen Prince’s terms, “brand-new” references. And the presence of a nonrestrictive relative clause telling the reader that they are “feuding over supremacy” reinforces this sense of newness. But this same sentence begins with a concessive “Sure,” marking it (or at least its central assertion, “The Carnegie and the Stage are good”) as a presupposition. Since presuppositions by definition comprise given information, we have what appears to be a pragmatic contradiction. The obvious way out is to apply Gricean reasoning, according to which the Carnegie and the Stage are interpreted as “inferable” givens. In short, by phrasing the sentence the way he has, Dershowitz simultaneously serves the needs of readers who know nothing about the deli war, and depicts a sort of conventional wisdom about the Carnegie-Stage rivalry. It is this kind of conventional but misguided belief that characterizes the Hypothetical part of the Hypothetical-Real discourse pattern, or the “most-readers-have-said” part of Bartholomae’s “machine.” Thus, the information structure of this sentence reinforces its identity as part of the ostensible Point of the essay.

Additional evidence for this being the Point statement of the essay can be found in the headline and subhead of the piece. It is a convention of op-ed essays, at least in the New York Times, that heads and subheads tip the reader off to the topic and main point of the essay. In this case we have “Lox on Both Their Houses” and “The Carnegie and Stage Don’t Cut the Mustard in New York’s Deli War,” both clearly in keeping with the Point statement identified earlier. Assuming that the unknown headline writer in this case was a competent professional, his or her choice of headlines constitutes further support for the above analysis. (In Study 1 we blanked out the heading and subheading of the text so as not to bias the reader.)

Finally, we note that Dershowitz’s use of lexical strings (Halliday and Hasan) mirrors the uptown versus downtown theme contained in the Point statement. The uptown delis are described in terms like stardom, gridlock, gluttony, sheer bulk, and bulging bellies, while the “real” delis (the downtown ones) are described in colorful Yiddish terms: maven, schmear, noshtalgia, fress, schmooze, gribbenes, and knishes. Those who patronize the uptown delis are tourists, big shots, and celebrities, while those who hang out at the
downtown delis are *purists, mavens, old timers, true connoisseurs, cognoscenti,* and *those in the know.*

Thus, a variety of text cues strongly converge on the first sentence of paragraph three as being the main point or thesis of this essay (hereafter referred to as the "ostensible" main point). But when we asked our twenty-three first-year readers, "What is the main point or thesis of this essay?" only twelve said anything about the downtown delis being better than the ones uptown. The other eleven did not mention the uptown delis, the downtown delis, the Carnegie, or the Stage; instead, they offered higher-level generalizations such as, "If you have a business and want it to prosper, you have to have a competitor."

What seems to be going on is that this is a "nested" text: a text-within-a-text that allows for different point-driven readings. One can interpret it either as (a) a discussion of delicatessens preceded and followed by inconsequential anecdotes, or (b) a complete text unto itself in which the opening and closing anecdotes lay out the main thesis, and all the material in the middle serves as a humorous example of it. Interpretation "a" (the "narrow" interpretation) encourages the reader to focus on the features of the "inner text" as discussed above and to arrive at the ostensible main point of the essay. Interpretation "b" (the "broad" interpretation) encourages the reader to create a main point that embraces the text as a whole—that is, both "inner" and "outer" texts together.

The "broad" interpretation does not have the kind of textual support that the narrow one has. It does benefit from the fact that anecdotes about lawyers, economists, and the "stranded Jew" are positioned in the opening and closing segments of the essay. One of the characteristics of point-driven reading, it may be remembered, is that the reader is encouraged to postpone closure and embrace as much of the text as possible in interpreting the author's main point. This, combined with the serial position effects of initial and final text segments (Kieras), may help account for the fact that eleven of our twenty-three readers opted for the "broad" interpretation. But these readers would have had to devalue the conventional textual cues discussed above, and in that sense they were clearly less "text-bound" than the readers who chose the "narrow" interpretation.

