THE STUDENT'S READER IS ALWAYS A FICTION

Susan Miller

The composition student's reader is a more unstable fiction that the "audience" that Walter Ong credited with guiding a writer's choices in his "The Writer's Audience Is Always A Fiction." This reader is the teacher who may be said to do many things with student writing (e.g., "respond," "mark," "evaluate," "feedback," and "grade") but, as I hope to show, cannot easily be said to read it. If we describe what does go on instead of "normal" reading, itself a complicated process, and place this description in relation to both recent and traditional theories of reading and of textuality, we can learn what is at stake for composition in theories that are rarely connected to it directly. And we can also shed some light on the nature of appropriate questions in composition, which always derive from the recursive interactions of theory and practice.

This essay is an attempt to join current literary theory and composition studies with the most frequently written and read texts, student writing. By describing the reading of these student texts in light of recent and traditional theories of reading and of textuality, we learn what is at stake in oppositions of past to present theories. We can also shed some light on the nature of appropriate questions in composition theory. What follows argues that practice and theory may directly interact with each other where each is recursively placed in the context of the other.

The ordinary and appropriate chaos of composition teaching and our common reactions to it are not often sources of theoretical comment or subjects for such comment. But writing teachers might avoid feelings of inadequacy or more accurately understand their experiences if they were related to broader con-
texts. Our usual classroom practices as well as our responses to them unfortunately do not often fit the cool categories and methods that linguistics, cognitive theory, rhetoric, and pedagogical schemes offer. As of now, we have no performance theory that can explain what we are doing, despite being in classrooms that primarily foster processes but only secondarily, or instrumentally, transmit information.2

At the heart of composition "performance" is the process of reading student papers. It would be a service to us all, but especially to those new in this process, if we could place this vernacular act in a wider academic context. This reading process deserves exploration so that its difficulties and surprising stressfulness make better sense.

In the service of these motives, then, reading student writing can be held up to, and can finally provide a comment on, theories of reading and of texts. These theories may reductively be categorized as traditional and contemporary or "New Critical" and "post-modern." In the traditional view, practice suggests that 1) texts are artifacts that represent a meaning; 2) readers discover the meaning of the text; and 3) authors' and readers' particular situations (e. g., in history or in personal linguistic experience) make readers more or less able to expose the text's meaning.3

Contemporary literary theory, because it is informed by less certainty about meanings represented by words on a page, conflicts with the traditional view. Contemporary theory does not assume that written language—apart from writer or reader—is a stable system of meaning. Contemporary literary theory and philosophical hermeneutics currently question the status (in Cicero's sense) of the written text.4 These fields offer subjective interpretation ("reader-response criticism") which conflicts with the premises of essentially positivistic new criticism. They suggest that "strong mis-readings" are as valuable as "genuine" discoveries about the text's one, privileged, intended meaning. In current theoretical views, the relationship between marks on the page (the text) and the reader is an insoluble but nevertheless stimulating problematic, no longer a neat "problem" with a simple "solution."

I will summarize some of the new and parallel theoretical propositions about reading before I attempt to hold them against the experience of reading student writing. In all of the disciplines concerned with written language, it is now commonplace
to assert that reading is an act of construction rather than an act of reception. Reading is an active, engaged, creative process. Psycho-linguistic and psychological descriptions of the process show that it depends only secondarily on the cognitive ability to decipher written symbols, and primarily on making predictions, perceiving patterns, and playing hunches about what is to come in the text being read. The expectations about and past experiences of texts that we bring to reading allow us to take away a sense of coherent meaning. We could not, in fact, understand written language if we looked at each letter or word as we read; our short-term memories would not hold the implication of each symbol long enough for long-term memory to comprehend sentences. Thus "readability," the relative ease with which a text is understood, depends on that text's predictable, redundant nature. Reading is a supra-textual, active construction of the marks on a page.

But although the reader must make (rather than make out) the meaning of the text, the text is also a fact, if not an artifact, that "makes" the reader's meaning. We are always, in regard to describing texts, both Bishop Berkeley and Doctor Johnson kicking the stone of refutation, both idealist and materialist. Reading depends on the process of making accurate, inaccurate, and probable predictions within the contexts of the reader's past linguistic experiences and present expectations. But texts also exist. When we write, we inextricably link an inalterable "content" to the marks on a particular page and to our intentions, which are based on our own linguistic experience and expectations about what we will be thought to mean and to a cultural consensus about what we meant. Reading is both making and receiving the marks on the page; texts both "make meaning" and are made out by readers.

