Viewpoints: Cultures, Text Models, and the Activity of Writing

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Abstract. This essay explores three issues related to the activity of writing: the role of knowledge as underlying any writing activity and an exploration of the kinds of knowledge that might be requisite for the writer; the interrelationship of the acts constituting any writing activity and the determination of when the activity of writing a particular text is completed; and the idea of text and textuality as these might affect the activity of writing. Each of these is viewed in the light of current thinking in cultural psychology, anthropology, and literary and linguistic theory. Each of these issues is seen as being in part culturally determined, whether the culture be the larger culture of a language or social group or the smaller culture of a profession or of an academic discipline. Finally each is viewed as it might suggest areas for future research.

The genesis of this paper lies in a request to prepare a review of what is generally known about the activity of writing but to cast that review in the light of disciplines that have not frequently been cited in research on writing. The request stems from a concern that much that has been recently generalized from experimental and other psychologically based studies of people writing as well as from observational studies in classrooms in the United States and other English-speaking countries may not have the broad applicability that is claimed. This has seemed particularly apparent to us as we have worked with writers and writing instructors in other countries and in other languages. As Goody (1977, p. 85) says, “the context of written communication will be affected by the models followed, the materials used . . . , and the wider social situation.” We want, therefore, to review what is currently thought about writing from a broadly cross-cultural perspective and to examine many of the assumptions and conclusions of previous research.

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We would like to begin by proposing that writing be thought of as an activity rather than as a process, because we believe that the currently fashionable term *process* brings with it some unfortunate connotations. When Emig (1971) first discussed the ways by which students wrote, she used the term “composing processes,” implying that there might be several sorts of processes. Her caution has been abandoned by subsequent scholars, who use the singular, *process*, and suggest that there is but one process operating in all writers in all sorts of context. Further, *process* bears the denotation that it is purely linear and highly predictable, almost mechanical. Yet Emig and many other have suggested quite the opposite.

We prefer the term *activity* to describe what people do when they engage in writing to produce a text. The term, as Leontev (1973) and Galperin (1976/1979) have explained, implics something which has an independent goal of which the subject is consciously aware. A subject is always the subject of activity, which, in turn, is directed towards a goal (Takala, 1984). An activity consists of a number of *acts*, which in turn consist of *operations*, about which the subject is not necessarily conscious. The acts comprising an activity may not necessarily occur in a fixed order or sequence, although operations often occur as sequences. In addition, what at one point in an individual’s life may have constituted an activity (e.g., forming letters) will later become so well practiced and so habitual that it is “chunked” as an act or even an operation. To think of writing as an activity is to allow for change in what is an act or an operation and to allow for modification and rearrangement of those acts and operations in particular contexts. To think of writing as an activity is also to realize that in virtually every instance there is a purposive nature to the act, a planned result, which is a particular text for a particular occasion in a particular cultural context. With such a framework one cannot divorce the process from the product as has so frequently been done in recent research and discussion about writing.

Previous research in writing has suggested a set of categories for describing the discrete acts involved in the activity of writing; terms such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing are the most common ones used. These four acts are often described as occurring in a sequence, and research indicates that usually they are recursive and intermingled in any manifestation of the activity. A dynamic notion of text production can be better realized using the notion of activity, for such a notion suggests the intermingling, interaction, and even partial suppression of each of the four acts. This variability has been observed with regard to oral performance and oral activity in the past (Lord, 1964). It would seem that each of the four acts is “chunked” in part or in whole, so that some are performed unconsciously almost as operations until the writer pays conscious attention to a particular act. As each of these acts is broken down into its operations, the same notion may be applied: the operations are chunked until or unless the writer...
chooses to move them to a location of more immediate awareness at which point they become acts or even activities. An experienced writer may stop at a particular point and carefully spell out a word, whereas in a moment or two the same writer may write several lines without being at all conscious of spelling; the writer has turned an operation into an act for a brief moment.

We would like to explore the nature of the activity with its various acts and operations and the relation of that activity to the resultant text. We further seek to explore the various cultural influences on both activity and text and to accomplish these aims by following various paths laid down by literary critics and theoreticians, by rhetoricians, by anthropologists, and by cultural psychologist. in order to suggest a number of areas for further research, particularly as that research might affect the learning and teaching of writing. One premise of this article is that the activity of writing is affected by the varying vocational and situational contexts that a writer inhabits (for which we will use the broad term culture).

In general the article seeks to raise three issues concerning the activity of writing and its relation to texts and cultures: the first deals with the role of knowledge and how it affects the activity of writing; the second deals with the varying nature of the activity itself and how that activity is shaped by context, and particularly with the question as to when the individual writer knows or senses that the activity is over and when a text is completed, and thus by what criteria a text is determined; the third deals with the broader and overriding issue of what is the perceived nature of the written work in a given culture. This last issue might be rephrased as the issue of textuality. Once something is “in writing” is the message fixed and how is it to be regarded by the writer or by others viewing what has been written? Is the written text immutable or is it subject to change? Clearly how a text is viewed affects the activity of writing just as the activity affects the view of the text. This article is intended to elucidate the various complexities of the activity of writing in a culture and the complexities of the texts that may emerge as cultural artifacts.

Knowledge as the Basis for the Activity of Writing

The interplay of acts and operations constitutes any writing activity. There appears to be a frequent shifting among the acts of planning, drafting, revising, and editing and their subservient operations. This shift may at times be seen as a shift of scale in the writing activity from individual phoneme and grapheme to syntax to general form and organization. At times it may be seen as a shift from the formal and procedural aspects of the activity (such as how to punctuate a sentence of whether to check a
spelling) to the information that is to be conveyed in the writing and back again.