Of major interest also was the pattern of answers we received from individual readers regarding the identification of secondary points. Most of them identified multiple points, but these points were almost always in the same "category" (either "broad" or "narrow" but not both). For example, when asked to describe the author's main point, one reader wrote, "He emphasizes the fact that even though big shots eat at the Carnegie and the Stage, the best food is found at the delis downtown, not uptown." When asked, "What other points do you think he's trying to make?" this same reader responded: "Older delis downtown remind older people of the old times and are therefore a classic that uptown is not. The only reason uptown
is a success is ‘who’ goes there not the nostalgia and tradition old delis possess.” This is a good example of a subject’s answers staying entirely within the “narrow” interpretive category. Both answers refer to the “deli war,” not to conflict or competition in any more general sense.

In this next example, however, the reader adhered strictly to the “broad” interpretation. This reader rendered the writer’s main point this way: “The more businesses (whether service or material related) in one area (or vicinity), the fiercer the competition and demand.” In indicating the writer’s “other points,” this same reader wrote, “First, as supply increases, demand increases. Second, true connoisseurs (or professionals in any field) will not settle for second best, even if it is an inconvenience to obtain the best. Third, people use the past (nostalgia) in helping them make decisions about what course(s) of action to take.” Unlike the previous example, this subject’s answers stay at a level of generality that transcends the “deli war.” They illustrate the “broad” interpretation in that they embrace the entire Der-Showitz text, not just the central part of it.

Only two of our twenty-three readers identified points from both the “narrow” and “broad” categories. For example, here’s how one of them described the writer’s main point: “The conflict between the uptown delicatessens (the Carnegie and Stage) has more to do with names and images and quantities than with the food quality: downtown delis are more tourist oriented—they have been caught up in the whirlpool of flashy commercialism in which images rather than substance dictate status.” In discussing the writer’s “other points,” this subject wrote,

On a more general level, he is saying that nothing helps business more than competition. As soon as rivalries develop, people must start deciding, evaluating, and comparing the competitors and in so doing must create a mental rating system or scale. And if there were two main competitors, both are going to be on one extreme or the other, which results in preconceived judgments. In other words, preference of one (for whatever reason) dictates that the other must be worse whether the person has actually been there or not.

He also seems to be attempting to demonstrate how modernization and fast-paced industrialism has infiltrated and directly altered that most sacred realm of nostalgic revelry: the art of eating (not just the refueling aspect but the actual art of dining).

Our readers had ample time and encouragement to identify points from both the “narrow” and “broad” categories. If they had made such identifications, they might have produced the kind of rich interpretation that is evident in the last transcript given above. But most of them didn’t. Rather, they seemed to get “locked into” a single pragmatic frame, sticking to either one category or the other. One possible explanation for this behavior is that it may be a natural consequence of point-driven reading. In trying to build a single, coherent representation of a text (that is, in trying to see it as a “global speech act”), most readers may commit themselves to a particular frame of reference that excludes certain other possible interpretations. Generic
expectations could well play a role in this. After years of exposure to argumentative texts, our readers probably had conventional, genre-based expectations that arguments normally consist of some main point or claim supported by relevant sub-points. If so, then having identified a main point for the Deli essay and having been asked to identify secondary points, they would presumably have looked for secondary points that support this main point. In that case, they may have noticed other points but simply did not mention them on the grounds that they do not support the main point and thus should not be considered secondary points.

Our findings resemble those of Anderson's, in that readers also blocked out competing perspectives. In the Anderson studies, though, readers selected one reading over another on the basis of prior knowledge of the subject matter, whereas in our case the differing sets of interpretations appear to result from readers' differing identification of the main point. This, of course, begs the question of why our readers differed in their interpretation of the main point in the first place, a topic we return to later.

**Study 2: Conventional Interpretations of Point Lead to Conventional Interpretations of Purpose**

Given the findings of Study 1 about main-point framing and the identification of secondary points, we were curious to see if there was a similar relationship between main-point framing and the interpretation of purpose(s). We used the same text, but this time with the title and subtitle included. We used thirty-seven readers: ten first-year composition students, four senior technical writing students, eighteen English Department graduate students, and five History and English faculty members. Only one of these readers (one of the graduate students) had any prior knowledge of the text's subject matter. We asked them to respond in writing to these questions: "What is the main point or thesis of this essay?"; "What do you think was the author's primary purpose or goal?"; and "What other purposes or goals do you think he had?" The order of presentation of these questions was randomly varied, so that on half the response sheets the first question appeared first while on the other half it appeared last. We did not try to define the terms "purpose," "goal," "point," or "thesis"; we let the readers define these terms for themselves.

