THE "READER'S OUTLINE": A TOOL FOR GLOBAL REVISION

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In spite of significant advances in our understanding of how good writers revise, we continue to be frustrated in our efforts to teach average and below average students to do what good writers seem to do naturally. Richard Lanham's "paramedic method" offers an example of a technique that most students can use to do sentence revisions. But when students are asked to do global revisions of their drafts, teachers and textbooks typically ask them to respond to questions on a "Revision Checklist."[1] Although these questions may indicate important considerations, they do not help writers who simply cannot answer the questions with the objectivity that would make their answers useful. When asked, for example, *Does your essay have a clear focus?* all but my best students tend arbitrarily to answer with either a bald *yes*, and slide on to the next question, or a depressed *no*, and ask if they can try a different topic. They cannot answer the question productively because they cannot achieve the kind of objective *vision* of a draft that is necessary for revision.

In this essay I offer a means for analyzing one's own texts through the construction and use of a tool—I call it a reader's outline because it helps students to perceive their writing as a reader would—that students can build from their rough drafts and that enables them to *see* a draft in a way that facilitates more effective detection and diagnosis of problems and helps point the way to solutions.

* * *

As context for my explanation of how to build and use that tool, we should recall what, according to current research, good revisers do at the global level and what makes that level of revision so difficult.[2] First of all, effective revisers, rather than merely doing rewording, restructure texts globally by conceptualizing the *gist* and the *rhetorical shape* of an argument. They then distinguish between the gist and overall structure that *actually presents* itself in the text and that which they *intended* to convey, doing so by listening for *dissonance* that clangs when actuality jars against intention.

Once detected, dissonance can be diagnosed in order to discover options for revision.[3] Sommers concludes an essay on revision by asserting, "Good writing disturbs: it creates dissonances. Students need to seek the dissonance of discovery . . .—the possibility of revision" (387). Effective revisers respond positively to dissonance, seeing it not as evidence of failure, not as a dead-end sign of incompetence, but as opportunity for culling out alternatives.

However, the process of detecting problems in a text "often goes awry," conclude Flower, et. al., "for two major reasons: the writer who is attempting to compare intention and text has either a poor representation of the text, or an inadequate representation of the intentions" (29). And Beach contends that "some students may not be able to revise because they are cognitively incapable of abstracting key points . . . ("Self-Evaluation Strategies" 164). Writers may be more likely to detect dissonance if they can represent intentions, but intentions, even if they are arbitrarily conceived, exert a powerful gravitational attraction on a writer's attention as he or she tries to determine what a draft actually says. Writers may think, "My point is such and such"; then they are drawn to look for, and find, what they want to see rather than what their readers would see. In a study of self-assessment strategies of college freshmen, Beach and Eaton found that

> . . . the students were primarily rereading their drafts and reconfirming, in a self-fulfilling manner, that the drafts said what they had intended. They were simply and literally rereading their paragraphs, egocentrically absorbed in their own ideas. ("Factors" 163)

Without the ability to perceive texts as readers do, without being able to cast off the blinders of arbitrarily conceived inten-

tion, writers cannot evaluate the gist and structure of their own work. In fact, Beach discovered that high school students using self-evaluation forms made no more revisions than those who conducted no evaluation between drafts. The self-assessment forms did not sufficiently guide the students to identify "overall intentions, strengths and weaknesses, or necessary changes" ("Effects" 118). Witte concludes his study of "Topical Structure and Revision" by saying,

> How students decide to revise a text is largely dependent on their understanding of the text . . . . If writers cannot read and understand their own texts . . . , it is difficult to see how they could ever become effective revisers. (335)

One limiting factor in successful revision is, then, the ability to understand what one has said, to *see* one's own texts with the eyes of one's audience.

* * *

I emphasize the visual metaphor in the preceding sentence because the tool I propose operates on the following principle: visual accessibility to the elements of a text to which *readers* respond emphatically enhances an author's ability to see his or her text objectively. This tool, the reader's outline, resembles the kinds of outlines that students typically write; but it differs from those outlines in that it does not ask them to make qualitative decisions; it does not ask them to determine what the most important point of a paragraph is and then to assign that a roman numeral. Rather it reveals what their readers are likely to see as being emphatic in their essays. My use of the term *reader's outline* is intended to remind student writers that they must analyze their drafts in order to perceive those drafts as their readers do. While a reader's outline is often useful to peer editors or instructors, its primary goal is to help writers read their drafts through their readers' eyes.