At this stage of inquiry psychology, criticism, or philosophy offer global rather than particularized explanations of "reading." The act that both causes and results from a text is rarely understood as a situationally specific, intentional process whose entire gestalt may vary, even for the same reader, from time to time and setting to setting. Although "reading for information," "finding main ideas," "word attack," and "critical reading" are taught separately, few acknowledge that reading fluently for a particular feature of the text is only half of the reading story. "Reading" is as tied to the reader's situation as "writing" is to purpose, audience, mode of discourse, the developmental level
of the writer, the physical media, or temporal constraints. But because we lack catalogues of the varieties of reading experience, the following description of what happens when we read student papers is speculative. What is clear is that, especially for a literary or composition scholar and teacher whose professional life is devoted to texts, the student's writing in a writing class presents a special instance of "reading."

An account of what we usually may do demonstrates this proposition. Teachers do not choose to read student papers as they might select a novel or magazine, nor are they motivated to do so by a desire for entertainment or information, or even by the same sense of professional responsibility that might bring them to select either the Faerie Queene or a well-received critical essay. They approach this reading with a certain sense of excitement. They are reading writing that they themselves in part caused to be written. Typically, a teacher anticipates seeing "what they did" with the assignment, with the newly taught technique, or with guidance in individual writing styles. At the same time that the teacher imagined intentions for the text, the teacher also had realistic doubts that these intentions will be fulfilled by all students. We hope to discover that the students have met or transcended the expectations. The wish to be pleasantly surprised is a desire to be "taken" or "made" by the text—to experience the usual, constructive reading experience much like the one you are having now: you generally know what to expect but concentrate, nonetheless, on what I will say next. The teacher who is reading begins with a semi-Platonic model: each text to be read is preconceived as only a shadow of the Ideal text, but any embodiment of that Ideal in practice would be a surprise to the teacher who was the first cause of the text. Just as current reading theory teaches us, the teacher has already created the text but nonetheless seeks the text, or the Text, the Ideal that was implicit in the assignment.

Teachers begin to read, then, with both eager and anxious expectancy about discourse we have caused to exist but have not written. Depending on our particular methods, we actively seek explicit answers to questions to which readers in other settings receptively await answers. We check the formal features of each piece: format, medium, and length. We "look at" the way the writer has treated the assigned subject or problem, mentally assessing rather than assenting to the chosen content. As we read on, this process of assessment intensifies. Whatever we
may have told students we will seek as we read, we nonetheless measure each paper by criteria developed from our sophisticated ideas about appropriate performances in each of the categories of textual analysis. We try to separate the text's content from what we assume to be the writer's prior information about this particular subject. We separate each paragraph from the whole, each sentence from each paragraph, and each of the many surface features of the text from all others. At once we notice and attend to each category of a text: editing (e.g., typos), revisions (e.g., spelling, punctuation, grammar), writing itself (e.g., word choice, syntax, transitions) and conceptualization (e.g., form, voice, tone, content, thesis).

Now "mistakes" or slips in any of these categories catch our attention, if only peripherally, as they would of most educated readers. But the teacher's reading process anticipates, if not actively seeks, such deviations from fluency and thus invites interruption. Those of us who expect the best from student writing may explicitly tell students that we look forward to a normal, pleasant reading experience. But when a paper demands attention to flaws, or when we successfully role-play a simulated audience for an assigned piece, we nonetheless are actively reading to notice success and failure in each of the categories of textual analysis. We are reacting to the texts as a reader who had instigated them and who is in some fashion responsible for them.

Consequently, most writing teachers will "read" and evaluate writing which they are, in ordinary terms, unable to understand. We have, as professionals, a ready-at-hand reading process that comes close to expressing Aristotle's principle that rhetoric has no content. We will address any text with a sense that we could make suggestions or discover errors despite only minimal understanding of the text's content or its specific conventions.

