

DRAFT

**Combining rhetorical theory
with usability theory to evaluate quality
of writing in web-based texts**

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After the first draft of this chapter is written, my next step will be to develop an outline. The outline will help me organize my many different thought processes and make it easier for you to evaluate my ideas in the finished chapter. Traditional (hard copy) texts are typically linear and are about as far as one can get from complex information systems. In fact, intuitively it would seem linear texts might be too simple to have a need for any kind of usability study. In reality, disorganization in a traditional text is counterproductive (just as in digital texts). So the outline becomes a usability study of sorts, and it will aid me with my organization. On the other hand, apart from organization, nothing in the outlining process improves the quality of my writing. If my text is well organized but poorly written, turgid or purple or yellow or filled with uninformed opinions, the outline provides nothing to improve it. Tools designed to evaluate

structures offer little for evaluating quality of idea or sophistication of meaning in a text. To evaluate the quality of my writing I need a different set of tools. They will be based on my understanding of the genre of this document and the rhetorical stances that genre implies. Based on my understanding of the exigencies and purposes of this chapter, I identify its likely audiences. Exigency, purpose, and audience define the structures in the text and lead me to the demands placed on me as the author. The demands on me as an author lead to appropriate rhetorical stances. Armed with that information, I can then evaluate the text of the chapter and see if it seems to meet those demands. Of course, that most commonly occurs at a subconscious level. In short, we all evaluate texts through filters that, in large part, we extract from our understanding of the genres we are evaluating.

Increasingly, as information and its sources become more complicated (e.g., hypermedia, Internet, Web 2.0), we are moving away from comprehensive understanding of the new and more complicated genres being created, but as I will point out in this chapter, a good understanding of the genre is critical for being able to analyze the quality of the writing (whether generated by computer or human). My effort, then, is to describe a rubric that will permit us to establish the genres of the different texts technical writers will face in their daily work and so permit us to establish their quality – a system as applicable in evaluating texts in complex information systems as in evaluating this chapter.

usability and writing

As we all know, the best known usability theorist have long advocated adapting Web-based writing to meet needs implied by usability theory, and a number, including Janice Redish with Letting Go of the Words (2007), have written books specifically on that topic. In general, their advice on writing for a Web-based environment is straightforward, “keep your texts short”

(Nielsen, 2000, p. 100), “don’t make them think” (Krug, 2006, p. 11), “give people only what they need” (Redish, 2007, p. 94). These suggestions are in keeping with the results of more than two decades of research that clearly shows an impatient community of readers. According to them, if a text is to be read, it must necessarily be short and easily read.

but . . .

Impatient readers may not be the problem. Some scholars suggest they are the symptom of a larger problem. Scholars argue that online readers read as they do because they have learned no better methods for reading digital material. In “Online Literacy is a Lesser Kind” (2008), Mark Bauerlein points out and agrees with Nielsen’s suggestion that when faced with long readings, readers “don’t” (B11). As unfortunate as it might sound, Bauerlein goes on to suggest that because they have been developing bad habits for so long, students may never learn to read well in a digital environment. The implication of Bauerlein’s argument is not only are texts currently carelessly read, but this level of Internet illiteracy may never be overcome.

While I do not believe the habit of careless reading will never be overcome, I agree that in the current internet environment Nielsen, Krug, Barnum, Bauerlein and the others are correct; Web users do not read carefully. I go a step farther and make the claim that many professional writers have similar problems reading Web-based copy and even greater problems evaluating it and for the same reasons. They have never been taught how to do it, and they evaluate texts much like Internet readers read it.

A very important problem: After 15 years professional writers still cannot evaluate web content

One would expect a person who spends day in and day out writing in a digital environment to be unaffected by the problems afflicting casual readers. As it turns out, this seems not to be the case. Our graduate student body is made up of professional writers: technical writers, journalists, editors, communications directors, managing editors, Web editors, Web managers, and Web developers (to name a few) with years of workplace experience and from around the world – a major requirement for matriculation into our program is to be a working, professional writer. So when I ask a graduate student in our program a question, it is generally answered by a professional writer.

a test of writers' ability to evaluate texts

Every year for five years, in an ongoing (albeit informal) study of methods professional writers use for evaluating digital texts, from 2002 and 2007, I had my subjects evaluate four simple pages on a website. One of the pages was designed to recruit sophomores into a technical writing program, but the text for the page was originally designed to recruit students into the literature program. The text for another page was designed to recruit technical writing students was originally written to impress Northwest Accreditation evaluators. One of the pages fails to do what its title promises, and one of them repeats another page word for word. All of the pages needed to be completely rewritten.

the subjects began by discussing design

Typically, the students began by discussing design. They invariably presented conflicting opinions: “I don’t like the color of the text”; “I love the color of the text”; “I hate the use of the paper metaphor”; “I like the way the shadow falls under the edge of the page.” Being writers and not artists, they had no vocabulary or theoretical foundation for evaluating design. Still, they always began by evaluating the visual design of these pages.

the subjects moved to discussing navigation

Having exhausted discussion of design, they began discussing navigation. The navigation is very straightforward (each page has three links and the texts are short and properly chunked and there are even breadcrumbs) so there are really no usability issues to discuss.

eventually . . . they discussed writing quality

Finally, the subjects began doing what they should have been able to do well: examining writing quality. Usually, they pointed out an embedded mechanical problem or two, but, to a person, they were consistently satisfied with the writing quality. Just as consistently, I assured them that every page had significant problems, and as professionals they should be able to find them. One page contains the following two sentences.

English majors have found job opportunities in financial institutions, insurance companies, federal and state government agencies, the hospitality industry, universities, museums, and service organizations. They are employed as personnel and planning directors, administrative associates, marketing directors, technical librarians, wage and salary representatives, service correspondents, claims adjustors, and insurance agents (Career Opportunities, para. 2).