It would indeed be difficult to separate any of the acts into discrete sequential categories so as to analyze them independently of each other; therefore it is better to consider them as a matrix of acts and operations embedded within a larger activity, a matrix which consists of chunked and unchunked parts that shift and change during any single manifestation of the activity as well as between activities. To give an example, when an individual writes a letter, the individual may not be thinking of the fact that he or she must plan and draft what is to be written. These may be, in that particular instance, two intertwined acts. During the course of drafting the letter, the writer may form words and sentences using a typewriter and yet not be aware of following particular rules of spelling or of looking to see which keys to strike at which point. Yet at some earlier point in the history of that individual, each of these operations may have been an activity in and of itself, one that was distinctively studied and learned. If the writer comes to a word the spelling of which is at that moment unsure, the writer will focus on the individual letters of the word, thereby making an act of what in other cases for that writer is an operation. The writer may even sound out the word and bring into play information concerning sound-spelling relations that had been in other circumstances “unconscious” or operational. “Chunking” has been studied by psychologists such as Miller (1956), Bereiter and Scardamalia (1981), and Scardamalia and Paris (1984), all of whom have suggested that what is chunked includes both declarative or substantive knowledge and procedural knowledge, that is knowledge of operations and acts. The relation of acts and operations as the parts of a matrix may vary in different cultures because each culture presents a particular set of demands on the writing activity and the resultant text and may affect the form and function of the texts as well as the attitudes of writers and readers towards that text. Indeed the matrix of interrelationships may be as difficult to define as is culture itself.

In writing, then, it appears that individuals chunk not only operations but certain aspects of the content and form of a written message. This latter kind of chunking depends upon the acquisition and retention of knowledge, particularly knowledge of components of a text or formulaic knowledge. Thus it is that a writer of a business letter will include certain phrases and even whole sentences and paragraphs as pro forma segments of discourse and therefore use those segments whenever the occasion arises. In most cases a proficient writer of a business letter will be barely conscious of, for example, the salutation and close of the letter, or even of the letter's layout. Such knowledge of forms extends beyond these examples to include knowledge of whole structures of discourse such as story forms, paragraph types, organizational strategies, and types of language that are used in particular kinds
of discourse. These become so embedded in the writer’s mind that they are
brought forward without any conscious planning. They are what we shall
henceforth refer to as models, a term which we use in the plural to suggest
that they are diverse both as to the nature of what might constitute a model
and as to the range of models that is available to the highly literate writer.

This fact that a writer brings various models into play as well as chunked
operations (such as checking orthography while writing a draft) would seem
to suggest that writing, like reading, is less what has frequently been thought
of as a skill than it is an activity dependent on the prior acquisition of
knowledge (Anderson, Spiro, & Montague, 1977). That knowledge would
appear to be of several sorts: knowledge of the material to be written about;
knowledge of the language including its semantic, phonological-graphological,
and lexico-grammatical natures; knowledge of text and text structures
and their concomitant styles (e.g., one knows what a business letter or a
bedtime story “looks like” or “sounds like” and what each contains or omits,
what registers are appropriate, and what kinds of phrases or sentences are
likely to appear); and knowledge of the sociocultural norms for various
activities of writing (e.g., on what occasions it is appropriate or obligatory
that one should write and how one should respond in writing to a particular
invitation to write—whether one actually so responds is less important than
that one knows what is called for).

These kinds of knowledge are based on experience with the world, with
language, and with the norms of culture: on the basis of these three kinds
of knowledge, an individual in a particular culture engages in the activity
of writing. The mature writer then, has acquired complex sets of knowledge
and has chunked many of them so that either in terms of the operations of
writing or in terms of the models concerning what is to be written, much
becomes automatic or habitual. For any writer at any level of proficiency,
however, there are moments when certain operations or certain models come
to the awareness of the writer, and what had been an operation or an
accepted model comes into question (see Polanyi, 1958). Why these questions
and shifts of attention should occur is a matter of some interest to research.

The three basic forms of knowledge requisite for the writer in any cul-
ture, or, to put it another way, the three major sets of constraints imposed
by a culture upon a writer, include:

1) Semantic knowledge which involves knowledge of words and larger
units of discourse and what they mean, so that such knowledge continues
growing throughout the life of the individual.

2) Knowledge of models such as text models and other culturally appro-
priate formulaic uses of language. Such knowledge concerning writing sto-
ries would include, for example, knowledge of the general shape of a story
or a narrative, that it has a particular sort of a beginning, middle, and end
which form a frame that can be filled with various kinds of information,
plots, characters, and settings. We would include knowledge of syntactic structures, and, for the writer, knowledge of the relation of phonemes to graphemes and other orthographic knowledge. In addition, there is knowledge of what sorts of linguistic devices belong in a particular kind of text, such as what forms of direct and indirect discourse belong as well as what sorts of metaphors and similes and what registers might be appropriate.

3) Knowledge of social and cultural rules governing both when it is appropriate to write and when it is obligatory to write as well as knowledge of the appropriate procedures to use in the activity of writing. This knowledge, which some call pragmatics, includes knowledge of appropriate aims and of what is appropriate to include in certain kinds of writing. In some cultures it is inappropriate to include personal matters in a business letter to a stranger; in other cultures it would be inappropriate not to include such matters. This realm of knowledge also includes knowledge of socially appropriate language in certain kinds of writing. One might include some aspects of pragmatics in the second type of knowledge, knowledge of structures, but we should, perhaps, reserve that second type solely for structural and formal information. The realm also includes knowledge of socially appropriate procedures such as checking spelling, sitting up straight when writing, or conferring with an editor or with a dictionary.