In response to the question, "What is the main point or thesis of this essay?" we again got a split response: only sixteen singled out the downtown-uptown deli war (that is, the "narrow" interpretation). Fifteen others chose the "broad" interpretation, offering such higher-level generalizations as, "Anything that shows conflict is appealing to us" and "We like novelty in small doses to compensate for a 'hum-drum' life." The remaining six (mainly first-year students) apparently focused on the deli part of the essay but saw the main point in somewhat more general terms (for example, "The very idea of delicatessens implies variety, and we ought to embrace this fact by not
pitting one deli against another. They all have something unique to offer”).

All our readers saw Dershowitz as pursuing multiple purposes with his text. Generally, the more experienced readers identified more authorial purposes than the less experienced readers, and the purposes they identified tended to be more varied. For example, a typical response from a first-year student is that the author’s primary purpose was “to inform the audience of the ‘deli war’ and why it exists” and that his other purpose was “to entertain the reader by using puns and inside New Yorker jokes.” By contrast, one of the more experienced readers, an English professor who spent his childhood in New York (but who did not know about the “deli war”), identified four purposes: “Partly to amuse, partly to indulge in nostalgia, partly to parade his ethnic heritage, and maybe partly to advertise his delicatessen near Harvard Square.” He added that he wasn’t sure what the author’s primary purpose was. A history professor who reads the op-ed page once a week said that the author’s primary purpose was “to make people laugh, while ruminating over the possibility that well-known delis are outpaced by the more authentic Lower East Side joints”; his other purposes were “gaining customers for his Cambridge deli, showing off his virtuoso punning abilities, plugging authenticity in kosher food, and lampooning Jewish joy in controversies over food.”

Of more interest is the relationship of purposes to points we found in the readers’ responses. All sixteen readers who chose a narrow interpretation of the main point (uptown versus downtown delis) attributed only narrow purposes to the author. For example, when asked to specify the essay’s main point or thesis, one student replied, “The Carnegie and the Stage are not among the best delis in town.” When asked to specify “the author’s primary purpose or goal in writing this essay,” this same student answered, “To show that the Carnegie and the Stage are not the best delis in town.” Finally, asked what the author’s “other purposes or goals” might be, the student said, “To write an entertaining article about delicatessens and the whims of deli ‘connoisseurs.’”

According to this reader, the author’s purposes do not transcend the topic of the “deli war.” For him, the framing anecdotes about the frontier lawyer, the stranded Jew, and the Seventh Avenue tailors apparently have little significance. This narrow-narrow pattern was common to all sixteen readers who stuck closely to the conventional features of the text. There were no exceptions. Although we cannot claim a causal relationship between point-identification and purpose-identification, the strong correlation between these two aspects of interpretation does call for some explanation.

In contrast, those readers who had a broader interpretation of the main point did not display any particular pattern, as a group, in their interpretation of authorial purposes. For example, one student responded this way about the essay’s main point or thesis:
Conflict is natural and even healthy, "despite newfangled law school courses in dispute resolution." (Out of hand, conflicts end up in court; left to grow in one person, they end up as two synagogues on a desert island. In our [deli] economy, conflict—created or natural—results in increased interests and higher profits . . . as well as giving people something to argue about.)

This student said that the author's primary purpose or goal in writing the essay was that "Dershowitz was most probably interested in promoting 'non-celebrity' delis, his own included." And this reader supplied four "other purposes or goals":

(a) He creates the illusion (impression?) of an out-of-town observer offering lawyerly, deli-owner observations about the "deli war," arguing that his "disinterested" view is the accurate one (b) He has great FUN . . . I think a big factor in writing this column. (c) He points out the silliness of being swayed by celebrity status when real deli food is so easily available (d) He indicates that some very public conflicts (big news!) are created, contrived, encouraged, nourished (ha!) to feed economic interests.