This reading process is for most of us also a physical act, insofar as the teacher marks and writes on the text at hand while continuing to read. This physical activity differs from the underlining or note-taking we do as we "study" a text because it requires the teacher to maintain a professional persona in relation to the student writer. It makes the student's reader also, at the same time, a writer. The teacher "thought up" the discourse the student wrote but did not write it; similarly, this "reader" is a writer who must assume the professional rhetorical stance
toward the student that allows meta-communication on the margins. The teacher cannot edit in the way he or she might if the writing were actually the teacher's own. By so doing we would misappropriate the student's text. The teacher may not in fact know what the student "meant" to say; if we think we do, we still want the student to discover that meaning and express it independently.

In addition, reading student writing is evaluative; it results in a grade or some other sort of relative professional judgment. Consequently, the teacher who is reading is also measuring the text against 1) an ideal response to the assignment, 2) the average performance within the group of responses, 3) all the similar papers this teacher has read previously, 4) the adequacy of the preparation for this particular assignment that the teacher provided, 5) the teacher's standards, 6) stated or tacit departmental and school standards, 7) one or another of a variety of analytic or holistic rating methods, and, at times, against 8) the teacher's own ability to write in response to the same assignment. Some teachers are also measuring this text against the particular student's 1) other writing, 2) best possible or worst writing, 3) current academic situation, and 4) stated expectations about grades. Some of us who read anonymous papers create the writer's identity for ourselves and re-read parts or the whole against what we imagine about the person who wrote it.

During this many-faceted experience, teachers who are reading are taken by many moods ranging from disaffected boredom to intense pleasure and anger. Experiencing anger or extreme frustration is a particularly interesting response. This anger may occur in response to the whole text, without reference to its errors or other flaws. "This is not what I assigned," or "This is plagiarized." More often, such emotion appears as a response to parts of the text, especially to errors. Considering that the teacher is teaching a course designed to improve (rather than certify) the student's writing, and considering that the teacher, unlike an athletic coach, expresses such emotions privately, extreme responses to flaws in student writing may be gratuitous. Such private expressions are at war with the teacher's pedagogical role and cannot benefit the student.

Teachers who find themselves furious (or perhaps "break up" with laughter at a student's inadvertent verbal naivete) are, to use sociologist Erving Goffman's term, "flooding out." This sort of reaction occurs when the role a person has assumed—in
this case the role of a student's "normal" reader—is finally insupportable because it is too much at odds with the teacher's sense of the reality of the text at hand. From the point of view of the teacher, the plagiarism, the spelling error, or the miscalculation of whatever sort is the last straw, breaking the teacher's concentrated effort at once to read and not to read the student writing.

For this reading experience is neither ordinary fluent reading nor a professional critic's, or student's, reading of a "difficult" text. The latter, it might be argued, is equally "close," equally analytical, equally intended to "make out" a text rather than be receptively made its reader by its "meaning." And certainly reading student writing is, on a spectrum of reading experiences, more like the close critical reading than like reading for most ordinary purposes. The essential difference, however, is the teacher's supra-textual relation to student texts. The teacher will want to improve a student text but will not feel compelled to improve Lear.

Skilled readers have always acknowledged the difficulty of special kinds of reading of some texts. Translators, for example, must read under special stresses. Textual scholars and literary critics have generally assumed that the text is a fixed meaning and have, at least in the application of the New Criticism, set aside authorial intention and reader reaction to construe "the text itself" in the best possible light. Until recently, the questions of criticism might all be seen to have one purpose: making the text "better." Such reading tries to understand how and why the text is "good," why it is whole, unified, patterned, allusive, complex, coherent, and powerful.

This traditional or New Critical assumption about the integral nature of difficult but worthy texts sharply marks off the line between the close reading of literary texts from the canon and the reading of student writing. We may not "understand" Finnegans Wake and may need to be taught the rules for construing As I Lay Dying or The Sound and the Fury, but we do not begrudge these texts such special conditions as may be required for their interpretation. The traditional reading project is to place ourselves in relation to literature so that is will "make" us, to be prepared or to have been prepared to read it well. We meet it, or any difficult text, on its own terms. But we only assume this posture toward student writing in order to help the writer meet other readers' expectations about conventional codes, forms, and voices. We learn to read student texts in order to
normalize them. We understand their special logic in relation to various measures we assume to be above, rather than only off, their mark(s).