These three kinds of knowledge lie at the heart of any activity of writing. A person cannot write without bringing such knowledge to bear, and even a young child brings rudimentary forms of these kinds of knowledge into play with the first attempts at writing (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984). These three kinds of knowledge dominate the acts of planning, drafting, revising, and editing, as well as every operation therein. As a result of these kinds of knowledge, the activity of writing then becomes a conscious and purposeful activity to bring a text into being.

Research Issues Related to Knowledge

What we have posited concerning the role of knowledge in writing suggest to us a number of issues that might form an agenda for research and that may influence curriculum and instruction in various cultures particularly when the curriculum is addressed to students from different cultures.

1. First one needs to broaden the scope of research to include the vast body of knowledge that a writer uses when successfully completing the activity of writing. In general, research in writing has focused on a limited scope of linguistic knowledge, particularly on lexical, orthographic, and syntactic knowledge. We would suggest, however, that knowledge of forms and structures and knowledge of pragmatics are of at least equal importance as
knowledge of smaller units of discourse. We know a bit less about these forms and structures and pragmatics than we do about words and sentences, perhaps, yet our knowledge is not inconsiderable, building as it does upon a long history of literacy, folkloric, and rhetorical studies. We are now beginning to be aware of the extent to which these forms and structures are culturally determined; they are not in the structure of the language, but they are in the rhetorical and literary history of a culture. A story takes a particular form throughout the history of a culture: it may have its way of beginning, its way of developing, and its way of reaching a conclusion. To another culture, such a structure may seem alien, even though that culture speaks the same language as the first culture (as may be seen in the difficulty Americans have with texts by authors like Naipaul or Achebe, which seem alien and unlike British or American novels—see Kachru, 1982). Such is the assumption of the emerging field of contrastive rhetoric, a line of inquiry that we believe should be pursued. One needs to use the techniques of contrastive rhetoric to study the emerging writing of children as well, so as to seek to determine what influences have affected their sense of structure for different rhetorical forms. The fundamental research question here is, “What knowledge have they acquired and where have they acquired it?”

In particular, we see a need to investigate how people acquire knowledge of the forms of discourse appropriate to the various fields of endeavor they enter (such as law, business, or an academic field). Many of these forms appear to have the nature of conventional beliefs. We know for example, that some punctuation rules, such as the placement of the comma in relation to the quotation mark, are simply conventions established by printers. So too are many of the text formats such as the paragraph, which appears to vary in length and placement of the central idea according to the culture of the writer. Young children in the United States, for example, generally believe that to be a poem a text must have rhyme, and children in England and the United States also acquire clear notions of the structure of a story (Applebee, 1978). These notions they acquire before there is formal schooling, and it would seem that they acquire them through hearing and perhaps reading poems and stories. It would seem plausible that other models are learned informally; it would also seem plausible that some of the informally learned models come into conflict with those presented in formal education.

Through their education people appear to learn that certain kinds of text structures are appropriate in the sciences, for example, but not in history. Yet we suspect that many people do not acquire an adequate knowledge of these structures and often use the wrong one in a given subculture. The expert scientist knows not only science but how to render scientific knowledge in a form appropriate to the scientific community. Yet at what point the novice scientist should begin to acquire knowledge of those structures...
or be taught them explicitly remains a matter of dispute among those who are concerned with "writing across [or in] the curriculum."

2. A further issue concerning knowledge concerns the ways by which an individual acquires the appropriate pragmatic knowledge with respect to writing. Again, such knowledge would seem to be culturally determined. An individual in a particular culture knows when it is appropriate to take notes or to write a letter but how that knowledge is imparted or acquired remains obscure. At some point during school in certain subjects, for example, a student learns that it is appropriate and perhaps mandatory that reading and lecture notes be taken; in other subjects this activity is less important and perhaps not even desirable. In social situations, a person learns that it is appropriate to respond to certain events with a written note—after having received a present or upon the death of a relative or a friend, for example. At the same time, the recipient of that note knows that it is not necessary to respond.

Another issue concerning pragmatics is how or at what point an individual acquires the knowledge that certain forms or uses of language is important for the individual if he or she is seeking acceptability within a given community, whether it be a large social group or a small community of a particular business or profession.

3. Turning from ways of knowing to the items that are known, one may raise a number of additional issues particularly with respect to 1) what segments of discourse and what aspects of discourse are formulaic for writers in different cultures, communities, or vocations; 2) what model or models of text exist for a given writer in a given culture; and 3) whether such models include various aspects of the text such as lexis, orthography, syntax, structure, use of embellishment, format, and selection of content? A partial answer to this question has emerged from recent work that has been done on the IEA Study of Written Composition, which has examined compositions written by secondary school students from a number of countries (Takala, Purves, & Buckmaster, 1982; Purves, in press). The compositions tended to differ systematically by culture of origin along a number of continua, some of which matched those of earlier researchers, particularly Carroll (1960), Glenn and Glenn (1981), and Kaplan (1966). The continua that emerged were the following:

**Personal-Impersonal:** This continuum depends primarily on the frequency of references in the text to the writer’s thoughts and feelings about the subject.

**Ornamented-Plain:** This continuum may also be defined as “figurative-literal” and depends on the frequency of use of metaphor, imagery, and other figures of speech.
Abstract-Concrete: This continuum is defined in terms of the amount of specific information and detailed references in the text as well as to the general level of abstraction.

Single-Multiple: This continuum refers to whether the text focusses on one selected aspect of the subject or tries to cover a large number of aspects of the subject.