The emphasis on visual clues to illuminate the emphatic features of a text and thus to provide an analytical tool is what chiefly distinguishes the reader's outline from Kenneth Bruffee's "Descriptive Outline." The two share the goal of helping "inexperienced writers gain a measure of . . . valuable objectivity in their work" (Bruffee 97). Bruffee's technique calls for writers to evaluate what each paragraph "does," devising something of a plot summary of a paragraph, and "says," analyzing the points

made in a paragraph. The reader's outline thus differs from the descriptive outline in appearance, giving the reader's outline is visual emphasis, and in method, calling for less analytical work in the construction of the outline and instead emphasizing the analyses that the writer does with the outline as a tool.

The reader's outline is, first, a diagnostic tool. Insofar as its object is to discern the global structure of a draft, it works as an x-ray, exposing the structure beneath the surface. To use another analogy, constructing a reader's outline is like making a stained tissue slide. When a physician wants to study the structure of tissue cells, he or she might prepare a slice of tissue thin enough to be transparent under a microscope. Because parts of the cell are of particular importance, the physician may use staining techniques that highlight the parts that must be inspected in order to make accurate diagnoses.

The reader's outline similarly aims to illuminate the basic parts of a draft and to highlight elements to which readers respond emphatically—those elements which are, generally, critical in diagnosing a draft's infirmities. Most rhetoric texts, when discussing emphasis, agree that readers rely on *placement* (initial and final position), *key terms* (principle words from a thesis or statement of purpose, and their synonyms), *directional terms* (transitional words, conjunctions), *concrete details*, and *repetition*. This list is far from exhaustive, but it is supported by research in discourse processing and gives us a group of essential elements with which we can demonstrate the construction and use of a reader's outline.[4]

Consider the following essay. It came to me when a group of students doing peer evaluations asked me for help because they sensed that something was wrong with it but could not figure out what. The assignment asked students to analyze the strategy of a one-page advertisement in order to determine the implied buyer that the advertisement addresses. (This student wrote on a mink coat advertisement that appeared in the *New York Times* in 1965):

> This ad's purpose is to promote an exclusive full-length fur coat. The appeal of this ad is directed to a wide range of consumers. It appeals to women because they want the look that the coat projects. Men are also attracted to the coat because they want their women to have this appearance. It also enhances their own image, showing off the fact that they can afford such a glorious gift. In general, the ad is

directed at the middle income consumer. The special price and payment plan give almost anyone several methods by which to purchase the merchandise.

The advertisement claims that the coat is one-hundred dollars less than other mink coats of the same quality, thus grabbing the reader's attention. If the price tag is still too high, the company offers two installment plans of varying length and interest rates. These plans, says the ad, should make the coat affordable for all.

In addition to the price and payment plans, the ad makes an appeal to women by the way it shows a picture of a rich looking deep brown mink coat—worn, of course, by a beautiful model with a perfect figure and an expensive looking diamond ring. This picture creates a fantasy of riches and luxury that women want to share by owning a coat that will give them that luxurious image.

Men will also be attracted to the beautiful model; but though they don't want to look like her, they do want to show the world that they can afford to take care of a woman as rich looking as the model in the ad. Additionally, they want their own woman to look as good as the woman in the ad, and they think that if their girl wears such a beautiful coat she will look as beautiful as the model.

Other factors in the ad give it an appealing richness: the high quality style of print, the rich looking car, and even the model's shoes and purse.

All things considered, the ad is successful in appealing to a wide range of potential buyers. Everyone wants that great look that will let an average person feel rich. So the ad presents an attractive, desirable object that can be made affordable to the typical middle-income consumer.