This is not to say that we are ill-willed, that we do not enjoy watching students' progress, or that we are not interested—in both the ordinary and in the scholarly sense of the word—in what they say. Even those teachers who first read without a pen in hand to avoid being mere "error hunters," as well as those whose honors' classes regularly write relatively delightful prose, must be anti-readers. Teachers simultaneously and consciously keep in play all the layers of analysis they know, even while they may attempt to assent to the text and its potential normalcy.

Throughout my description of this process, the tension between "normal" reading and a particular kind of anti-reading recurs. Approaching, beginning, carrying through and completing this project, all demand that we not read while reading. Every word, each pattern of development, each allusion, and every point made is in some measure in quotation marks, as are each error and deviation from normal patterns. We hold each student utterance up to so many prior, possible, or "better" expressions that we are, within multiple frames of professional responsibility, curiosity, and evaluation, unavoidably frustrated by this reading. No matter how diligently we work to reduce the artificiality of the classroom situation, how adamantly we seek assignments whose responses will surprise or inform our genuine curiosity, or how rigorously we play the role of an intended audience, the student's "reader" is always a fiction, purely if not simply no reader at all, but a teacher. And the student is no Author, but instead a "writer," a person whose authorial character revealed by the text must always, in this classroom context, remain only a caricature. Both parties—both the reader and the text—are always constrained by rhetoric's iron law of context, and, therefore, always doomed to attend dress rehearsals, to be always the reading and writing bridesmaid.

Although the students' complaint that we "tear the paper apart" does little to address the conscious motives of our reading their papers, it is closer to truth than we may have realized. Reading student writing is not "normal" or constructive, but by nature deconstructive insofar as we are, clearly, reading for difference. That is, we do not assume the organic unity of the text or seek to produce the one best account of it. Student texts
are not givens, nor do they have intrinsic interest. We instead see them as realized possibilities that might have alternatives. We urge these texts to self-destruct, to reveal the ruptures, knots, and inconsistencies that their phenomenology as *student* writing implies to all of us, whatever our positions may be about literary writing.

If we have, then, an answer to "what is reading?," we also have one to the question "what is a student text?". It is commonplace to call student writing "artificial"; it is in most of its aspects a staged performance, or commonly a dress rehearsal. We may read student writing as this week's set of themes, as the final "treatment" of some aspect of course content (e.g., a seminar paper), as a potentially publishable essay, or (rarely) as the published version of a paper written for our or someone else's course. (Reading a plagiarized paper occasions a special experience of student writing in relation to the criterion "publication." ) But once we know it as "student writing," perspectives come into play that prevent it from being "real" writing, except within its own school context.

In addition, the student text is, if we define it by its reading, never the last word, the product that reifies an Author's understanding of a subject. It is always, as it is known by its readers, writing-in-process, writing to be changed or bettered by another attempt. The text remains open; its undecidedness is a given condition of its occurrence, neither the product of flaws nor of naivete. Ideally, this student writing has sought the teacher's reading, rather than what would be utterly artificial in the con-text of a classroom, a "real" reader's reading.

Thus each student text is an attempt, an essay, an *instance* of writing rather than "writing" itself. Student texts do not have the same status that non-student texts assume, even when they are written by unskilled writers who may be credited with "folk writing." They are exercises, such as those established by the teachers of the classical sequence of school progymnasmata who seriously asked students from Roman to Milton's time "whether day or night is more beautiful." The student text is only an imitation of academic, personal, professional, technical, or "creative" writing. As we read it, student writing is always written on a double mirror that shows both the inscription and the something else, a suggested other, behind it.

This answer to "what is a student text?" opens another window on contemporary literary theory. What I have said
about the open, undecided nature of the student text is what post­
structuralist critics are now saying about literature and written
language, although they say it in pursuit of signs while I focus
on the whole purpose and situation of student discourse. The
core doctrine of this school is that texts participate in "textuality."
Anything written is so embedded in the history of written utter­
ances that it is impossible to claim that it has a fixed, decidable,
"best" interpretation, or that it is itself either a unique or original
"work of art."