Propositional-Appositional: This continuum, which is similar to Glenn and Glenn's abstractive-associative, refers to the types of connectives that hold the text together and whether there appears to be a clear order that follows one of a number of standard development types (e.g., comparison-contrast): such a composition would be propositional. An appositional composition would use few connectives besides "and" or "but" and often omits cohesive ties other than repetition, substitution, or collocation. As opposed to the propositionally structured text, the appositionally structured text admits little opportunity for the addition or deletion of material.

Characterizing-Narrating-Dramatizing: These three dimensions appear to mark, in part, distinctions among tasks that to Westerners call for narration and which refer to the degree of emphasis on setting and character, on action, or on dialogue as a distinguishing feature of the story-telling style.

Message-Focussed—Reader-Focussed: This continuum appears primarily in letters and other documents that have a clear audience specified and refers primarily to the extent to which the writer acknowledges the existence of that audience.

These characteristics appear to exist in patterns that distinguish the writing of students in different cultures; it is possible that other distinguishing characters may emerge, but from the initial research it appears that these form some of the dimensions by which the models of text are delimited in certain cultures. Clearly further exploration of such cultural variation in text characteristics should be pursued.

This finding clearly raises the research issue as to the extent to which the existence of differing models for people from different cultures may inhibit the learning of new models when an individual moves from one culture to another. There is a further issue as to whether an individual writer sees that certain models are universally applicable on all occasions when writing is called for or whether the writer relates particular models to particular situations. An accumulating body of evidence suggests that writers apply models that are culturally familiar even when they enter a new culture and use a new language (Söter, 1985).

One complicating factor in such learning may concern whether the shift from culture to culture also means a shift of language. To some extent it
may be more difficult for a person moving from Anglophone India to the United States to realize that different models are operative than it would be for a person moving from a non-English-speaking culture (Kachru, 1982). A second intervening factor may arise from how individuals learn and apply models. It may be that they are taught them explicitly as models. If this is the case, it would be conceivable that those individuals would have a less difficult time moving to a new culture than would those who had learned the models implicitly, particularly if those implicit models had pervaded the individuals’ consciousnesses for most of their lives. It might be, for example, that certain models (such as particular forms of parallel structure in English and Hebrew) are learned as part of religious liturgy which individuals have heard daily or weekly in formal services and which they also hear vestigially in daily conversation and read in secular texts. One would suppose that it would be more difficult for these individuals to change those models than it would be for them to change, let us say, the formula for footnoting learned in one discipline when they begin to write in another discipline.

4. How individuals decide on the appropriateness of a given model in a given situation is a final issue that we would suggest for study. We have suggested earlier that the proper application of a model in a given context is an aspect of pragmatics, but the notion of pragmatics suggests that a writer develops a repertoire of models that are specific to given situations or contexts. Observations of writers in business indicate that in the course of a single day they may shift models (changing tone, register, organizational markers, and other structures) several times depending on whether they are writing a memorandum, a letter of application for a position, or filling out a form. It would appear to be clear that these writers have acquired a complex set of rules, but one needs to ask what the rules are and how they were acquired. These rules might be thought of as decision-making rules based on knowledge of the situation in which the text is to be written and to be read. Such rules do not, in many cases, appear to be the object of instruction, but among adept writers they are carefully followed and presumably deeply ingrained.

Issues Related to the Activity of Writing and the Question, When Does a Text Emerge?

We have suggested earlier that the activity of writing consists of a matrix of acts which are further comprised of operations. It would appear to follow that the nature and arrangement of the acts in the matrix might vary according to the context in which a person writes and the culture of community that a person inhabits. The writer of a friendly note to a relative may spend little time planning or even revising or editing. When that person
writes a business letter, there may be more time allotted to planning and editing. If the situation is such that the response to the letter might be crucial, the writer may spend more time revising and polishing. In academic writing, such as the preparation of a thesis, there might even be protracted periods of planning and revision. Such variations would appear to be particularly appropriate areas for research, so that instruction of the novice writer might include planned instruction as to the appropriateness of particular arrangements of acts and operations in particular situations. On the face of it, to apply one arrangement in all situations would appear to be counter-productive.

The idea of situational variation seems to us to bind together inextricably the act of writing with what is to be written. With a cultural approach to writing we cannot disentangle "process" from "product" but we do need to consider the concept of a "finished text" and ask the overriding question: "When does a text emerge?" or "At what point does an individual know that there is no more to be done and that the particular activity of writing is complete?" Among literary scholars, this question has long been the subject of debate. Literary scholarship in the past century has often been concerned with the establishment of the correct text, just as Biblical scholarship has been for several centuries. The correct text has been defined alternatively as the final manuscript before it is sent to the printer, as the edited first edition, and as the revised last edition issued during the author's lifetime (Altick, 1963). Although which text is the authentic text is a matter of debate, there seems little debate as to the idea of an authentic text, one that an author has assented to or one upon which later authorities can agree.

The first criterion (the text that an author has assented to) has pitfalls, particularly in that many authors (e.g., Henry James, W. H. Auden, and Charles Dickens) kept revising what they wrote for subsequent editions. In effect, they never assented to an "authentic text." Other authors have treated their texts more definitively (e.g., Madeleine L'Engle) and do not make any revisions to their manuscript after submitting it to a publisher.

The second criterion for authenticity, the text later authorities agree upon, applies primarily to texts that have had their origin in oral tradition or in an era when printing and publishing were inexact. The problem with this criterion is that there is frequent disagreement among authorities. In some cases (as with religious texts) there may be a stipulated authorized version, but even such a version does not go unchallenged by later archeological results or by members of a dissenting sect.

The perspective of literary scholarship, therefore, provides no clearcut answer to the question to when a text emerges. Although many agree that there is something that one might call the text or the definitive text, few can agree on general rules for determining when that text has emerged.

