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Where Do I Start?

Ming has just walked in for her writing conference and handed you a two-page, neat draft of the first assignment. She's very quiet and doesn't say much; she just looks at you as if she expects you to say something profound about her paper. She expects help, whether you are the instructor, a tutor, or writing center consultant. Not wanting to let her down, you pick up the paper, grab a pen just in case you need to put a dot over something to discuss later, and you start reading. Pretty soon though, you find that you're making marks on every line and that it's increasingly difficult to get the gist of her sentences. The more you read, the more confused you become. Little beads of sweat appear on your forehead, and you wonder, "Where do I start?"

The first step is to put the pen down. I know, you just want to use it to identify words or passages that cause you problems as a reader. You've been trained as a writing consultant or teacher, and you know better than to try to correct grammar or mark language errors on a first read. But the pen is a warning sign! (So is the urge to pick one up.) It means that you are trying to read in too many ways at once.

Reading researchers generally talk about two complementary strategies for deciphering a text, top-down and bottom-up. Top-down strategies focus on the overall meaning, building an evolving model for the message of the text that is used to figure out new pieces of the puzzle. Bottom-up strategies focus on the meaning of individual words and infer new meanings from what is known about patterns for stringing words together. If we are reading for enjoyment, we usually employ both approaches. We like descriptive language, and so we savor it, noticing the particular turning of a phrase. At the same time, if it's fiction, we keep in

mind the plot structure, or if it's an opinion essay, we keep in mind the stated purpose. We notice a word like *seem* or other hedging devices because they cast doubt on the veracity of a character, but we also count how many valid points have been made and whether we've likely reached the clincher of the essay yet.

Sometimes, however, we need to use one approach more than the other. If we have 75 pages of a U.S. history textbook to finish tonight, we tend to do a lot of top-down reading. We look in places where we expect to find key sentences, like the end of the introductory paragraph and the beginning of body paragraphs; we string them together, and we see if we have a coherent product that will get us through tomorrow's lecture. At other times we are faced with a text that might as well be written in a foreign language. For me, the fine print on the back of a credit card application is a good example. I cannot skim it because the vocabulary is specialized, there's a comma every five words setting off a qualification of the preceding five words, and there are a lot more nouns and prepositions than verbs. Because I don't want to miss any details, I use careful bottom-up processing strategies to piece the text together.

Why does my reading strategy matter? Ming is an English language learner. At first, her essay may seem like a good candidate for bottom-up reading. Words and phrases jump out at you as you start to read it. Some of them just seem odd; some of them make the alarm bell on your high school English teacher's desk start to ring; and some of them make you want to laugh. The problem with bottom-up reading at this point, however, is that it distracts you from your job, which is to offer Ming a plan to improve the essay as a whole and become a better writer in general. You may need to force yourself to read Ming's essay from the top down. Get the big picture first, and then focus on the details.

This book offers strategies and useful information to help you accomplish both of these tasks—looking at the big picture and providing support for the details—during a conference or tutoring session with a second language writer. Chapter 1 discusses a

general strategy for approaching texts written by English language learners.

Initial Questions to Ask

As you begin the process of reading an essay from the top down, I propose six questions to keep in mind. They are intended to help you consider a range of variables that may affect the essay's ability to communicate a message and its ultimate effectiveness.

1. Do I understand the general point of the essay?

Writing teachers use many terms to describe the general point of an essay: *thesis statement, controlling idea, focus point, statement of purpose, main idea,* etc. Regardless of the terminology, most of us agree that one of the defining characteristics of shorter pieces of academic writing is a singularity of focus. Different types of writing vary in the degree to which this focus is made explicit and whether the focus represents a purpose, a feeling, or simply an entity to be described.

