

writer / reader



A writer is someone who writes something. A reader is someone who reads something.

Are you following me?

Good. Because I wouldn't be writing this if it weren't for you.

It's possible, I guess, to imagine a piece of writing without a *human* reader. For example, you might write down a secret wish, or a prayer, and then burn it, or bury it, or toss it in a river, hoping that God or the Universe or a vodník will read it and grant your deepest desires. I've never done that, but you might! It's a cool idea.

Most writers write, though, because they imagine a human will read what they've written. Of course, that human might be only the writer themselves! When I think about it, most of the things I've written have only ever been read by me. This includes a lot of awful poetry I wrote as a teenager, and some angry diary entries from the same time, in which I explained in great detail how stupid and wrong my parents were about everything. I never intended anyone else to read that stuff (definitely not my parents, anyway). But occasionally I go back and read some of it, and when I do, I'm usually surprised and sort of creeped out—I can't believe it was really me who wrote those words. They feel so goofy and alien to me. It feels like the writer and reader are two different people, even though I know they are both me.

My "unread" writing also includes all the notes I took for school, which also were meant only for me and no one else. I doubt anyone (including myself) would be able to make much sense of those notes now. But they were written for a particular reader—not just me, but university-student-me—at a particular time. That reader existed for a short time and now he's gone forever. But those writings served their purpose well because they were written for that particular reader.

The vast majority of my unread writings are first, second, or third drafts of things—things which I intended to be read by someone else, but before I let them out into the world, they had go through lots of revisions. In some cases I've saved the earlier versions (for example, on my computer there are lots of unpublished poems and essays in various states of revision) but in most cases I've just erased the earlier drafts (including the thousands of unused sentences or

paragraphs for school essays, the hundreds of words from emails I decided not to send, the many random ideas for lessons or assignments which I later developed or just ignored...). When I consider all the writing I've done in my life, I realize only a small portion of it has actually been read by other human beings.

But none of it would have been written if I hadn't had some concept in my mind of a *reader*—someone who would (hopefully) understand what I wanted to say, but more importantly, would *respond* in some way, in some emotional and intellectual way, in some human way.

The relationship—or let's say, the conversation—between the writer and the reader is the underlying purpose of any written text. When that relationship breaks down, and the conversation stagnates, then the text loses its purpose. My job, as a writing teacher, is to show you various ways of starting, or joining, this written conversation and then keeping it going, because it's this conversation that gives meaning and life to written language.

Here are two things I believe about the relationship between writer and reader:

1. The *reader* is primary. The writer exists only because there is someone to read what they've written.
2. The responsibility for successful communication falls mainly on the *writer*. In general, the writer should assume that if their intended reader has not understood something, if they have not felt or thought something the writer wanted them to feel, it's the *writer* who needs to do more. They should revisit and revise their work, taking the reader's opinion into account.
3. As a writer gets more and more experienced, they will start to *internalize* a reader—they will learn to imagine what that reader needs, and they will learn to write and revise with an imaginary reader in their head. In other words, the roles of writer and reader will start to alternate and/or merge together in one person.

One of the methods which is essential for learning this internalizing skill is *textual analysis*. This term can mean different things in different contexts, but in the context of this course, it means "reading as a writer." It's a way of reading a text (either a text you wrote, or a text someone else wrote), and (re)imagining yourself as the writer (and therefore the editor) of that text.

I've tried to simplify the process into 5 actions, with a key word for each action. What follows is just an outline; we'll spend more time in class unpacking and practicing each part.

Textual Analysis ("Reading as a Writer"): 5 Actions

1. **Describe** the effect a piece of writing has on you. What does it make you feel or think?
2. **Identify** a specific place or places in the text that are helping to create this effect. What *formal* aspects of the text are guiding you towards these thoughts or feelings?
3. **Reconstruct** the author's choice: Why did they write it this way? What were they trying to do?

4. **Reimagine:** What could the author have done differently? If they had written it differently, how would the effect change?
5. **Evaluate:** Is the effect supporting the larger purpose of the text, or working against it? Should the author do (or have done) something different? What effects would be gained or lost if they did it differently? Is it “worth” it to make a change?

One key concept which might be hard to “get” at first is the concept of seeing any given text as the result of *choices* which the writer has made. This concept logically leads to the understanding that the writer could have made *different* choices, resulting in a *different* kind of text. Textual analysis then asks, “Why did the writer do it this way, and not some other way?” And this is a great question, because it can lead you toward better questions, and toward the deeper purposes and implications of a text—which is what good thinkers are always thinking about.

It takes a lot of practice to do textual analysis well, because it requires some imaginative leaps. First, you have to remember that you are both a reader and a writer at the same time, and you have to mentally switch back and forth between those roles. Second, you have to visualize a text not as a final, static, unchangeable block, but as an imperfect, in-progress, dynamic field, with many parts which can be manipulated and moved around. Finally, you have to turn off that voice that says, “This is someone else’s work, and they are smarter than me; I can’t comment on or criticize or change what they’ve done.” Sure you can! If you do it thoughtfully, respectfully, honestly, and directly.

Textual analysis is one of the things that makes a writing class like this one very different from a standard university subject course. In that kind of course you probably will just be reading (or skimming, or scanning) texts for information—which is a different skill, of course. But practicing textual analysis can help you get better at other reading skills too.

Okay, are you still there, reader?

I’ll just leave you with one final thought which has been helpful for my students in the past. When students are writing a piece, I often ask them to tell me who their intended reader is. I might ask, “Who do you imagine reading this piece? Who will want to read it?” This question about the intended (or ideal) reader is a thought experiment; it’s meant to help you think about what the purpose of your writing is. Students often answer this question unhelpfully, by saying, “I want to write this piece for everyone!” or “I hope it will appeal to anyone who is interested in this topic.” But here’s the irony—the more general, average, and normal you imagine your reader to be, the more likely you are to write something general, average, and normal—which will probably end up appealing to no one! Whereas if you imagine a more specific reader, it’s more likely that you will include unique and specific details which will appeal to many more unique, specific humans.

For example, one of my students last year did an essay project for which she walked around Brno, took photos, and commented on the photos. She wanted the essay to be a kind of

personal tour of Brno. But the first draft of the essay felt very impersonal—more like the text of a brochure you could find in the Brno tourist office. But then, when I asked her who her ideal reader was, she said, “Well, maybe my daughter; I’d like to show her my favorite places in Brno.” So I said, “How about writing the essay directly TO your daughter, like a letter almost?” When I read the second draft of the essay, it almost brought me to tears, it was so moving. Even though it was addressed directly to her daughter, someone I didn’t know and knew nothing about, I felt as if she was speaking to ME. By imagining a more specific human reader, she had turned herself into a more human writer, a writer with a voice which spoke to many other humans. This is what good writers do, and this is what I want YOU to do, too.