If the answer to this question is ambiguous from the perspective of literary theory, such theory is more clear as to whether there is what might
be called a "model text" in a genre (which brings us back to the notion of models that we have discussed earlier). Throughout the history of literary criticism in the West, there has been agreement that particular genres can be defined and described. Since Aristotle, writers about literature have defined a play or a poem or a novel. Their definitions have established sets of rules for a genre and have set forth exemplary texts as models for future writers. Subsequent critics and authors have challenged these previous definitions and rules only to establish their own (Lowes, 1930). Frequently these critics have taken the question, "What is a good play?" and rephrased it as "What is a play?" as if the nature of the genre was determined by the value place on particular productions within that genre. In many cases, what begins as a matter of taste becomes a matter of categorization.

What has been true for literature has entered other words of writing as well, witness the business letter, the personal letter, the essay, or the technical manual. There are still books available with sample letters for all occasions. Over the years there have been changes in the model and there are clearly cultural variations in the exemplary text or model, but the idea of a model persists, whether that model be a model of content, of organization, of style, of layout, or of a combination of the four. In writing instruction in many countries, recently, there have been recent attempts to shift the model (Britton et al., 1975; Macrorie, 1970), but each critic of past models has prescribed a new model. Recently, text linguists have sought to make the rules far more specific (Halliday & Hassan, 1976; Lautamatti, 1978; Kintsch & van Dijk, 1983) by elaborating rules for cohesion, coherence, story grammars, and topical structures. Whether these specifications will produce models is yet unclear, since they tend to deal with parts of a text rather than whole texts or genres, and since their authors are still working on descriptive systems. At the same time, others have only too readily taken such descriptive systems and turned them into prescriptions and models.

The idea of a model establishes for the individual writer a sense (however precise or vague) of when a text is completed or when it emerges. It emerges when it appears to approximate a model. Yet individuals within a culture may have differing ideas of when the model is approximated: it could be when all the ideas are set out in order, when all the ideas are elaborated, when all the ideas are presented without a surface flaw, when all the ideas are presented, elaborated, checked and rechecked by someone else, or at some other point. They may also have differing ideas of the model itself, its linguistic and structural characteristics as well as the sort of information that should be included in the text. If such differences occur within a culture, one might expect that there would be differences between cultures not only as to the shape of the model, a particular text structure, but also as to the point at which the activity ceases. It appears that in some cultures a single draft is sufficient; in others that redrafting and polishing are required. The text model, which is situational, should determine the
sequence, timing, and values placed upon the acts and operations that constitute the activity of writing.

**Research Issues Related to Text Models and the Activity of Writing**

The foregoing suggests a number of issues that could profitably be studied:

1. The first issue for research concerns the nature of the rules that a writer has for determining when an individual performance matches the model that a writer has for a finished text. The rule may, for example, be based on some matching of the external form of the text so that the text produced resembles a model in terms of format. Such appears to be the rule governing the writing activity of very young children (Harste, et al., 1984) as well as technical writers and even those writing examinations in academic courses. It would seem clear that a competing set of rules to those based on format or visible features is one based on the content of the communication. Some writers appear to think they have completed the activity when a first approximation of the content is produced either in an outline or in a draft. Other writers will polish and repolish, check and double check. How do writers acquire rules? We suspect that these ideas are learned through informal transmission and observation of both texts and other writers. The child who believes that format is the guiding principle has sensed that form contains meaning but has not fully realized the linguistic and particularly the semantic aspects of written language. The adult who thinks that setting down the first rush of content and stopping there constitutes the rule has sensed the importance of the ideational function of writing but may not have fully realized the importance of the audience. Both child and adult have sets of operating rules, but in some cultures these particular rules may not be optimal for the formation of acceptable text. How a culture imparts these optimal rules and even whether there is any set of rules commonly held within a culture should form a focus for research.

2. A subsidiary issue concerns the extent to which a writer shifts models and rules according to a specific context. It is clear from many people's experience that when people write letters to friends, they do not follow the same model or rules that they do when writing a business letter or an academic paper. It is also clear that some people do not acquire as ready a sense that some models and rules are appropriate in certain contexts but not in others. This situation appears particularly true for the novice in academic writing who has to shift from the set of models and rules for one of the sciences to the set for history.

As to the shifting of the decision rules for different contexts, it would appear that in some literate cultures, a writer learns that it is permissible
to complete the activity of writing when a rough draft is produced (in a personal letter to a close relative, for example), but that in a different context, such as a business or an academic setting, a polished and proofread version is obligatory. Again it would seem that some writers do not acquire an adequate set of rules or they apply the rules from one context to another where they may not be appropriate.

From this perspective, we may move to the study of the specifics of the activity of writing and consider the following issues as being worthy of research.

3. One approach to the study of cultural variation would be to consider what operations are chunked by writers in varying cultures, including varying occupational, academic, and social communities within each larger culture. A corollary consideration concerns the extent to which individuals vary or remain consistent in their chunking as they move from situation to situation or task to task. For example, a person might see that in certain situations it is more important for orthography and neatness to be the focal point than for content and organization. In other situations, the reverse might obtain. We can ask what would lead a person to make this judgment and whether the judgment is a fitting one. It is at this point, perhaps, that awareness of audience enters in, for the awareness of a particular audience and its potential reaction to various aspects of text and text models could determine the writer's emphasis on particular acts.

Along with study of what is chunked should, of course, be studies of the amount of time allocated by writers to the individual acts of writing (planning, drafting, and the like) and how they decide that such allocation is appropriate to the particular situation. In some situations it would appear to be appropriate to allocate all one's time to drafting (as in the examination), but to extend that allocation to all situations may be inappropriate. Some studies of "basic" writers suggest that they are so concerned with the superficial form of what they write that they allocate all of their time to editing (Shaunessy, 1977), which may again be an inappropriate use of time. Another way of looking at this question may be to determine the extent to which the allocation of time to certain acts results from individual rather than situational differences.