This typed draft is more visually accessible than the typical hand-written draft; we can easily imagine the difficulty of *seeing* the structure of a draft written on five pages, with sentences and paragraphs crossed out or additions written in the margins. But consider now a reader's outline of this essay. On this version I have highlighted *placement*, outdenting the first and last sentences in each paragraph and also underlining the especially emphatic first and last sentences of the opening and closing paragraphs; *key words*, using boldface to mark the key terms derived from the statement of purpose (students reformulate the statement of

purpose as a question and, largely by process of elimination, find the substantive terms in the question; see the example following); and *directional terms*, by bracketing (handbooks typically contain a list of transitional words; and after the examples familiarize the students with the principle involved, they are usually able to recognize these terms). I have students put a statement of purpose at the beginning of a reader's outline so that they have a keynote against which to measure dissonance. In this case the purpose is given by the assignment: analyze the ad to determine who is the buyer that the ad addresses. The central question that must be answered is *Who is the buyer?* So the key terms are those that indicate the *buyers*. (In order to maximize the visual character of the reader's outline, I place it all on one page; if a reader's outline runs to more than a page, its pages should be taped together to form one long sheet.)

Statement of purpose: Analyze an advertisement in order to determine who is the buyer that the ad addresses.

#1 — *This ad's purpose is to promote an exclusive full-length fur coat.*

— The appeal of this ad is directed to a **wide range of consumers.**

— It appeals to women because they want the look that the coat projects.

— **Men** are also attracted to the coat because they want their women to have this appearance.

— It also enhances their own image, showing off the fact that they can afford such a glorious gift.

— [In general], the ad is directed at the **middle-income consumer.**

— *The special price and payment plan give almost **anyone** several methods by which to purchase the merchandise.*

#2 — The advertisement claims that the coat is one-hundred dollars less than other mink coats of the same quality, [thus] grabbing **the reader's** attention.

— [If] the price tag is still too high, the company offers two installment plans of varying length and interest rates.

— These plans, says the ad, should make the coat affordable for **all.**

#3   —[In addition] to the price and payment plans, the ad makes an appeal to **women** by the way it shows a picture of a rich looking deep brown mink coat—worn, of course, by a beautiful model with a perfect figure and an expensive looking diamond ring.
      —This picture creates a fantasy of riches and luxury that **women** want to share by owning a coat that will give them that luxurious image.

#4   —**Men** will [also] be attracted to the beautiful model; but though they don't want to look like her, they do want to show the world that they can afford to take care of a woman as rich looking as the model in the ad.
      —[Additionally], they want their own woman to look as good as the woman in the ad, and they think that if their girl wears such a beautiful coat she will look as beautiful as the model.

#5   —[Other factors] in the ad give it an appealing richness: the high quality style of print, the rich looking car, and even the model's shoes and purse.

#6   —*[All things considered], the ad is successful in appealing to a* **wide range of potential buyers.**
      —**Everyone** wants that great look that will let an **average person** feel rich.
    —*[So] the ad presents an attractive, desirable object that can be made affordable to the* **typical middle-income consumer.**

Some things become immediately apparent; we see, for example, what parts of a text carry the most weight. Our demonstration essay is excessively top-heavy; the first paragraph contains seven sentences while the next-to-last, where we expect an emphatic climax to the argument, contains one twenty-seven word sentence expressing information that could just as easily appear earlier in the text—no obvious *pattern* emerges. But at this point we resist premature judgments.

Our first task is to check the *focus* of the draft by comparing the first and last paragraphs of the reader's outline—in order to see if the paper ends by focusing on the same ideas with which it begins.

Statement of purpose: Analyze an advertisement in order to determine who is the buyer that the ad addresses.

#1   — *This ad's purpose is to promote an exclusive full-length fur coat.*

- The appeal of this ad is directed to a **wide range of consumers.**
- It appeals to **women** because they want the look that the coat projects.
- **Men** are also attracted to the coat because they want their women to have this appearance.
- It also enhances their own image, showing off the fact that they can afford such a glorious gift.
- [In general], the ad is directed at the **middle-income consumer.**

— *The special price and payment plan give almost* ***anyone*** *several methods by which to purchase the merchandise.*

#6   — *[All things considered], the ad is successful in appealing to a **wide range of potential buyers.***

- **Everyone** wants that great look that will let an **average person** feel rich.

