Revision: Turning writer-based prose into reader-based prose

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"If you are working on a difficult paper, it is often easier to discover what you know first and worry about designing it for a reader later" (Flower, 1989). In other words, the goal during the drafting stage is to get your thoughts and ideas down on paper and roughly organized. Afterward – during the revision process – is when you transform your writing so that it works both for you *and* your readers.

The following strategies for achieving this transformation are taken from Flower, 1989.

Setting up a shared goal. *Your* goal is for readers to read what you've written, but to achieve this you must also consider *their* goals and needs and try to meet them. To begin tapping into their needs, think about the needs you have when you read a scientific paper. For example, most readers need to grasp the problem that's being addressed by a research project (i.e., a clear problem statement) in order to get interested in the research itself.

<u>What are some of your needs and goals as a reader</u>?

Recognizing writer-based prose. It's natural for us, especially when we're still not completely sure what we want to say, to write exclusively from our own point of view. In fact, unless writers have been explicitly trained to consider the audience, they will likely churn out prose with the following characteristics, according to Flower:

1. An egocentric focus on the writer. In this type of writing, the audience's needs are not considered; instead the writer pretty much writes for herself.

2. A narrative structure focused on the writer's own discovery process. That is, pieces of information are presented in terms of when they were discovered, not in terms of their significance or logical connections.

3. A survey structure organized, like a textbook, around the writer's information. In other words, the writer simply dumps out all s/he knows on a topic rather than adapting and organizing that knowledge to suit the reader's needs.

<u>What examples can you think of from the scientific literature that signal writer-based prose</u>?

Creating reader-based prose. The following points are also modified or taken directly from Flower.

1. Organize your paper around a main message you want to leave with readers or a problem you share with them, instead of around your own discovery process or the topic. Have a point, in other words, that readers can relate to.

2. With that message at the top, organize the ideas that support it in a hierarchy. Begin with your major points and then follow with minor ones, making sure the relationship between them is explicit.

3. If you want readers to draw certain conclusions from your work, state those conclusions directly. Don't make your audience guess what your results mean.

4. Once you've developed and organized your ideas in a hierarchy focused on both yours and the reader's needs, use *cues* to guide the reader and make that organization clear. These include:

   - Cues that preview your main points, such as your title, your abstract, headings and subheadings, the problem/question posed in your introduction, the topic sentences of paragraphs.

   - Cues that summarize your points, including summary sentences at the end of paragraphs, a conclusions section.

   - Visual cues such as graphs and tables, different typefaces (bold or italics), numbering.

   - Connecting words (thus, however, then, for example), pronouns (*these* or *our* models), repetitions of key words and phrases.

--Adapted from Flower, Linda. 1989. "Writing Reader-Based Prose" in *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*, 3rd ed., pp. 187-212.