In addition to the matter of chunking and the matter of time comes the question as to whether the acts and operations occur in systematic sequences for writers in particular contexts. One might well ask whether the drafting and editing sequences occur more frequently for writers in examinations than they do in situations where the writer has ample time to plan and revise. Does the writer adjust the sequence to the demands of the situation or does the writer persist in using the same set of sequences in every situation? Again it might be that there are cultural differences between groups as to what sequences exist in what groupings, so that members of one group...
persist through the entire drafting process and then go back to revise or edit, and members of another group spend a long period of time planning. Such differences may be culturally determined directly through schooling so as to produce habitual operations, or they may be acquired as pragmatic responses to specific situations. (It might be inappropriate to suggest which sets of systematic sequences produce better writing, but it might be well to inquire concerning the extent to which different sequences among different groups produce equally effective texts.)

4. Arising from these considerations is the parallel one as to the values placed on the various acts and operations by differing cultures. This question raises the issue of criteria for writing and the degree to which they are culturally determined. Takala, Purves, and Buckmaster (1982) have shown there to be differing cultural criteria for good writing which would seem to lead to different values placed by different cultures on particular acts of writing. In some cultures there appears to be a greater emphasis on criteria that reflect editing; in others there appears to be a greater emphasis on criteria related to planning and drafting. (The first might be reflected in a heavier stress placed on style and mechanics; the second in a heavier stress placed on content and organization as well as on sincerity and honesty.)

5. The educational issue arising from these considerations is whether there exists a clear developmental pattern across cultures and situations by which activities become acts and then operations. We often assume that the individual first learns to shape letters and then words and then sentences and larger units of discourse. Recent research has challenged that assumption (Clay, 1975; Markova, 1979; Harste, et al., 1984), but the challenge has been based on evidence that might be restricted to particular groups, and particularly to particular ages. These research studies have examined children in the Soviet Union, New Zealand, and the United States, but further cross-cultural studies are needed to substantiate the idea that we think of as subsequent activities (e.g., producing a whole discourse) in most cases precede the learning of what has traditionally been seen as the initial activity (e.g., forming letters). Further, we need to explore what might be the best sequences of activities so that the optimum form of chunking and the optimum models are instilled in nascent writers.

Cultures and the Perception of Text

The idea of models and rules for determining when a text is completed raises a further area for consideration. The models and rules in a given culture may well be related to the perceptions of that culture concerning the nature of written text and the appropriateness of certain activities with respect to text. These may be thought of as pragmatics, but they encompass
a larger set of beliefs and subsequent practices. They would include, for one, the social values placed on reading and writing, and they would also include the ways that reading, writing, and text are viewed in a given culture. In some cases, these beliefs and practices have deep historical and religious roots.

It is apparent that the Judeo-Christian view of the Biblical text has a long and complex history. The text as an artifact is sacred; the Ark of the Covenant was important because it is engraved as text. One still places one’s hand on the Bible when taking an oath in court. One reason for the sacrosanct nature of the text, of course, is that it was divinely inspired; the writers were simply transcribing divine word. For many centuries, the text could not even be translated. Later tradition, however, particularly in Judaism after the Diaspora and in medieval Catholicism, allowed for subsequent commentary on the original text, and that body of commentary brought with it authority almost equal to that of the original text. At the same time, this commentary was an interpretation of the text and almost usurped the text as authority. In Catholicism, particularly, the priest became an important figure because he was able to read and interpret the text to a lay audience; in fact, by the time of the Reformation, the priest almost replaced the text. The Lutheran and Calvinist reforms were in part based on the idea that The Bible was to be reasserted as the sole authority and each individual was to be his or her own priest. The reforms brought with them, of course, more widespread literacy, but at the same time reintroduced the idea that the text was the sole arbiter of belief and action. “It is in the book” and “it is written” have become watchwords of both religious and secular culture. The same view of text appears in Islam, for the Q’ran is also the result of divine dictation and human transcription, and both literacy and memorization of the text become important features of Muslim life, again both religious and secular. Muslim trained students appear to have less respect for teachers who read a lecture rather than recite from memory.

In European literary theory, much of which derived from religious hermeneutics as well as from Classical aesthetics and rhetoric, the text held a central position (Abrams, 1953), as was seen as the authority for interpretation. The idea of the inspired writer persisted through much of the writing about literature and substantiated the primacy of the text. Such a view of the text has come to be challenged in recent literary theory, however, in part because it was difficult to assert what, in fact, was the text (Wellek & Warren, 1977), and in part because the interpreter of the text came to be seen as being of equal, if not greater, importance than the text. At the same time, the writer came to be seen less as a creature of inspiration and more as the practitioner of a craft. Post-structuralist criticism has challenged the authority of the text and placed the reader in the central position (Scholes, 1985). Although this view is not popularly held, a generally relativist position
concerning the authority of the text appears to be gaining ground in much of European culture.

It is not entirely clear what effect this shift in view of the text and the authority of the text has upon the activity of writing. It would seem, however, that some effect will emerge. One might hypothesize that an absolutist view of the authority of the text would lead writers to find it more difficult to envision revising the text that has been drafted. What is written in the first rush of the act of drafting has some of the quality of inspired text, even if the text is a note to a friend or a school assignment. The relativist view would appear to permit or at least accompany the notion that a text may be revised and polished. If the relativist view comes to predominate, revision and the teaching of various approaches to revision will become increasingly acceptable. As it is now in the United States, revision is barely acceptable to many students in secondary school, perhaps because they view text much the way as do Heath’s (1983) Roadville citizens or perhaps because they have little time in which to write a composition compared to students in other countries where revision is more of a commonplace. It may be that many United States students have been taught to see the first draft as the final text. In fact many elementary school students do not revise the draft of a story save to edit it, but write a new story based on the same theme or idea.