When I told the subjects the pages all had serious problems they looked more carefully at the text, but ultimately replied that they could find nothing -- and out of more than one hundred subjects, only one has ever found any of the problems (and he had no vocabulary for explaining it).

effectively discussing writing quality

Only when I finally made them identify the purpose of the page did they recognize the audience. The purpose of the page was to recruit technical writing students from a pool of

sophomores, but the text was clearly designed to recruit literature majors. Worse than not providing correct information for the appropriate audience, the text provides information that might very well repel any potential technical writing student. Any informed rhetorician analyzing the text in context of its genre should instantly recognize it as directed at the wrong audience.

There was one page where a student suggested a problem. He felt that on one page the sentences were too long, but he was at a loss for explaining why that was a problem, other than he felt it was a bad idea to have long sentences on the Internet. Although he is right; it is often a bad idea to have long sentences made up of academic prose, the text was designed for Northwest Accreditation reviewers. For their original audience the sentences are not inappropriately long, but they were copied and pasted into a page designed to recruit sophomores. They are filled with academic jargon meaningless to sophomores, and there is no reason this page could ever achieve its mandate of recruiting technical communication students.

how it could happen

The textual errors are as easily identified as they are egregious; how could more than 100 professional writers, over a period of five years, not be able to identify such obvious problems and explain them? Worse, how could highly respected usability study teachers not have seen the problems when they had their classes run usability tests on those pages?

One might be tempted to suggest that these must have been really weak writers (and teachers), but they are all excellent writers. The problems are not with their writing skill. Redish points to the core of the problems in Letting Go, “People aren’t just passive receptacles into which writers can pour information. We are constantly interpreting what we see on the screen in

the light of our experiences and expectations” (p. 11). I think this quote points to the problems, and they seem to come from two sources:

- (1) The Internet is a pastiche of cut-and-pasted texts pulled from places where they might have been meaningful and pasted into environments where they might or might not still be meaningful. Such texts are almost always on topic and so superficially may seem correct, but they are often written for the wrong purpose or audience or contain incorrect information for the rhetorical situation of their new environments.”
- (2) As a community we seem to have incomplete rhetorical filters for evaluating the content of writing once it is on a website. When looking at a text on the Internet, we often have no idea of its genre.

impact on evaluation

That the Internet is a cut-and-paste pastiche of these genres needs little or no explanation. I am currently producing seven websites. In no case is all of the content new in these projects. I am hard pressed to remember the last site I built from scratch, and have not built one with all new content since 1996. This cut-n-paste mentality is a habit of dubious quality, but nonetheless common in the profession and is perhaps the core tenant of complex information systems.

incomplete rhetorical filters

That “there are incomplete rhetorical filters” is more complicated. A variety of studies indicate that when we read, we read through different sets of filters. In some cases the mechanics of a text are important (a resume) and in some cases less so (a few words of love on a Post-it note). Sometimes, quality of type is critical (contemporary art book) and at other times less so (Shakespeare’s 1623, Folio). Depending on the genre, vernacular prose may be appropriate, or poetry or academic prose. We read everything through these filters. But we assign the filters

intuitively and based on experience and education (we have to be taught to read documents such as scholarship, modernist novels, and postmodern poetry, just as we have to be taught to appreciate contemporary art and classical music).

Part of learning to read different genres is learning what to expect from them, what they should be doing – these are the filters. We only know what filters we need if we know the genre we are reading – love letter, humorous greeting card, sympathetic greeting card, curriculum vita, mystery novel, fantasy, proposal, brochure, annual report, etc. In a traditional world, when we begin to read a traditional text, we load the appropriate filters, and we naturally evaluate as we read. The thing I find with my professional-writer students is that when they read online they seldom recognize the genres they are reading, and so they have no rhetorical filters for evaluating how the text should work and no vocabulary for discussing it. They cannot evaluate the text because, like everybody else, they were never taught to read it.

genres and filters in websites

Webpages are collections of many easily identifiable genres – menus, welcome messages, reviews, tutorials, sales brochures, annual reports, tables of facts, schedules, photo albums, shopping carts, help files, scholarly articles, postcards, interactive-science-fiction stories, etc., but they are also collections of not-so-easily identifiable, new genres. In my graduate classes, I have to teach working, professional writers how to recognize genres they would have no problem recognizing in a traditional environment, and since many genres are new (e.g., [You Suck at Photoshop](#), 2007), we often have to invent new filters for evaluating them.

Once the writers understand this process, they no longer have trouble evaluating the texts. In a new study, I now have undergraduate students evaluate the same, egregious, four web pages

after teaching them processes I use for identifying the genre of the text, and they consistently, immediately identify the problems, and they have a vocabulary for discussing them.

a future of documentation and content evaluation

Whenever I check in at MSNBC.com I receive a brief report on the weather at my home address. Somewhere a computer is tapping the weather conditions here in Logan, UT., and forwarding it to MSNBC's server, and that server forwards it to me. I also receive a section devoted to the news in my local paper (even before the paper prints it). It is a relatively simple example of computers communicating with each other to produce automated documents. Although the computers were originally programmed by and use texts written by humans, they now produce and update documents independently.

Whenever I log into Amazon.com it compiles a page of all the things my wife has explored over the past few weeks because she uses my account. So in addition to opportunities to buy the latest in XML books, I am offered the opportunity to buy women's sandals in size 8. Recently, I received an email from them (a flyer, really) offering me a selection of nursing bras. Amazon tracks what it considers my purchasing patterns and automatically updates its sales efforts to meet those patterns. We recently sent a G-mail to a niece named Avery, and for weeks our G-mail account was plastered with bird ads. In this case, the text of the ads was created by people, but the content for the ads sent me was assembled by computers based on my whole family's purchasing habits.

complex information systems

With the advent of Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) and other XML-based information management systems and the growing power and use of broadband technologies (in addition to the older but still pretty reliable ASP/SQL), it is increasingly

possible for computers to write, configure, and publish documents without human intervention. These capabilities point to a very powerful future for publishing. No two people go to Amazon.com and get the same page. For Amazon.com this is a powerful marketing capability that they have now expanded by sending the computer generated information to their customers via E-mail.

problems in managing quality of content

These are groundbreaking capabilities, but they also point to serious problems in the future. Amazon.com does not know my wife uses my “one click” capability. Because there is no human intervention, the computer and code managing my account “thinks” it is marketing to me. In the case of Amazon, there is no harm because the content it uses was written for specific purposes and for specific audiences so my wife sees ads designed for her and I see ads designed for me even if the page is addressed to me. But not all complex information systems will work this way. In many cases, the systems generate the text as a response to sensors, or they cut and paste from other texts, perhaps in XML or SQL databases, designed for completely different purposes (e.g., text written for a brochure about the safety record of a company might be inappropriately integrated into a safety training document).