In this book's introduction, I began the third paragraph with *This book focuses on . . . ,* followed by sentences describing the contents of the book as a whole. When we use words like *focus* or *I will argue,* we are using **metadiscourse** to explicitly mark a central point. In U.S. academic texts we also often rely on our readers' expectations about location to signal that a sentence represents a central idea. In the composition class essay, the thesis statement is typically the last sentence of the first paragraph. In a business plan, the opening paragraph should name the entity being described and outline the way it will be described.

Were I writing up an ethnographic study of peer tutoring sessions, however, I might begin with a lengthy illustrative narrative and leave it for the reader to derive the point. If I decided to state a purpose, I might delay it until the end, like the moral to a fable. Essays in popular magazines such as *Time* or *Newsweek* often employ this strategy, ending with nothing more than a question for the reader to think about.

Newspaper stories, on the other hand, tend to begin with the juiciest details of a story—the body count or how many billions were embezzled—and then they move into the background information. Although media critics can often detect a journalist's point of view through looking at what details were highlighted or the tenor of descriptive words, the point of view is rarely made explicit in a single sentence.

Just as types of writing vary with respect to where and how clearly the focus is presented, there is also some evidence that different cultures may vary in their preferences for how the focus is presented. U.S. academic culture seems to value explicit, up-front statements about where a paper is going. (Keep in mind that instructors often try to liven up an assignment by asking students to write an academic paper in the guise of a non-academic genre, such as a letter or a position brief for which there are different expectations.) Apologists for the writing styles of other academic cultures note that the up-front preference doesn't really allow the reader a chance to make up his or her own mind or reach independent conclusions. In other words, the U.S. preference places the burden of interpretation primarily on the writer; the reader's job is to take it as given and then make a judgment about the package.

This is a gross oversimplification of the reading process, but I think you get my point. When working with a second language writer, you need to entertain the possibility that there is a singularity of focus, but that it's just not presented in the way you expected. Of course, with a writer from any culture, there is always the possibility that there isn't a central point. If that's the case, you know what to do. You work with the student to identify the different threads and then decide whether to choose one and throw out the rest or to look for an idea that ties everything together.

Finally, you also have to ask whether the focus is meaningful. I try to stay away from topics asking students to compare U.S. culture with theirs, and one of the reasons is because I find that too many students try to make their papers coherent under the

rubric of *There are many simi-larities/differences/similarities and differences between my country and the United States.* This can work as the controlling statement for an essay, but the essay is going to be boring, and at the end I'm going to be left wondering why this essay was worth my time.

> ### Tutoring / Teaching Tip
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> Make a collection of different types of texts, some with explicitly stated purposes and some with implicit. Ask the student to summarize the author's purpose for each text in one sentence. This can also lead to good discussions about the difference between *topic* and *purpose.*

2. Do I think the essay fits the goal(s) of the assignment?

A second factor is the social context for which the paper was written. I'm assuming that most of the writing you see will be an assignment for an academic class, but within academia there is a diverse range of writing types. Composition classes typically focus on the essay and the research paper, but other classes may require book reports, reading reaction papers, position statements, or proposals. Some non-humanities classes ask for written notes on observations, experiments, and field experiences. For students to be successful at producing any one of these types, they need to be aware of a broad range of conventions related to content, organization, language formality, and audience recognition.

These conventions can be a problem for any student. But if most of the writing you have done involved summarizing what you read in order to show content mastery or you immigrated to the United States in the tenth grade and spent most of your time since then learning to write the kinds of essays needed to pass standardized tests, then you may not even be aware of what you don't know. You may also be afraid to demonstrate your lack of knowledge by asking the teacher for help. Even if the teacher is nice and gives you a sample paper, you may not have the linguistic awareness necessary to notice the conventions in it.

If you are working with this student as a writing consultant, you have to think about more than what the piece of writing

means to you; you also have to think about how it will be received elsewhere. This may involve some detective work on your part. Of course, you want to see anything the teacher has given the student related to the assignment—instructions, lists of potential resources, grading procedures, and, if you're lucky, examples. You also want to query the student about what he or she thinks is expected. Does the student have a clear idea? How important does he or she think the assignment is? Can the student articulate these things clearly?