This student's response is much broader than the first student's. In saying that "conflict is natural," her interpretation of the main point embraces the entire text, not just the "deli war" part. And she attributes a variety of purposes to the author, ranging from promoting his own deli to discussing the widespread commercial practice of creating public conflicts in order to feed economic interests.

Of the sixteen readers who selected a broad interpretation of the main point, five identified only broad purposes, six identified only narrow purposes, and five identified a mixture of broad and narrow purposes. In short, those readers who relied less heavily on conventional text features in identifying the author's main point seemed to feel greater independence (as a group, compared to the first group) in identifying the author's purposes.

Conclusion: Conventional Reading Yields Conventional Points and Purposes

This research was undertaken to explore the nature of point-driven and purpose-driven understanding. Specifically, we were interested in seeing the kinds of points and purposes that readers identify in a situation in which they have little or no knowledge of the author or the subject matter. In Study 1, we found that readers following a point-driven reading strategy tend to get "locked into" a particular level of interpretation, such that their identification of the main point seemed to influence the kinds of secondary points they identified. Confronted with a complex, ambiguous text, some of the readers apparently saw it as being about a specific, local topic (New York delicates-sens), while others saw it in more general, abstract terms. Only two readers were able to mix these two levels of interpretation. In Study 2, we discovered an asymmetric relation between readers' main-point identification and their interpretation of the author's purposes. Readers who interpreted the main
point narrowly (as concerning the specific topic of competition among New York delicatessens) saw the author's purposes as being equally specific and local. By contrast, readers who interpreted the main point more broadly (as being about competition in general) varied significantly in their interpretation of authorial purposes.

One way of interpreting these findings is to suppose that these two groups of readers simply construed the text in different ways: one as comprising only the “deli” part and the other as comprising the entire essay, with the “deli” part embedded in it. On this account, readers taking the narrow view would presumably be constrained to identify points and purposes related to the deli war, while readers taking the broader view would have a broader field to work with. But this would not explain why some of the broad-view readers identified only narrow purposes while some others identified only broad purposes.

Therefore, a more plausible way of interpreting these findings, we feel, is to note that the narrow, local reading of the text is heavily supported by conventional text features, while the broader, more general reading is not. Thus, the fact that readers who chose the narrow reading restricted themselves to narrow points and narrow purposes may be due to a heavy reliance on these conventional, generic linguistic features. If so (judging from the responses of our readers), there would appear to be a fairly close correspondence between ostensible points and purposes, at least in a text of this type; that is, the author's apparent purpose would be to make a certain point. For example, one student wrote that the author's main point was that “The Carnegie and the Stage are not among the best delis in town” and that his main purpose was “To show that the Carnegie and the Stage are not the best delis in town.”

By contrast, readers who relied less heavily on the conventional features of the text to identify the author's main point showed greater freedom in their interpretation of authorial purposes. These readers seemed to be reading more between the lines—that is, more “rhetorically.” In this respect they resembled the expert readers in Flower and Haas's studies who tried to go beyond the text and build rhetorical, situational representations in order to interpret the writer's points and purposes. In the Flower and Haas studies and in the present one, readers who opted for less conventional interpretations identified a broader array of possible authorial purposes than did readers who were more closely bound to the text; and these purposes were far more likely to be independent of the author's ostensible points. These readers seemed to be more aware of the possibility of a single text containing multiple discourses, as discussed for example in Kress.

Why did some readers interpret the text one way and other readers another? We do not really have an answer to this question, as our research design was only exploratory and did not include the sorts of controls that would allow us to sort out the relevant variables. But we would like to make
some observations that may help guide future study in this area. First, it might be useful to think of point-driven reading as a process that can be applied in varying degrees, rather than as an all-or-nothing process. Vipond and Hunt’s description of point-driven reading emphasizes the role of inferencing, and so it would be reasonable to think that readers who did relatively little inferencing (the narrow-interpretation group) were simply not engaged in point-driven reading. But all of the readers in these two studies were instructed to identify the author’s main point, and all of them responded accordingly; therefore, at some level they must have been using point-driven reading. Furthermore, judging from their answers to our questions, they displayed Vipond and Hunt’s three characteristics of point-driven reading: they saw the text as a “global speech act” produced by an intentional being; they tried to incorporate all textual details into a single coherent structure; and they paid close attention to the surface features of the text. Thus, the differences between the two groups of readers probably reside within the point-driven paradigm, not outside of it. In other words, some of our readers may have simply been more point-driven than others: they may have detected more authorial intentionality; they may have incorporated more details into their text representation; and they may have paid closer attention to the surface features of the text, especially unusual features.