If professional writers find it difficult to evaluate the content they generate and handle, how can they hope to evaluate content generated and/or copy-pasted by computers? In a recent conversation with an information management manager at Lockheed Martin (Meersman, 2008), I was told that among their greatest problems is “texts moved from document to document with no sense of context or regard for audience.” So far the only solution I have heard (and I have heard it several times) is, “write for a generalized audience.” I suggest that much (perhaps most) digital content on the Internet is meant to be persuasive. People are selling things, or trying to

get people to do things, or they are trying to get people to believe things or learn things or think things.

I suggest that persuasive arguments directed at a general audience with no sense of context are directed at nobody at all. In short, we need tools for quickly and effectively evaluating digital texts being used to persuade in any sense of the word. The rest of this chapter is devoted to describing a possible solution.

applying genre theory to content evaluation

In the past, scholars organized genres in accordance with their structures. In-keeping with that tradition, Sharon and Steven Gerson, in Technical Writing: Process and Product (2000), describe a proposal as containing a title page, cover letter, table of contents, list of illustrations, executive summary, introduction, discussion, conclusion, recommendation, glossary, works cited page, appendix (358). None of these described components are necessary to a proposal and all are commonly found in documents that are not proposals (e.g., reports). A fast-tracked proposal may have no letter. A proposal with no images would have no list of illustrations. A proposal might well have an introduction but not an executive summary. And every proposal I have ever written contained a budget – something their description lacks. In fact, I can think of no structural descriptions (executive summary, cover letter, table of contents, list of illustrations, budget, etc.) that apply to a proposal and only a proposal.

In Technical Writing: a Reader Centered Approach (1987), Paul Anderson describes proposals differently. He suggests a proposal is an action. “In a proposal,” he says, “you make an offer. And you try to persuade your readers to accept that offer.” He goes on with, “You say that, in exchange for money or time or some kind of support from your readers, you will give

them something they want, make something they desire, or do something they desire” (704). He has done an excellent job of describing every proposal I have ever written or seen.

applying a more contemporary and dynamic theory of genres

Genre theorists have long abandoned the old notion that a genre was some kind of category that can be described in terms of similarities in the structures of its texts. At the risk of putting words in their mouths, I suggest contemporary genre theorists would describe proposals much as Anderson has. In “Genre as a Social Action,” Caroline Miller describes “genre” as “a ‘cultural artifact’ that is interpretable as a recurrent, significant action” (2007, 37). In “Anyone for Tennis?” (2008) Anne Freedman additionally suggests genres require action, but she argues they also need a reaction from an audience.

Contemporary genre theorists do not see genres as static. Rather, genres are identifiable moments in ongoing conversations and they evolve through time. There are events leading up to a proposal and events following, and these events help define the nature of the proposal. Somewhere, there is usually an RFP, and following the submission of the proposal there will usually be a response. The RFP will have begun with exigencies that may extend from an earlier proposal or from a change in political agenda, and the response to the proposal will often be the exigency for subsequent actions.

a more extended theory of genres

One might argue that professional writing is meant to accomplish something – even if it is just to entertain. Web analysts call it “conversion.” The word describes a narrative, of sorts, where a person reads a body of text and changes. One way of measuring a genre is to identify what it is supposed to accomplish and measure the extent to which it accomplishes that “conversion.” With traditional genres (e.g., grant proposals), determining what it is, what it is

supposed to do, and whether it is successful is not difficult. With many of the new, interactive, genres, identifying it, recognizing what it is supposed to do, and whether it does that thing can be more difficult. With the newer information systems it can approach impossible, although it becomes all the more important.

a genre-based rubric

Extending theories the genre theorists have proposed, I suggest a rubric for identifying and describing the genres of Web-based texts and a vocabulary that enhances their discussion. I suggest that if you can accurately describe the genre's various characteristics, you can effectively evaluate and parse the text, but you also have the language for discussing your results. There is no need to apply some kind of name to the text (e.g., mystery, grand proposal, sales brochure), a good description is enough. The key is to begin by recognizing the characteristics of the genres you are evaluating. Although there are many, I suggest the most important ones follow.

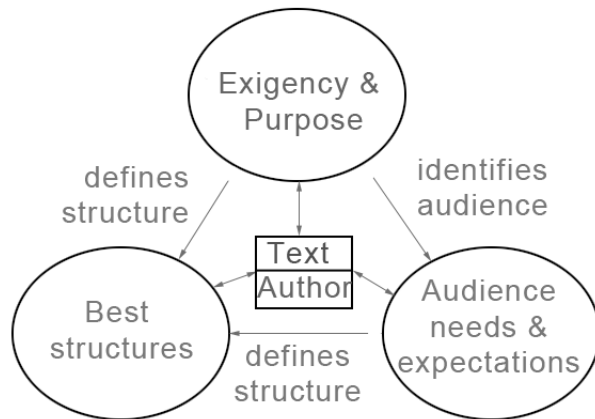
- Exigency or need for a text
- Purpose of the text
- Audience needs and expectations
- Conceptual structure of the text
- Physical structure of the text, including its medium
- Expectations and demands on the author

If you can describe these six characteristics, you can effectively describe the genre, identify what it is supposed to accomplish, and determine whether the genre accomplishes that.

combining the components into a schema

It is possible to demonstrate how everything comes together with a pair of charts.