With respect to conventions for the assignment genre, you may want to consider formal properties first, things like:

- What kind of title, if any, does the genre typically have?
- Does it have a fixed organizational structure?
- Does it use headings to mark the structure?
- What are the parameters for length?
- If it includes citations, what style format is used?

You will also need to think about more intangible characteristics though. One area that can be particularly problematic for students from other educational cultures is the incorporation of source material. I have had students who worked quite hard to piece together as many quotations as possible from a large number of sources and yet never said what they thought about the topic. Others have taken nicely worded phrases and even entire sentences from a book and blended them into a paragraph without ever using quotation marks. They acknowledged the book in their bibliography and freely admitted that they had used it to help write the section. When I told the students that the teacher was probably more interested in seeing that they understood the source material well enough to form an independent opinion about it, though, they were genuinely surprised. They thought they had.

The issue of how outside authorities are treated within a genre is related to what composition teachers refer to as **voice**. Voice is often treated as the way in which individualism is expressed in a piece of writing. A number of second language writing researchers

have noted that asking a student to express voice may be particularly problematic if the student comes from a collectivist culture where the good of society is typically valued over individual needs and desires. The issue here is more than whether it's OK to use *I* when we write, however, because there are many U.S. academic genres where first person pronouns are avoided completely. Rather, this has to do with the willingness to take an individual stand and to talk about other authors in a way that acknowledges that you see things differently from them.

When working with second language writers, I tend to avoid the collectivist versus individualistic debate because I think it will inevitably lead to confrontation and us/them dichotomies. Instead I talk about voice in a more metaphorical sense, such as whether the writer has a sense of the text as part of a discourse. In other words, does the writer have a sense of who he or she is talking to and the language needed to be understood? With academic assignments, a big question is always whether the audience is the teacher (who knows what the assignment was), a generic reader who cannot be assumed to know anything about the assignment or the writer, or a specified reader such as the board of directors for an imaginary company. In order to engage in a conversation with the target audience, is it better to use a casual, conversational style or to demonstrate technical precision in the choice of words and syntactic structures?

As you can see, even this notion of voice is somewhat fuzzy. You probably are very good at it though, and your expertise is the product of experience. Second

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Tutoring / Teaching Tip

Question 2 relates to the student's ability to analyze audience. Sometimes it's helpful to make this process explicit by giving the student a chart to fill in about the reader(s) for whatever he or she is working on. The chart can include questions like: Who is the audience? What are they likely to know about your topic? What are they likely to feel or believe about your topic? Make two rows in the chart—one for before reading and one for after. This also communicates the message that writing should be transformative—that is, readers' beliefs or states of knowledge should be different after they finish reading.

language writers are typically playing catch up; they do not have the benefit of knowledge built up over years. They need input from someone who can see their writing in a broader context, who knows that MLA and APA reference styles are different but who also knows whether the teacher's question should be restated in the introductory paragraph of an essay exam.

3. Do I recognize an organizational strategy?
   Is it effective?

It's been my experience that students rarely hand in a paper that is not organized. If you think about it, it is genuinely difficult to tell a story where the events don't occur in order. With argumentative writing, it is possible to begin with the logical conclusion and then express your reasons for reaching that conclusion, or you can save the punch line until the end. Whether a text's organization is apparent, however, is another matter. And whether it is effective is yet another.

I probably should define what I mean by organization. Essentially I understand organization to comprise two abilities: the ability to cluster ideas hierarchically and the ability to sequence those clusters in an order that produces a desired effect in a reader. When we read a text, we start with the default assumption that the ideas in a sentence are related to the ideas of the preceding sentence and the successive sentence. This is especially clear with narratives where we assume that the order in which events are related matches the order in which they occurred unless the writer explicitly indicates otherwise. With expository writing, we do not make assumptions about order of occurrence, but we still expect relatedness of content or purpose.