Jacques Derrida, whose Writing and Difference and Of
Grammatology are primary sources for various applications of
this view of the text, points out that texts "signify" according to
their difference from other texts, not only according to their
representation of mimetic or symbolic congruences with exper­
ience or reality. Thus it is "absence," neither authorial presence
nor the presence of art, that creates meaning. As readers or as
auditors, we seek the author or art that has inevitably disap­
peared when language is uttered, the vanishing statement that is
perhaps everything except what has just been said in writing. As
soon as language combines with and reifies history at the
moment of its utterance, "truth" disappears into context, taking
with it the author, content, and meaning.

"Deconstruction is in this view all we can do with any
writing. We may only search out the elements of, allusions to,
and layers of probable intention to destroy or explode the text.
Everything is read in quotation marks; if not, it will be misunder­
stood. The play of meanings and of language inscribes the
author. Juxtaposition of images, or allusion, does not allow us
to escape the freplay of prior meanings, only to transform them.
Whatever we write holds us up against all other uses of the
same forms, words, even letters; language alludes to us and
becomes the black box we can neither break out of nor into.

Obviously such a doctrine may upset those who depend
on the stability of written language. All of the premises that
have until recently guided the study of literature are called into
question. And all of the promises we thought we had to keep to
art, to history, or to students become "promises" when only the
road not taken is on the page and itself unavailable, absent.
"Reading" itself becomes a fiction.

Critics may argue, on the one hand, that accepting the
fluid, uncertain nature of writing will loose anarchy on the
world by making it impossible to state a thesis and support it, or
on the other hand, they may imply that the text's uncertain nature is a good, slightly naughty joke about the insufficient philosophies of absolutism, hierarchical structures of value, or Meyer Abrams. But we teachers of writing can accept and turn to our own purposes the play of order against accident, of thesis against the traces of other people's theses. We are able to hold the tension between so hierarchical a grading system as A, B, C, D, F and the individual writer's development; we can decide to fail a paper even while telling a student that it is an effort superior to all earlier attempts. (We can also give A's for "effort," but I am arguing, of course, that we do not teach effort, but instead teach purposeful participation in the history of texts, in textuality itself.)

The student text is and has always been, at least in the teacher's reading of it, a "factitious" embodiment of the newly recognized undecided and uncertain writing (écriture) that is the object of post-structuralist poetics. The student writer, like the disappearing Author whose death and disemberment were proclaimed by Roland Barthes,14 is written by writing. A student writer's identity is inscribed by the manifold layers of evaluation, by the teacher's professional experience and role-related anxieties, by the assigned problem's solutions, and by all of the other students' writing that the teacher unavoidably brings to bear on the text. Teachers take student texts seriously in the same way that directors take rehearsals seriously. We are neither betrayed nor startled by texts whose unique, original congruence with personal meaning we never expected. We are able to hear the innocence of the first time a student writer has dared to use what we must call the world's most tiresome cliche.

This recognition offers an open window on theoretical proposals and arguments, and what we see through that window might enlighten us about the tension felt between we teachers devoted to composition and our colleagues devoted to literary exegesis. Understanding the activity of reading student papers shows us how essential and unself-conscious is a vision of a stable text for "unreconstructed" New Critics or formalists. This understanding also suggests that participating in our primary activity of reading student papers not only wastes the time of but also threatens to undermine the critical assumptions of a colleague committed to text as artifact, to reading to make the text "better."

Through this window of understanding we can also see
that student writing is a source for testing current ideas about the nature of the text and textuality. Theories of the text may be tested against our experiences with and knowledge about the nature of obviously uncertain and fluid writing. Within the limits of the classroom, the complexity of reading other texts may be laid bare, acted out, and empirically experienced. To test the limits of Derrida's, or Barthe's, or Foucault's notions of textuality within which no text may be unique or original, we can recommend teaching composition. The New Critics can learn from teachers of writing who know how to read student writing and expect that this reading will be frustrating because it is much less comfortable than reading "certain," or "art," or "expert" writing.

More immediately, our own understanding can help us in various ways. We may recognize our own dualism in the separation of our roles as composition teachers and as literature teachers, caused perhaps by a double vision sanctioned by theories of reading and of the "proper" status of a text. Such a recognition reveals that we all experience stress when we read student writing because we hold to conflicting (but unarticulated) values that make us construct and deconstruct this text. Once we spell out the troublesome but essential dynamic oppositions we must encompass while reading student writing—art versus nature, achievement versus apprenticeship, freshness versus cliche, risk versus error—we may continue with fewer frustrations and more certainty about the way we perform this essential professional task.