When originating new content authors often go through a largely subconscious process.*



- 1 E & P identifies audience
- 2 Audience defines structure
- 3 E& P also define structure
- 4 E & P, audience, and structures place demands on the author.
- 5 Author places demands on audience.

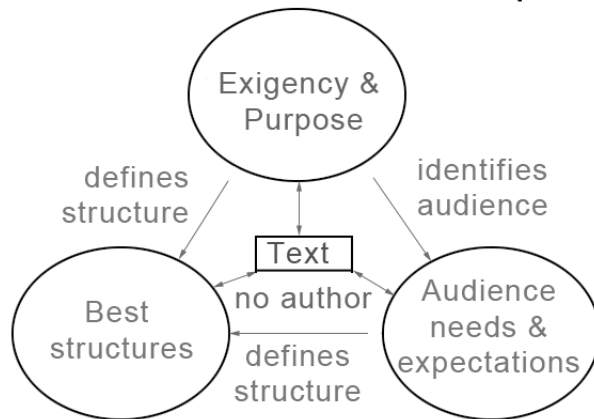
* This describes a first cycle. After the first cycle, the process becomes iterative.

Exigency, purpose, and stakeholder go a long way toward identifying the audience. Once the evaluator understands the purpose and audience, appropriate structures present themselves.

Purpose, audience, and structure each place a variety of different demands on the author. Once the text is complete, the author steps out (even if just temporarily), and the art becomes an artifact. In a sense the artifact becomes the surrogate for the author.

To evaluate the text once it has been done and the author is gone, many of the steps used by the author are replicated. Identify the exigencies and purposes of the text. That identifies the audience. Actually, this may be all you have to do. In the case of the Careers page example I use above, the instant you know the purpose of the page and the audience, it becomes clear that the page was never designed for that audience. You immediately know the page is problematic. For more complicated evaluation, you must drill deeper into exigencies, purposes, audience needs and expectations and best structures – including rhetorical stance -- to know why a page works or does not work.

When the author is gone, Miller's cultural artifact remains. For evaluating its content the enclosed process works well.*



- 1 Author is gone.
- 2 Evaluator identifies E & P
- 3 E & P leads to audience.
- 4 E & P and audience define structure
- 5 E & P, audience, and structures place demands on the text.
- 7 Does the Text meet the demands?

* This is not typically iterative and with a little practice can be done in moments.

exigency and purpose

Exigency and purpose might seem similar but are quite different. Arguably, exigency is the force that precipitates the act, while purpose is the intended result of the act. Understanding both is necessary for understanding the genre of the text. The exigency and purpose will be defined by stakeholders and may be intuitively understood with initial writing, but are often not understood by later evaluators. Writers who are tasked with evaluating copy begin with knowing the exigency and purpose of a page before they can even guess at the audience.

With the rebuild of a marketing page on a website, the exigency might be the company's decline in sales, while the purpose of the text might variously be to unload old stock or hype a new product or develop a mailing list. Of course, since this is about communication, "hype a new product" is incomplete. The purpose of a communication always leads to a description of the audience – "hype a new product to," "unload our old stock to," "create a mailing list of" Arguably, knowing the exigencies of a text always leads to an understanding of its purpose, and the purpose leads to a description of audiences.

knowing the exigency and purpose of a text is critical for describing its genre

Clearly, recognizing the audiences of a document is important, but it is relatively simple to demonstrate that exigency and purpose are even more critical for describing the genre of a text. There is a very interesting spoof of Photoshop tutorials called You Suck at Photoshop. It presents itself as a series of 20 tutorial videos, but after a very few moments of watching the first segment, the viewer realizes it is actually a story about a neurotic (possibly psychotic) Photoshop guru who is losing his wife, hates his job and boss, and is in an advanced state of emotional devolution. In the initial episode he begins with:

. . . maybe you have a photo of a Vanagin that your wife and her friend from high school spend Friday nights in. . . . Oh, hey look, I've got that one myself, right here, so let's go ahead and open that right up. That's what we'll start with.

In a total of twenty episodes, he show his viewers a variety of bleak events from his personal life: how to prepare an image of a wedding bands for posting on E-Bay, how to remove a hypothetical someone (him) from a security video taken outside a store where thousands of thumb drives have been stolen, how to regain a girlfriend he has bashed in a previous episode, and much more. All in all, it is an exceptionally creative piece that splits the difference between audio book with its narrative stripped away and a satire of a typical Photoshop tutorial.

Within only a few months, these tutorials developed a significant following that speculated for more than a year on who was producing them (8.5 million people, according to National Public Radio). The consensus was that this was a new and creative approach to telling a story. The episodes seemed to represent a completely new genre of fictional, first person stories hidden in apparently traditional tutorials. In the end, completely different exigency and

purpose were revealed in an NPR interview. The introduction to the interview spells it out: “Troy Hitch talks with Scott Simon about You Suck at Photoshop, a hit series of Web videos created to explore viral marketing concepts. Hitch is the creative director for the agency Big Fat Institute” (NPR, 2009). The text’s relationship with the audience completely changes once it becomes clear this is marketing research. It is still very creative, and it is still some kind of hybrid that is in many respects like an audio book and in other respects a tutorial, but it is also the staging platform for a study in viral advertising – and 8.5 million people had the genre and audience wrong – they were not the audience; they were the subjects of an experiment. Its principal audience is the advertising community, and its purpose is to examine new marketing techniques. Without knowing the exigency and purpose, we can never know about the additional, complicated layers of complexity in this document nor can we know the totality of its audiences. In effect we can never be confident of any evaluation we do without knowing why the document was produced.