To an observer the second casting of the story is a revision of the first, but to the child both versions are equally valid as texts. This view of successive recastings as a valid form of revision may be seen in literary history, where the various novels of Dickens, for example, are viewed as having much of the continuity of successive drafts. In the separate academic or scholarly work that each of us has done since the first version of this article, we have taken various parts of it and recast it in a different text: so we have done with other scholarly writing. We would ask how an observer of a writer’s corpus can distinguish a revision from a “new” text.

One might also hypothesize that the shift in view of the text and the malleability of text has its roots in technology. In scribal times, copies of texts were less easy to create and the act of changing a text required a great deal of effort. The introduction of moveable type and the subsequent introduction of the typewriter and the word-processor have made the act of revision relatively simple. That something is easy to do makes it conceivable in the mind of a performer, and we would speculate that the post-structuralist view of text could not have emerged without a technological shift.

This shift in the view of the text has important ramifications. When David Olson writes: “To serve the requirements of written language, however, all of the information relevant to the communication of intention must be present in the text. Further, if the text is to permit or sustain certain conclusions, as in the essayist technique, then it must become an autonomous representation of meaning. . . . Written text, I am suggesting, is largely responsible
for permitting people to entertain sentence meaning per se rather than merely using the sentence as a cue to the meaning entertained by the speaker" (Olson, 1977, p. 277), he appears to be asserting the older conception concerning text. This conception is also apparent in the distinction made between text and utterance by George Dillon (1981). Perhaps they are assuming it. At any rate they are clearly operating within a cultural framework that sees text as permanent, detached from both writer and reader, and, once "finished," immutable. That view of text has recently been challenged by Elbow (1985) who argues that both text and utterance can be considered permanent or transitory depending on the frame of the observer, which frame, we suggest is partially determined by the observer's culture.

Whatever the cause, it appears that there are differences between cultures as to the view of a text and what it is permissible to do to a text (Glenn & Glenn, 1981; Cole & Scribner, 1974). In their discussion of the Vai, Scribner and Cole (1981) suggest that those people view texts in Arabic (particular Q'uranic texts) as immutable, but that they see texts in Vai as highly transitory. Such views also affect the value placed on a text. In some cultures, a printed or written text is of great value, regardless of what the text is about (Goody, 1977). Obviously as printed materials become increasingly available that value may diminish. Value, however, manifests itself in other ways; written documents appear to have the attribute of permanence (Ong, 1982; Dillon, 1981) and they take on importance in various commercial transactions. In fact, the first uses of writing appear to have been commercial (Gelb, 1952; Gaur, 1985) and their functions primarily to record (Goody, 1977). Written records form a major aspect of most literate cultures. There do appear to be differences among literate cultures, however, as to the value and importance placed on written communication for other purposes such as to inform, to express, to persuade or to entertain. The value also depends on how the writing serves as a means of communication through a hierarchical structure (Hofstede, 1980); writing from higher to lower assumes greater importance than writing from lower to higher. The text then is valued in relation to its source, or its assumed source. A reader views not simply the text but the assumed writer of the text, and thus ascribes value to it. If an individual occupies a relatively low position in a hierarchy, it is quite possible that the individual places less value on his or her writing than would be placed on that produced by someone in a higher position. This situation may well affect the writer's activity as a writer. Such a situation may clearly obtain in school writing as well as in writing in certain bureaucracies.

Another aspect of the relationship of reader to text that may vary according to culture and that may affect the activity of writing concerns the appropriate role of the reader. Purves (1984) postulated that readers may assume one or more of several stances with respect to the text: the reader may
receive and respond as a “common reader” and select either an “efferent” or an “aesthetic” role (Rosenblatt, 1978), seeing the text as bearing a message or as being something with which to engage in an aesthetic transaction; may receive and judge as an editor, reviewer or gatekeeper; may receive and analyze as a scholarly critic or as a linguist; or may receive and prescribe as a teacher. The illocutionary force of the reader’s comments on the text and therefore on the writer will shift accordingly from the neutral to the verdictive or constative. These roles may all occur within a given culture, but there may be some consistencies within a given culture, such as that of the classroom or of a particular community. If such be the case, the expectations concerning the reception of any text may affect the writer’s attitude towards texts and towards the activity of writing.

Cultures, then, may be distinguished as to how individual members view text, how they use text, and how they value text. These differences may well influence how members of a given culture engage in the activity of writing. They may influence, for example, the degree to which planning or revising are even conceivable. They may influence the degree to which the individuals see their writing as something to be worked on, and they may influence the perceptions that writers have of readers and what may be done to their text by others. What is written in one culture may have an aura of permanence and immutability so that liberties taken with the text are unthinkable—either liberties in modification or liberties in interpretation. In other cultures the text is much more ephemeral and perhaps inconsequential, and multiple modifications and interpretations are commonplace.

The major areas for research, therefore, arise from the question of defining the values and views of a culture concerning text and the relation of those values and views to the activity of writing. They also arise from the issue as to how, if linguistic and cultural pluralism (in any combination of oral and literate groups) exists in a larger culture or subculture, the communities interact with regard to written expression. Do the different communities view text and textuality in similar ways? How do their views, if they differ, affect each other? Do the tendencies and trends concerning the writing activity and associated issues of each community affect each other and, if so, how?