We may also as teachers become at once more supportive and more demanding of students. If we accept their writing as imitative, as an instance of practice in a developmental sequence through which each fully independent writer in Western history has progressed in some fashion, we may become writing coaches who are as understanding of achievement and failure as any of the great theatrical and athletic coaches. We can make assignments that allow the students "to be written" by conventions, rhetorical stances, and inventive problems, necessary stages in a normal progression toward independence when the students have their own chance to "write," to be Authors who renovate whatever discourse community they are in. We can acknowledge the artificiality of class writing and own up to ourselves as "readers" playing multiple roles, one of which is always the teacher for whom students write. Once teachers understand
their complex situation, they can assent to all writing—to literature and to the student text that is always becoming and will probably never "be." We can appreciate that the difficulty of reading student writing is its necessary condition: we can say about student writing neither "this is not perfect" nor "this is perfect."

As a discipline, we may also use an understanding of reading student texts to accomplish some new goals. The field of composition studies can ease the burden of new writing teachers by explaining the textual status of student writing as writings-in-process rather than as failed products. Such explanation can foster the new teachers' curiosity as well as quell incipient anger about the difference between this kind of reading and reading "normal" texts. We can take more seriously the relation of theory to practice, and sustain new explorations of difficult questions regarding the expressive individual and public conventions in introductory as well as in advanced composition courses. We can begin to extend the insights of performance theories into writing instruction, where until now we have largely relied on static, product-centered textual studies from linguistics or rhetoric and equally static behavioral studies of idealized writing processes separated from the texts which result from those processes.

Some of the most obvious questions appropriate to composition theory need to be asked explicitly: Is it suitable to require students to "publish" error-free writing within the classroom? Is it more or less difficult and "realistic" to write for a simulated audience than for a teacher? Can one really state a thesis, or is original authorial presence a fiction more easily mastered by imitation and simulation than by probing the student writer's so-called "genuine" point of view? Are the categories of form described in composition texts extensions of pre-modern hierarchies that no longer fit our new root metaphors for reality? How can composition instruction, particularly in view of its location in essentially public institutions, mediate between the individual and public discourse worlds?

I cannot pursue these questions far afield here in this consideration of reading student writing, but these issues do come up daily in that process. What teachers actually do and how they respond as they read has been largely ignored in and divorced from theory, so such questions as I just raised may appear to be only matters of personal conviction. I hope that this
description of the reading of student writing within the context provided by reading and textual theories shows that they are not.16

University of Utah
Salt Lake City, Utah

Notes

"Thanks to Tim Lally for his helping me with three revisions of this essay.


2 Peter Elbow, in "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process," College English, 45 (April, 1983), 327-339, has made an analogous connection between responses to teaching and theoretical constructs.

3 For instance, the text would "contain" a pun if two meanings of a word were "in the language" at the time, whether or not the writer intended or the reader "got" it.

4 See E. D. Hirsh, The Philosophy of Composition (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1977), pp. 82-85, 92-137 for a discussion of "readability."


7 It would be possible, of course, to conduct empirical research about this reading process. Rosemary Hake and Joseph Williams in "Style and Its Consequences: Do As I Do, Not As I Say," College English, 43 (September, 1981), 433-452, have empirically studied the results of this reading outside the classroom context, but I am at present only reading "the text" of teachers' immediate experience.

8 I have assumed that reading each paper is like reading the others and have thus omitted describing the continuity or order of reading and the inevitable effects of duration and sequence. See, e.g., Menukhem Perry, "Literary


11 This view of writing is that of the by-now notorious "Yale Critics" (J. Hillis Miller, Harold Bloom, and Geoffrey Hartman) and the French school of Roland Barthes, Michael Foucault and Jacques Derrida.


13 A good summary of the debate this anxiety has caused is by George Levine in a review essay of Gerald Graff's Literature Against Itself and Frank Lentricchia's After the New Criticism in College English, 43 (February, 1981), 146-180.


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