In a different case, PowellsBooks.com advertises a two volume set for \$350,000. When I suggested their marketing effort for the book could be improved, the rare book manager replied with,

Because this geographical area was so important to the Lewis & Clark adventure, the 1814 in original boards makes sense for us to have as a showpiece or attraction. . . . Not that we would turn down a reasonable offer, but it is the only part of our rare book inventory that we did not mark down 30% this spring.” (Berg, 2009)

In other words, the purpose of the page is not to sell the book but to enhance the ethos of the company. Without that information, an evaluator (me) would automatically be looking at the document as a sales (as opposed to marketing) tool.

audience need and expectation naturally follows from purpose

I have already mentioned that many professionals in Web Analytics call the process of persuading someone to do something “conversion” (e.g., Tim Ash in Landing Page Optimization). Most if not all Web pages have the need to persuade its audience to do something. This is why an understanding of rhetoric is fundamental to analyzing writing for the Web. Teachers of writing universally recognize that if writers hope to persuade anybody to do anything they must know whom they are trying to persuade, along with their needs and expectations. At the very least, audiences will have expectations as concerns style, information, and rhetoric, and they will have needs they often do not recognize.

Depending on the genre, the audience might expect more or less technical jargon (computer tutorial) or poetic language (romance literature) or glib prose (dummies and idiots guides) or dense scholarship (PMLA) or accuracy in mechanics (resume); they might also expect unique and creative punctuation (creative nonfiction, poetry), truth (scientific journal) or dishonesty (first-person novel with unreliable narrator).

rhetorical expectations

Expectations of structure and style in a text are simply identified and as simply understood; rhetorical expectations are more subtle and more complicated. For example, the visitor who comes to our careers page (the above example) is not hoping to be talked out of becoming a technical communicator. That they are visiting the page implies they are encouraging us to persuade them to join us. Many of the visitors of an automotive manufacturer’s website will be mining information about a particular car, looking for reasons to

buy the car. Yet, surprisingly, even though the purpose of the page may be obviously rhetorical, many automotive websites fail to offer rhetorical arguments that people might use to create a story they could use to persuade themselves. On the Honda website, for example, three lines introduce the new Civic Coupe:

- New Honeycomb Front Grille
- Clear Turn Signal Lenses
- Two new Color Choices” (Honda, 2009).

New honeycomb front grille? Clear turn signal lenses? As I try to imagine myself driving the new honeycomb front grill with its clear turn signal lenses, I am left in an emotional vacuum. There is no story, no persuasion, no reason to buy the car. If I am considering a Civic, my rhetorical expectations are altogether unmet. Expectations of style and structure are easily identified. Rhetorical expectations are more subtle.

even more subtle -- rhetorical need

Rhetorical need is often different from rhetorical expectation. For example, students often arrive at classes with misconceptions that drive their expectations. They expect their learning to be an extension of misconceptions they may already hold, and they can be petulant when they discover the teacher is going to teach them something contradictory. But they often need to be disabused of what they already “know” because it is so often based on ill-formed opinions. In 2007 I produced a series of simulations specifically designed to do exactly that. Students entering engineering or physics programs have many completely inaccurate opinions about how the physical universe works. These simulations give the students an opportunity to test their opinions against reality. Many of my graduate students bring misconceptions they learn in the workplace to class. They become agitated when they discover that I am teaching

information that goes against their long-held opinions. In a rhetorical situation, meeting audience needs sometimes means knowing things about them they do not know about themselves and giving them things they do not expect.

complexity of audience analysis

There are numerous descriptions of how to evaluate the audience. In a cursory review of a dozen tech comm. textbooks, I find that all discuss audience analysis to some degree. Most devote whole chapters to it. Yet, I find surprisingly few professional writers who can effectively describe an audience for a page. Whenever I ask my graduate students about the audience for the two sentence example I use on page two, they invariably respond with, “students.” When I explain that “Students” includes pretty much every literate person at some time or the other, and I ask for a more specific answer, they will universally reply with something like, “technical writing students.” Actually, this offers no more information. There may be fewer TC students, but the statement still says nothing to describe who they are. The people we attract to our program include creative writers interested in supporting their creativity by writing professionally, artists who write well and are interested in Web design, engineering students with no aptitude for math, science majors looking for a major that will permit them a career without having to get a master’s degree, computer wizards who love both technology and writing, and a few who have no idea what they really want to do when they graduate but know they want a job.

Naming the audience, however, is not the same thing as understanding it. What are our creative writing students’ interests? Can ex-engineering majors write well enough to thrive in a writing program? Do the design students really need to write all that well? This is where an audience analysis of some kind can be useful. In our case, we look at our existing student body

(made up of members of the above list) and identify their positive and negative characteristics. In effect, in this case we analyze our audiences by analyzing our customers.

Each of the people on this list will have a different set of expectations. Some are looking for opportunities to be creative while others are uninterested in being creative – they just want to study technology and write about it. A single document designed to attract these different interests would take each of them (as opposed to all of them) into account. A list of possible careers would include jobs each of them could see themselves happily doing. A well understood purpose might sound something like, “I need to create a recruiting page designed to attract (the entire above list) into our technical communications program.” The improved page, however, is not designed to recruit all of the audiences, it is designed to create each of the audiences.

It is critical to be able to describe each audience in great detail. If writers cannot do that, they have no hope of describing audience needs and expectations. How, then, could they possibly know if the hopes and expectations are met? Unfortunately, I was never able to develop a process that made it easy to teach students to more comprehensively consider their audiences.

Redish’s solution

More recently, however, I have modeled my instruction on Janice Redish’s excellent heuristic for identifying and defining an audience. In Letting Go Redish describes an excellent approach. She suggests a list of seven steps for identifying and understanding your audiences (12):

1. List your major audiences.
2. Gather Information about your audiences.
3. Gather your audiences’ questions, tasks, and stories.
4. Use your information to create personas.