With the exception of very basic texts such as a written invitation or phone message, however, mere relatedness is not sufficient. Most written texts involve a more complex association of ideas than the phone message, and readers need help if they are expected to process those ideas efficiently. The devices we have in English for making organizational hierarchy and sequencing explicit are metadiscourse and paragraphs.

Metadiscourse includes markers like those previously mentioned signaling a statement of purpose, transitional words and phrases such as *in addition* or *on the other hand*, and headings, which essentially provide the reader with an outline. Metadiscourse is a universal feature of language. Language learners have to master nuances such as the difference between *furthermore* and *moreover* (try explaining that one!), but the concept of organizational words will not seem strange.

In contrast to metadiscourse, paragraphs are not a universal phenomenon in written languages, and conventions about their importance and what a paragraph includes vary even more. Beginning second language writers will often write an essay as one long paragraph or set apart each sentence as if it were a separate paragraph. This may result from how texts are segmented in their native language, or it may be that they are so focused on word choice and sentence construction that paragraphing seems relatively unimportant.

Readers of English have a lot of expectations for the paragraph though. Unless the text is in a newspaper or dialogue in a novel, they probably expect it to fill up a certain amount of space on the page. They don't expect it to fill up more than a page, however! They also look for a sentence, generally at the beginning of the paragraph, that signals what it will be about and also how it fits into the text as a whole. (Again, the presence of explicit topic sentences varies by text type.) Finally, they expect the paragraph's content to be internally coherent and for the paragraph as a whole to cohere to the paragraphs before and after. Sometimes, you may need to ask a student directly what he or she knows about paragraphs.

If a student has mastered the art of chunking information into paragraph-size units, then you need to consider whether the organization of the units is effective. Developing writers too often conceive of the body of a work as the place where points are listed. The result is what I call the "grocery list" essay; it has lots of ingredients, but it needs some preparation before a reader can digest it. The preparation involves establishing a flow to the ideas,

of reconceptualizing the points as the pieces of a puzzle or boxes in a schematic drawing. In short, thinking of organization as more than physical location.

"Grocery list" essays often appear in the guise of a generic five-paragraph academic essay. This format is a peculiarly U.S. institution, but many second language writers have been introduced to it by an English teacher somewhere who wanted them to have a safe formula for passing standardized writing assessments. For a student already grappling with sentence structure and lexical choice, ready-made structure is a godsend, and it may well be sufficient to get them through the standardized tests. Unfortunately, the format is often presented in the context of a power relationship also—that is, "If you want to write like Americans, then you have to. . . ." Whether driven by futility or utility, the writers rarely interpret the suggestion to include three body paragraphs as anything more than a directive to brainstorm three aspects of a topic and develop each one into a paragraph. They cluster ideas, but they do not really pay attention to sequencing them.

Sentence structure and lexical choice may always be problematic for second language writers because they are properties of the second language, and that does not come easily. But organization is not the property of a language. When we talk about the organization of a piece of writing, we are discussing the ordering and juxtaposition of mental constructs stored by the human mind independently from language (or at least most researchers believe this to be true). As such, organization is the one aspect of writing where second language writers have the best chances for success. It is worth our time to figure out

Tutoring / Teaching Tip

One way to teach sequencing is to take a hard copy of the student's paper, physically cut the paragraphs apart, and then rearrange them. (You can also cut paragraphs into sentences.) Ask the student whether the essay is better or the same as a result of the rearrangement. If the student replies that it does not make a difference, explain that it should. If the student argues that the paragraphs cannot be rearranged, ask him or her to justify that claim by referring to both language and content.

the structure they are employing, reflect on its effectiveness, and help them play to its strength.

4. Is the writing interesting?

One of the main reasons I advocate starting with a top-down approach to reading second language writers' texts is that the bottom-up approach too often leads to a piece of writing that is technically correct but boring. In U.S. academia, we measure the effectiveness of writing using constructs like clarity of focus, development of ideas, and mechanical accuracy. Outside of academics, the effectiveness of writing is measured by whether it can sustain a reader's interest long enough to communicate a message.