Second, as we have just implied, it is not the case that only the narrow-interpretation readers paid close attention to the language of the text. Although we have stressed the view that the broad-interpretation readers went “beyond” the text—indeed, that they were able to construct a richer representation of the author’s meaning precisely because of this—what we mean by that is that they paid less attention to the conventional macrostructure of the text, not to the language of the text in general. Clearly, any interpretation of a text will have to draw heavily on the language of that text, even in cases where the reader has substantial extratextual knowledge. We have no reason to believe that our readers did not pay close attention to features of the text. Where they differed, we think, was in which features they attended to. One set of readers apparently paid more attention to the conventional macrostructure, while the other readers (as a group) exercised more freedom and paid more attention to a variety of features (including, for example, the opening and closing anecdotes).

Third, cultural factors play a role in interpretation, even in reading situations that are relatively decontextualized like this one. Discussions of point-making in oral and literary narrative, while offering somewhat varying definitions of the term “point,” have all mentioned the role of the perceiver’s cultural expectations. Polanyi, for example, notes that for something to count as a point in an oral story, it must be seen by listeners as “self-evidently important and true” in that culture (207). It could be that the readers of the Dershowitz text who opted for the broad interpretation did so partly because they felt the narrow interpretation (one deli being better than another) to be
too trivial to count as a point. If so, they may have elected to override the conventional text cues in favor of basic cultural constructs related to competition, conflict, and business. And this may have caused them to entertain a variety of authorial purposes that they otherwise would not have considered.

Finally, the relationship of points and purposes needs to be clarified further. Although we have noted that there was a close correspondence between points and purposes in the conventional reading but little or no correspondence in the unconventional one, this refers to the reader's summary interpretation, not to the reader's interpretation-in-the-making. Some readers may have tried to guess the author's purposes very early on, before working out the author's point. The point-driven reader, as described by Vipond and Hunt, tries to delay interpretation until the entire text is processed, but this would not prevent the same reader from trying to infer the author's purposes much earlier (as described in Flower, "Acts" and "Purpose"). We need to see if there is a causal relationship between the identification of authorial purposes and the identification of authorial points.

Although there is much we don't know about point- and purpose-driven reading and although the work reported here is only exploratory, we believe that we have learned something that can be of value to reading and writing teachers and students. Analogous to the expert readers described in Flower ("Purpose") and Haas and Flower, the readers in our study who established a more critical distance from the text were able to produce richer representations of it in terms of both points and purposes. Although they presumably noticed the text's conventional, relatively explicit points, they also inferred a number of implicit points. And they inferred more purposes as well, including some purposes that had little to do with the points they saw the author making. Conversely, those readers who read the text in a more conventional way produced conventional and limited interpretations of the author's meaning. Thus, consistent with current constructivist views of reading, we think it appropriate to teach students how to "step back" from a text and try to see it from multiple perspectives, including multiple perspectives of the writer's points and purposes.

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Notes

1 For example, see Asch, Faigley, Flower, and Haas and Flower.
2 See Anderson et al., as well as Pichert and Anderson.
3 As a preliminary to Study 1, we wanted some evidence that the first-year students we used were indeed competent readers attentive to textual features. Therefore, as a pretest we asked them to read a carefully structured argumentative text and identify as many main and secondary points as they could. Before scoring their responses, we consulted independently with the author to determine what points he was trying to make, and then we analyzed the text linguistically to determine how much textual support there was for each of these points. In this way, we were able to identify the author's intended main point and seven secondary points. The results lend support to our perception that these were indeed competent readers attentive to textual features.
4 See Labov, Polanyi, Prince, and Vipond and Hunt.

Works Cited