5. Include the persona's goals and tasks.
6. Use your information to write scenarios for your site.

I think this list is one of the most important contributions in her book, although number 3 on the list (“Gather your audiences’ questions, tasks, and stories”) lends itself to more to usability of the text than its rhetoric. For my purposes, I have changed number three on the list to “Identify your audiences’ needs, expectations, and stories.” My change is within the spirit of her suggestions, but I think it recasts her ideas in a more rhetorical direction. It seems to me that “questions” and “tasks” addresses what the audience wants to do more than what they need or expect rhetorically. Within the context of her discussion of audience analysis, the simpleminded answer, “student,” is not such a bad place to begin. After listing the major audiences and gathering information about the major audiences, an understanding of the complexity of those audiences becomes readily apparent. The rest of the steps naturally follow the second step because the second step (carefully followed) provides an understanding of the audiences and their complexities. I have integrated Redish’s six steps into my instruction, and it works perfectly – at least for me and my students.

conceptual structure of the text

“Conceptual structure,” as I use it, is that structure commonly identified as “the genre.” It is the structure that makes mysteries “mysteries,” science fiction “science fiction,” and proposals “proposals.” The plot of a novel represents a typical conceptual structure. A traditional mystery can be depicted using Freytag’s elements of drama. A pyramid rises through a series of rising actions until the story reaches a climax, followed by a denouement. With a traditional mystery, the rising action continuously points to the elements of a previous story. The point of the mystery is to discover that previous story. Some novels have very complicated

structures where the reader is carried back and forth through time. In such a structures, readers are expected to hold the various parts in their heads, putting the stories together much like puzzles. Similar conceptual structures may be found in puzzle games found in digital media, where there is a background story and the reader becomes a protagonist who writes a complete new story, and each reader creates a different story.

Technical communication contains similar structures. Earlier, I alluded to Sharon and Steven Gerson's, Technical Writing: Process and Product. I was not suggesting their description of proposals was wrong, but that it was incomplete. Proposals do contain different combinations of all the components the Gersons describe in their book plus even more. These structures, however, are based on demands made by the exigency, purpose and audience. If the purpose is to solicit funding from the NSF and audience includes NSF reviewers, and it is submitted via Internet, the structure will be different from a proposal submitted to a local funding agency where the details of the proposal and agreements might actually be worked out at the local beef-n-brew.

Online help contains a whole collection of structures that can help define different genres within the greater genre (super genre?) online help. For example, users of Word in the past received online help via HTML Help and WinHelp before that. Currently, WebHelp on the computer provides help for the simpler problems, but much help now comes directly from the company database, and that largely comes in the form of articles originally designed for tutoring and troubleshooting. With the advent of the new CS4 series of applications, much of Adobe's online help is presented as a series of very high resolution tutorial videos loaded from <http://tv.adobe.com> (whether this is a good idea remains to be seen). The structures are different, though the purposes are largely the same. One of the exigencies growing from more than a

decade ago is the need to save money by having texts perform multiple functions – originally called, “single sourcing,” the process now involves many different texts being used in a variety of different places in a variety of different documents for a variety of different purposes.

conceptual structures in Web design

In all cases, conceptual structures are nested and layered, but in the case of digital documents, the layering and nesting have become particularly chaotic and misleading. The chaos becomes particularly difficult to overcome when the mixed metaphors being used to describe the communications inhibit understanding. The conceptual structure of a website is typically “remote place” (a remote site). The metaphor is so strong that even writers who produce websites are often resistant to the suggestion that websites are documents and not places at all. Redish (2007) argues she prefers not to use “reader” as a description of the webpage’s audience because these people “‘use’ websites; they ‘use’ web content” (24). Time and again, Barnum, Nielsen, and Krug refer to the site as “the product,” and consistently describe it using a physical structural metaphors.

From the point of view of the reader, these are excellent metaphors. They represent the strength of interactive media where people can “stroll” through their documents. We do seem to visit remote places as we browse (mixing the metaphor) the Internet, and websites do resemble Nielsen’s “house with many doors.” From the point of view of the author, however, these mixed metaphors lead away from being able to evaluate the critical genres that occur on every page. The structures imputed to places (studs, floors, lighting fixtures, walls, wallboard, windows and doors) are incompatible with the structures of genres (paragraph, argument, rhetorical stance, demands on the author, introduction, persuasion), and the need to write or evaluate within the place metaphor creates a chaotic collection of contradictions that the author has to sort through.

This collection of contradictions is particularly opaque if authors have thoroughly embraced the place metaphor – they become blind to the nature of the texts that make up the structure. I argue that places do not typically have genres, and the filters we apply to evaluate places (space, atmosphere, navigation) do not apply in the same contexts to documents.

The structure of “place,” however is only a metaphor; there is really no “place” there. The structure we see on the monitor is a pop-up book, of sorts, based on a code designed to describe how the page should look – a popup book we import into our computer and open as we import all of its component parts into our computer. The component parts include photographs, text, and graphical images, in addition to video and animations.

Earlier I claimed that people do not know how to bring useful filters to digital media -- that they are functionally illiterate on the Internet. This is where I believe it happens and why. The conceptual metaphor of place overwhelms all other metaphors, and since a place is not really a genre, the entire concept of the document is skewed.

conceptual structures in complex information systems

Although the image of place we see is real enough, it is produced by an underlying set of documents that call up a collection of disparate elements from a variety of different places. As the developer well knows, the real site is a collection of directories or folders containing images, SWF files, video files, and written content (which is often extracted from matrices (e.g., ASP/SQL) or other documents (e.g., XML) or physical devices (e.g., weather stations), along with HTML, CSS, ActionScript and JavaScript pages of code describing how the files should be displayed. Actually, the developer knows there are no folders; they are simply a conceptual construct to make the way the computer works meaningful.

In the past, a webpage contained a few photographs, perhaps an animated gif, some links, and a body or two of text. Children in elementary school had little difficulty producing webpages. All of the resources could sit in a single folder and the reference could be a single file name. Now, I load a page, and a cookie tells the server who I am. Some servers configure the page specifically for me by downloading different clumps of text and other data from sources around the world. The idea of folders no longer applies. In many cases, the server extracts a single name from some remote XML document and forwards it to me. Moreover, the server might configure it for my computer, PDA, Kindle, cell phone, or I-pod.