— *[So] the ad presents an attractive, desirable object that can be made affordable to the **typical middle-income consumer.***

Paragraph one identifies the buyers as being "a wide range of consumers," "women," "men," "the middle-income consumer," and "almost anyone." In paragraph six the author uses similar terms: "wide range of potential buyers," "everyone," "the average person," and "the typical middle-income consumer." It thus becomes clear that, because the key term *buyer* is so loosely defined, the draft is poorly focused. So we must decide whether to focus on "everyone" or the "middle-income consumer." In this case the choice was easy; the writer had intended to focus on the "middle-income consumer" and had just been careless in using terms like "almost anyone."

We need next to determine what must be done to correct the diagnosed problem. Altering the loose terminology that we have seen is an obvious first step, but we should look for ways to refocus the rest of the draft.

We do so by gathering more information, analyzing the reader's outline in order to find out what other parts of the draft might be emphasized in the reader's eyes. We want to discover whether or not the writer has included sufficient material to make the focus—on the middle-income consumer—convincing and whether the writer has included material that is irrelevant to the focus. So we highlight two additional elements: *concrete details*, by circling (I instruct students to mark any details that they can see, feel, taste, smell, hear, measure, or count) and *repetitions*, by underscoring twice (students highlight repeated items, excluding articles and other clearly unimportant words. In the following example I have tried to simplify by not double-underscoring repeated elements that have already been highlighted—the synonyms for *buyers*). My students actually use colored highlighting pens rather than the circles and lines I had to use here.

Statement of purpose: Analyze an advertisement in order to determine who is the buyer that the ad addresses.

#1 —*This ad's purpose is to promote an exclusive full-length fur coat.*

    —The appeal of this ad is directed to a wide range of consumers.

    —It appeals to **women** because they want the look that the coat projects.

    —**Men** are also attracted to the coat because they want their women to have this appearance.

    —It also enhances their own image, showing off the fact that they can afford such a glorious gift.

    —[In general], the ad is directed at the **middle-income consumer.**

—*The special price and payment plan give almost **anyone** several methods by which to purchase the merchandise.*

#2 —The advertisement claims that the coat is one-hundred dollars less than other mink coats of the same quality, [thus] grabbing **the reader's** attention.

    — [If] the price tag is still too high, the company offers two installment plans of varying length and interest rates.

—These plans, says the ad, should make the coat affordable for **all**.

#3 —[In addition] to the price and payment plans, the ad makes an appeal to **women** by the way it shows a picture of a rich looking deep brown mink coat— worn, of course, by a beautiful model with a perfect figure and an expensive looking diamond ring.

—This picture creates a fantasy of riches and luxury that **women** want to share by owning a coat that will give them that luxurious image.

#4 —**Men** will [also] be attracted to the beautiful model; but though they don't want to look like her, they do want to show the world that they can afford to take care of a woman as rich looking as the model in the ad.

—[Additionally], they want their own woman to look as good as the woman in the ad, and they think that if their girl wears such a beautiful coat she will look as beautiful as the model.

#5 —Other factors in the ad give it an appealing richness: the high quality style of print, the rich looking car, and even the model's shoes and purse.

#6 —*[All things considered], the ad is successful in appeal- ing to a **wide range of potential buyers**.*

—**Everyone** wants that great look that will let an **average person** feel rich.

—*[So] the ad presents an attractive, desirable object that can be made affordable to the **typical middle- income consumer**.*

Looking at the concrete details and repetitions (I have students write these out on a separate sheet, organized by paragraphs), we find an emphasis on images of *affordability* and *wealth*. *Concrete details*, "one hundred dollars" and "two installment plans" appear in the second paragraph; and "deep brown mink coat," "beautiful model with a perfect figure and an expensive looking diamond ring," "high quality style of print," "rich looking car," and "model's shoes and purse" appear in paragraphs three and five. And evidence presented by the *repetitions* reiterates the dual

"appeals" to the desire ("want," "desirable") for the "look," the "image" of (1) "affordable" and (2) "rich" appearance. So we must ask what is the relationship between the assertion that the ad is directed at a middle-income consumer and the way in which the ad focuses our attention on the coat's affordability and images of wealth? The author decided that the combination of these two emphases indicates that *the ad attempts to convince the potential buyer that the woman who wears this coat can look rich without being rich; and that argument*, she thought, *is aimed at a middle-income audience.* My emphases indicate the words that became the thesis of the revised draft.