Conclusion

In this article we have asserted that writing, considered as an activity, takes place within a cultural context. Writing is, to be sure, a cognitive activity, one that relies on the bringing into play of a complex body of knowledge: semantic, linguistic, social, cultural, and attitudinal. A writer
operates within a cultural context when engaging in the activity of writing. Even the private writing of a diary operates under certain cultural norms and conventions. A writer, in effect, acts as a member of a rhetorical community (Purves, in press). This community is defined as a group of people who operate within the same sort of enterprise and have in common modes of inquiry and thinking and modes of communicating the results of that thinking (Törnebohm, 1973). Most writing is done within the framework of a community, be it a rather restricted community such as a community of scholars in a particular discipline or be it a broad community such as that of an educated citizenry in a nation-state. This idea of a community is what we have called a culture.

As we have suggested, the culture exerts pressure on both the individual's activity as a writer and on the individual's view of text by the force of tradition, convention, and potential comment on what the individual will write. The culture has expectations about the nature of texts and how texts are to be received and viewed. The culture accepts models for text that help individuals know when the activity of writing is completed and it establishes rules for individuals to help them determine both when the activity of writing is completed and what particular acts within the activity of writing should be emphasized at what times and in what situations. The culture sets rules as to when it is obligatory for an individual to write and when writing is an optional activity. The culture, finally, establishes standards for “good writing,” and all that that phrase entails with respect to orthography and penmanship, diction, syntax, grammar, structure, genre, and format.

It would appear clear that learning to write within a culture is a large undertaking, one that requires a good number of years and the accumulation of a great deal of knowledge about the expectations of a culture, a knowledge which we may term cultural knowledge. Kádár-Fülop (1983), citing Weinreich (1963) and Stenhouse (1967), suggests that literacy learning involves three complementary goals. The first is the development of cultural communication or learning how to communicate in oral and particularly written language with a larger society than the family or a set of peers, such a society to include writers of the past. The second is the development of cultural loyalty, the respecting and valuing of certain forms of language and expression and the repudiating of what may be seen as non-standard forms. In literature, for example, different cultures inculcate standards of what is good and what is bad literature; such standards often become translated by the society into what is and what is not literature. In composition, as we have been suggesting throughout this article, different cultures propose various models of text, models based on the quantity and type of information, on the structure of that information, on linguistic or stylistic forms, and on the visual format of texts, and they ask their members both to learn
these common models and become loyal to them. In addition, cultures may set forth models of text production and models of how texts are to be viewed in different situations.

Once these first two goals have been attained, Kádár-Fulop argues, society fosters the third, that of developing an individual mode of expression and interpretation and the development of personality through written language. In many societies, the third goal is seldom a conscious goal of instruction for more than a few, what she calls the “cultural-producers.” The first two goals are the primary ones for common schooling, and even though teachers of writing in the United States have claimed to be encouraging individualism for over fifty years, the results of various writing surveys would indicate that student writing falls into common structural and stylistic molds rather than being individual.

Learning to write is, as we have suggested throughout this essay, a part of learning to be a member of a culture, whether it be a narrow academic or vocational culture or a broader national or ethnic culture. When an individual is transplanted from one culture to another culture, the individual has a great deal both to unlearn and to learn if he or she is to be accepted as a writer in that culture. To some extent, it may be impossible for an individual thoroughly acculturated in one culture to become indistinguishable as a writer from members of another culture. A person trained in literary studies at a particular point in history (as is the case of one of the authors) may find it impossible to write a text indistinguishable from that written by a social scientist trained fifteen years later despite the number of attempts and partial successes. If this may be the case, one must wonder at the migrant-educated writer of one language community who moves to and hopes to be assimilated in a new culture.

The implications of our view of culture, models of text, and the activity of writing for research are myriad, we believe, for although scholars have learned a great deal about writing as an activity in some cultures, they have learned little that one can truly generalize across cultures. Scholars should also be quite unsure about the precise ways by which a particular culture shapes an individual’s knowledge, perceptions, and activities with respect to writing and text, and they should raise the question as to how great a role cultural variation plays in such shaping. We are convinced, however, that the field of study is broad and has profound implications for human understanding and cross-cultural communication as well as for educational planning. We are also convinced that many of the generalizations that have so far emerged from psychological research, particularly that which has restricted itself to the culture of schools in the United States, need to be tested in other cultures and situations. We would advocate a broad comparative perspective on writing and texts and we would advocate bringing into a dialogue research scholars from many countries and disciplines. Our argument is
that writing always exists within a framework of conflicting and complementary social and cultural forces. We see as fundamental that writing, like other kinds of language activity, is a social event and that while experience structures language, experience itself is structured by one's culture (Deely, 1982). Research dealing with the activity of writing must therefore take into account the individual writer's needs, belief systems, knowledge structures, and vocational, professional, and social identities—all of which form the writer's cultural experiences. Writing is one of the primary manifestations of an individual's acculturation, perhaps the one most marked by culture. The study of writing, therefore, must give culture its due.

References


NCTE Honors Heath for Research on Links between Language Differences, School Failure

Shirley Brice Heath, whose study of cultural differences in language and literacy learning has broad implications for education, received the 1985 David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. The award was presented at the 75th Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English in Philadelphia.

Heath, a professor of education at Stanford University, spent ten years studying children's language development in two rural South Carolina blue-collar communities, one white, one black. Comparing these children's language socialization with that of the mainstream townspeople who set the language patterns for school, she detected differences that reveal the roots of widespread school failure among the working-class children. Her findings are published in Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

In presenting the award, linguist Walter Loban said that in her research, Heath "exemplifies the responsible scientist in a democratic society. . . . She combines the search for truth with respect for the dignity of her subjects."