The structure of the Web has evolved toward increasing complexity and automation, and, in the effort for more effective management of communication, it will continue to do so into the foreseeable future. In this new environment, the conceptual structure of “place” becomes the superficial structure covering an amazing and somewhat frightening image of something produced by a black widow rather than an orb spider. In the end, being able to set aside the “place” and “web” metaphors and seeing websites as a collection of related texts configured in identifiable genres makes it easier for the writer to identify purposes and audiences for on each page and evaluate them for rhetorical stance, voice, argument – quality of writing as opposed to quality of structural metaphor.

physical structure, including medium

Slide shows, whether on computer or on projector, share the same conceptual structure. In either case, they are slide shows. In studies done in the late-90s scholars demonstrated that changes in medium typically made no difference in cognition. During this time a research team I was on, was able to demonstrate statistically that changes in media make a difference in cognition if the new media forces a change in genres (Hailey and Hailey,). If changes in media

force changes in genre (it is difficult to demonstrate engineering theories with abstract expressionist paintings or hard-boiled detective novels), learning can be severely hampered. On the other hand changes in media often open up new genres and subsequent learning and literary opportunities (audio books, interactive novels on the computer, new kinds of tutorials and other independent learning modules).

One of the reasons Physicists say that communication can never go faster than lightspeed is because, as far as we know, all communication has a physical structure. We “read” texts based on patterns in their physical structures. This is where the idea of “genre” seems to overlap the idea of “medium.”

physical structure of a website

In the previous section, I introduce the idea of websites actually being a collection of folders and pushed the metaphor to include the web. In reality, the true physical structure of a website “puts the lie” to those suggestions. As computer professionals know, the content of any hard drive is scattered across the drive, and a file allocation table keeps track of where everything is. Two files in a single folder (and even different parts of a file) can be scattered across the drive. In the end, even the idea of the folder containing files is only a metaphor. The information (data really) goes through a number of translation process before it arrives to us in a readable form.

In the past, a website could exist in a few metaphorical folders on a hard drive. Now, websites often have no centers. Different parts of the sites (and even individual pages) can be located around the world. Complex information systems repeat the hard drive process of scattering information across its entire surface, except much like a fractal, the new website is spread around the world.

expectations and demands on the author

Certainly, the law and professional standards can demand the writer meet certain ethical benchmarks, and the audience will have certain expectations of some level of honesty (though not necessarily perfect truth), but the audience might also expect a level of obscurity (poetry) or dishonesty (first person mystery novel).

Depending on the genre, failing to meet the expectations of the audience can have dire consequences, and so knowing what they are is important. If an author pens a memoir and the audience expects truth, the author is cruelly treated when the audience discovers the memoir is filled with fictions. On the other hand, if the audience expects the authors to be unreliable and the text to be a spoof (*You Suck at Photoshop*), the authors receive a great deal of praise from audience and critics alike for their dishonesty. In the case of *You Suck at Photoshop* the purpose of the work was kept from the public, who all thought it was something it was not. The truth was eventually broadcast with great interest and no sense of irony or scorn by National Public Radio.

An important expectation the workplace places on the author is a demand that the author understands the profession well enough to navigate the expectations, demands, and needs of the parties involved, and produce effective documents.

applying the rubric

Exigency, purpose, audience, author, structure are to some extent hierarchical. Exigency leads to purpose, which identifies the audience and structures of choice. Together, these identify the demands on the author. The hierarchy does not always work the other way, however.

Knowledge of structure of the text says nothing important about audience, author, purpose, or exigency, and knowledge of audience says similarly little about purpose or exigency. If I say,

“My audience is sixteen-to-thirty-five-year-olds with a great sense of adventure,” I could be marketing Disneyland trips, camping gear, the US Army, or I could be putting together a STD awareness site. On the other hand, if my exigency is driven by the fact that for the past three months I have failed to meet my Army recruiting quotas, my purposes and audiences become more clear. I might build a web document with the purpose of attracting recent high-school graduates facing the problem of funding college, I might create a series of tours and presentations meant to establish a database of sixteen to thirty-five year olds with a sense of adventure, or I might produce a poster designed to be placed in the unemployment office.

Each of these purposes evolves out of the same exigencies, but they are all different and reflect different audiences. The better the authors understand the purpose, the better they will understand the audience, and the better they understand the audience, the better they will understand the demands and expectations audiences place on them. Similarly, the evaluator of Web content can never confidently evaluate a text without knowing the demands on the author, and the evaluator cannot know the demands on the author without knowing exigency, purpose, and audience (the social implications) of the text.

Evaluators can generally look at any page and identify its exigency and purpose. If not, an evaluator has access to the stakeholders and decision makers -- it is easy enough to ask, “why did you produce this page? Exigency can often be described in a single statement – “We need to boost sales of our HDTVs.” Purpose, however, is more complicated and the statement will necessarily be longer. A typical purpose I might hear will sound like, “Sell more of the HDTVs,” which is actually little more than a repeat of the exigency. Statements like that are usually not useful. A good statement of purpose will introduce the audience and describe what that document is supposed to do to that audience:

A digital flyer linked to the webpages that will sell the HDTVs at a steep discount, emailed to our old customers who have demonstrated an interest in products such as this in the past. The purpose of the digital broadside or flyer is to get this audience to visit a webpage designed for bargain hunters who may have an interest in a new television.

This begins to describe both audience and structure.

Amazon.com is a master of this, and just today, I received just such a flyer in my E-mail. In the past few years, Amazon.com has sent me these flyers designed specifically for me, trying to sell me Canon lenses, computer monitors, maternity clothing, books about computers, books about physics, books about metaphysics, etc. I suspect that few companies have a better understanding of their audience than Amazon.com. Ironically, their understanding of the audience is based on automated algorithms and computer generated databases.

more specifically . . .