The author then restructured the essay around that thesis, outlining her plan in the following manner:

#1   Introduce the ad and present the thesis.
#2   Discuss all the details that present images of wealth (alligator shoes, two carat diamond ring, Mercedes Benz, full-length mink coat, etc) and use the details to prove that the ad tries to make the customer believe that the coat will make her (or his girl) look rich [note the improved concreteness].
#3   Discuss the details of the two payment plans offered in order to show that the ad wants to make the coat *seem* affordable.
#4   Use logic to show that the combination of the appeals discussed in the second and third paragraphs is aimed at neither the rich nor the poor but to the middle class.

The reader's outline has thus served to detect dissonance between the intention of defining an audience and the actual ambiguities in that definition, to diagnose this as a problem of focus, and to suggest a new focus and pattern for the essay that is based on a clearer perception of the ideas latent in the draft. We have navigated what Flower, et. al. call the "three major 'gates' or hurdles that the revision process presents to beginning writers: detecting problems in the text, diagnosing those problems, and selecting a strategy" (21).

These results derive from the enhanced *visibility* of the reader's outline. Stephen A. Bernhardt argues that ". . . texts which fall toward the visually informative end of the continuum [from texts with few visual cues to those which use such cues extensively] encourage selective reading and extracting of information" (75).

The reader's outline constructs a "visually informative" draft that pushes an author to detect the same information that his or her readers are most likely to detect.

Once a student has constructed a reader's outline, I suggest the following general instructions for using the tool:

1. From your statement of purpose, construct a central question (Who is the buyer that the ad addresses?).

2. Locate the key term(s) in the question (*buyers*), and use the term(s) to locate the answer(s) you propose (the synonyms for *buyers* indicate two answers, one general and one more specific), especially in the first and last paragraphs, which should be compared.

3. If you have proposed more than one answer, determine whether the answers are unified—in your thesis statement—or options among which you must choose (you select the more specific—middle-income consumer).

4. Typically you can make a more informed choice among your options if you first examine the body of your draft in order to discover the ideas that you consistently emphasize (wealth and affordability).

5. Use the information you have gathered to decide on a precise statement of your thesis (whether or not you intend to state the thesis explicitly in your essay), a clear answer to the question proposed by your statement of purpose.

6. Determine the basic parts of your thesis, thinking of it as a contract that you establish with your readers; decide what you must provide to fulfill the contract (evidence and argument to prove that images of wealth and a promise of affordability attract a middle-income audience); and arrange the main ideas in a logical pattern.

I certainly do not claim to have identified or ranked all the elements of prose to which readers respond emphatically; visually significant features of a draft—diagrams and charts, for example—would need to be highlighted in a reader's outline. And, especially in long texts, it could be useful to mark summaries in which the writer articulates what he or she perceives to be the gist.[5] I do, however, believe that the process of making oneself aware of even a few features of one's prose to which readers are likely to respond makes a writer more conscious of an audience and more inclined to revise with a reader's eyes.

I conducted an exploratory study to see if the reader's outline could make a significant difference in a student's ability to revise. To a control group, of about one hundred students, I gave copies of the essay on the fur coat advertisement discussed above and asked the students to list the major problems of the essay, excluding any stylistic or grammatical problems; I then asked them to suggest ways to revise and correct the problems. As a measure of success, I looked for any evidence that the student had recognized the ambiguity that results from the various definitions of the intended buyers. To the test group, again of roughly one-hundred students, I gave the same materials that the control group used plus a reader's outline of the essay—with no instructions on how to use the reader's outline other than telling them that it could help them to see problems in the essay. I also explained that the reader's outline highlighted placement, key terms from the statement of purpose, directional terms, concrete details, and repetitions.