If we go back to those two sentences . . .

English majors have found job opportunities in financial institutions, insurance companies, federal and state government agencies, the hospitality industry, universities, museums, and service organizations. They are employed as personnel and planning directors, administrative associates, marketing directors, technical librarians, wage and salary representatives, service correspondents, claims adjusters, and insurance agents.

. . . and ask the question, “what are the exigencies?” we get several answers but they point to an overarching need – maintain an acceptable student population in the technical writing program. The exigencies include the need to compete with other programs in the department (that, after all, is how you demonstrate the need for new faculty lines), demonstrate the value of the program to the college (who decides where a great deal of the funding goes) and to the university who in

times of crisis may programs and their relevant faculty. In this case, the exigencies say little about the audience and a great deal about the needs of the clients requesting the documents.

As a result of the exigencies, a number of different people produced a variety of documents mostly designed to grow the program. The documents were numerous and in many genres, including sections in the general catalog, posters, flyers, tables in job fairs, and a number of different webpages (of which this sample was one). The purpose of most of these documents is to attract students. So the answer “students” to describe the audiences is not wrong. But “attracting students” is the purpose. Answering the question, “Who are these students?” defines the audience. We have identified five possible audiences. But Redish proposes we gather information about our students. If we take that step seriously, we will quickly recognize there are a variety of audiences that we can identify by evaluating our student population. Through the years, we have attracted the same groups of people.

practical application— at page level

We need to know the possible audiences for a site to effectively evaluate it, but websites are made of scores of different genres. Any page will contain more than one. Perhaps a page has a drop-down menu, search engine, splashy photograph, welcome message, plus a current events blurb or calendar – these are all different genres. A different page might be something right out of a traditional catalog. The rubric I am now recommending applies to the individual genres within the page and not the whole document.

Various usability experts suggest that sites are layered and that the layers nearest the homepage tend to be structured for navigation (“landing pages”), while the layers farther from the homepage are more textual. Redish describes it as home leading to pathway pages, which lead to information pages (2007, 29). Arguably, landing pages need less in the way of text

analysis and more in the way of usability study. The page might contain little more than links and images (<http://www.CBSNEWS.com>). All landing pages have important rhetorical goals, however, and although they might seem to have little text, what text there is, nonetheless, needs analysis.

Practical Application – Content Pages

It probably goes without saying the information pages require the most comprehensive content evaluation. These are longer, more comprehensive, and often composed entirely of cut-n-paste snippets from a variety of sources. For example, on powellsbooks.com resides the page I mentioned earlier that seems to be designed to sell a \$350,000, two-volume set. Only if we know the exigency, purpose, audience, demands on the author, and structures of this page can we describe its genre. As I have already mentioned, exigency and purpose have more to do with the ethos of the company than selling the books. The text needs to seem to be selling the book while marketing the whole company.

The demands on the author are straightforward. Write in such a way as to interest (not sell) these rarified volumes. That this is a rhetorical demand requiring persuasion skills goes without saying. With this description it should be possible to evaluate the text on the page to see if the authors have met their demands.

the rhetoric of the book's description

Immediately after the book's title is a physical bibliography containing two paragraphs dedicated to describing the current damage to this book, describing foxing, smudging, and tearing page by page. The physical bibliography is followed by a couple of persuasive sentences: "Remarkable narrative of the most famous and significant American land expedition

in history. 1,417 copies were printed in 1814. Approximately 23 copies remain extant with very few in private hands.”

The sentences are followed by a short and confusing paragraph describing the publication of these books. Then there is a paragraph beginning with, “This is our national epic of exploration, conceived by Thomas Jefferson, wrought out by Lewis and Clark, and given to the world by Nicholas Biddle, which is extracted from a definitive text on rare books.” In all, there are half-a-dozen paragraphs written by different people for different purposes and even on different topics, cut and pasted into this description. In the end, the reader cannot help but leave completely confused about the books Powell’s Books seem to be trying to sell. If it were a physical object, the effort to sell the book is arguably a quilt made up of random snippets of diverse and only tentatively related fabrics. It seems to have been placed there simply because otherwise the space would have been completely empty.

Powell’s Books has a large collection of the webpages selling their rare books. In this section of their website, they have almost nothing that can be said to be persuasive. Many pages sell books of \$9,000 and up, presenting only the physical condition of the book, the foxing, smudging, torn pages, etc., and not a word about why anybody would want to buy it.

used book section

In contrast, in their used books section, Powell’s descriptions of the books are especially good. These descriptions point to their problem and lead me to the research being presented in this chapter. For their used books, they are posting the release notes and other marketing documents produced by the publishers – originally produced in print years ago. It makes sense. They do not want to spend \$20 describing a book they are selling for \$7, and the publishers, having a full understanding of the documents and their audiences all those years ago, produced

persuasive texts. Today, the exigencies and purposes have changed little – their need is still to sell the books. Even the audiences are fundamentally the same. A description of an Asimov or Hillerman book is as persuasive now as it was years ago. This is a case where the original, printed genre translates effectively into a digital environment for persuading.

Not recognizing the genres involved, Powell’s web people do not understand why the used book copy works when it does. It does not always work, however. For timely books such as manuals and technical guides, the publisher’s copy is often out of date and/or irrelevant. Even then, Powell’s Books continues to use the publishers’ comments, unedited. They seem to have no sense of why the used book copy is good (when it is good) or that the rare book copy is bad. Like my students, they appear to have no sense of the genres involved.

takeaways

The key to evaluating a text in a digital environment is to know what it is supposed to do and to whom. By identifying the component parts of an action-based genre (exigency, purpose, audience, structure, demands on the author and text) it becomes a simple matter to know what it is supposed to be doing and describe how effectively it does that.

This is particularly valuable to the professional writing community because, although so many people think they can write, it is easy enough to demonstrate only a professional writer has the skills to evaluate existing texts for quality – especially quality of rhetoric.

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