Differences appeared among the twelve classes that took part, but overall thirty-eight percent of those in the control group detected the touchstone problem while sixty-seven percent of those who used the reader's outline detected the problem. Most encouraging to me was the fact that the poorer students seemed to be helped as much as the better students. Among those students who eventually received grades of C + or below from their instructors, the control group revealed twenty-seven percent detecting the problem—the test group, sixty-one percent.

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This method does, of course, have limitations. As is the case with any tool, some skill is required for effective operation. (I often use a reader's outline when conferring with a student, in the process trying to show the student how to use the tool.) I agree that

> Whenever students can clearly define and limit the choices available in a given writing situation and can discern a compelling reason for preferring one choice over others, then they are likely to alter their texts. (Ruszkiewicz 146)

And the reader's outline can demonstrate what choices an author has made or failed to make and then help to reveal new options. But only the writing instructor can teach the students that once options surface a writer must *make* decisions, must *find* reasons for making choices. In fact, I find the reader's outline most helpful

when conducting conferences because I can ask the students to look at what their essays feature and to make their own decisions—while I intrude as little as possible.

An instructor could discover other practical advantages, individualizing a reader's outline, asking a particular student to highlight any elements that might expose his or her logical or linguistic idiosyncrasies. If the student is using a word processor, as I have been doing in my writing this essay,[6] it is both easy to construct a reader's outline and simple to print out several copies, each of which can be highlighted in a different way in order to illuminate various elements of the text.

Finally, however, my students find two most compelling reasons for using a reader's outline. First, it prevents them from subjectively mistaking an intended main idea, hidden inconspicuously in a paragraph, for the main idea that a reader will perceive. Unless the idea is clearly highlighted in the reader's outline, the student assumes that a reader will not see it as a main point. Second, the experience of using a reader's outline can convince a student writer that revision is discovery. When a student detects dissonance and selects among optional strategies for revising, he or she begins to develop a new *attitude* towards the process of revision. Beach, in his study of student revisions ("Self-Evaluation Strategies"), found that "The attitude towards or interest in revision . . . affected the degree of revision" (163). I recall my own tendency to want to junk a draft and start over again if I detected anything more than sentence level problems. If writers can detect global problems in a way that leads them to consider newly conceived options, they can begin to move from feeling a sense of failure when they perceive problems to recognizing possibilities for discovery.

NOTES

[1]Others have suggested strategies for achieving objectivity when revising globally that seem to me more effective than the "Revision Checklist" and that are similar in principle and method to what I propose in this essay. In addition to Kenneth Bruffee, whom I discuss in my essay, Calderonello and Edwards, for example, give students "Seven Reading Strategies for Revising a Rough Draft," including looking at both opening and closing paragraphs and first sentences of each paragraph (155-57). And some computer software helps reveal significant global features of texts; the *Writer's Workbench* (AT&T), for example, prints out just the first and last sentences of each paragraph so the writer can check the flow of ideas in a draft.

²My summary is intended only to supply background important in seeing the reasons for my teaching technique. A usefully thorough review of "Research on Revision in Writing" was done by Jill Fitzgerald.

³See Flower, et. al. for a discussion of what they see as the two primary revision strategies—"detect/rewrite" and "diagnose/revise," 42-51.

⁴I have not attempted to base the reader's outline on a model of discourse processing because to do so would make it too complex for students to construct and use. But such models do include the elements that I highlight. In passages on macrostructures, van Dijk and Kintsch, for example, comment on position, key terms, "macroconnectives" (which are among the directional terms I note), concreteness, and repetition (see especially pages 52-54 and 202-204).

⁵Van Dijk and Kintsch contend that "only summaries will express macrostructures" (202); thus summaries might provide an important focal point for detecting dissonance if stood against the thesis, statement of purpose, and then the other highlighted features of the text.

⁶Using a computer is not necessary; handwritten reader's outlines—with photocopies for highlighting various features—may, in some ways, work better than computerized versions because the students who construct a handwritten version look closely at every word and sentence; and doing that can result in improved *sentence* as well as global revision.

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