So, how do we make a text interesting? There is an entire genre of books identified by the subtitle: *A Guide to Effective Writing*. Most of these books include instructions like avoid generic vocabulary (e.g., *something*), use active verbs instead of passive, and beware of too many convoluted noun phrases. If we are writing a personal essay about the joys and difficulties of being a full-time student and working many hours, this is good advice. Heavy noun phrases require extra mental commitment to process, and generic vocabulary does not engender the rich image that many people like to paint. This is bad advice, however, if you are writing a legal brief, a concise summary for an annotated bibliography, or a write-up of a lab experiment.

What makes a text interesting varies with the purpose of the text and the characteristics of the typical reader. It may evolve from the eloquence of the language, the novelty of the argument, or the ability to draw together in one place a number of different source texts. If the text is a type where personal experiences can be included in the content, then second language writers often have an advantage when it comes to novelty. They can incorporate experiences and viewpoints that do not seem commonplace to a U.S. reader. With other types of writing, they will have to work as hard as anyone else to make the text interesting.

What is important when working with second language writers is to stress that good writing is more than technical precision; it is

more than getting the language "right." We can tell a U.S.-educated writer that his or her style is verbose or pedantic; the same can be true for a non-U.S.-educated writer. We owe it to our students to be honest and always to keep in mind that the role of writing is effective communication. We also need to keep in mind that what constitutes effective communication is variable.

5. How bothered am I by the language? Am I bothered in spite of what the essay says or because I can't understand what the writer is saying?

In advocating a top-down approach, I am not suggesting that we can totally ignore language structure and choice. You can put the pen down, but it is unrealistic to expect you not to notice the missing *it* or that you had to read one sentence three times before you reached an interpretation that would allow you to continue reading. The trick is not to let these types of things bog you down or prevent you from considering the issues previously discussed. You also have to begin thinking about how and when you will address the language issues.

Many second language writers have studied English since early childhood and although there are a few features that mark them as non-native writers—sentences like *I wondered who is the teacher looking for*—language issues are not common in their writing. With this kind of writer, you want to focus on more general writing concerns. In fact, where their language differs from the structure you would choose may be what is known in second language acquisition studies as a **fossilized** structure. Fossilized structures are generally impervious to instruction and are likely to be used by the learner for the rest of his or her life. You can suggest that the writer make a list of structures to check for when editing the final paper, but beyond this, it is probably not going to be very helpful to spend a lot of time talking about the ins and outs of the grammar.

There are other writers, however, for whom we have to acknowledge that their use of language bothers us. In these cases,

you need to do some soul searching. Do the language problems primarily feel like a nuisance to you? If so, it probably means that you like the message of the text and are generally satisfied with the way it is presented. If that's the case, then it may be appropriate to begin working on language issues fairly early. Do some prioritizing, identify the issues that are most frequent, give the learner a chance to self-correct, and then try to explain if need be.

In other cases, however, you may feel that an essay is rife with grammatical errors to the point that you are not always sure what the writer is saying. The human instinct at this point is to bring out the grammar charts and launch right into myriad explanations about the technicalities of English articles or the meaning of the preposition *at*. This is probably the wrong direction to go. If you are having difficulty understanding what the writer intended, then it is likely that the writer was not sure either. Second language learners rarely display 100 percent consistency in their paradigms for features like word order, agreement, and grammatical inflection. Sometimes they produce what sound like perfect constructions; other times they surprise us with mismatches in structures we assumed they had mastered. Most scholars agree that the mismatches can be induced by cognitive burden: They are more likely to mess up the grammar if they are still trying to work out what they want to say.

If this describes the student you are working with, then you need to spend a lot of time talking about purpose for writing, audience expectations, and organization first. Once the student has worked his or her ideas into a coherent presentation, turn to the linguistic choices that were made. This is the chronology that matches the path a text takes from our brains to paper. It is also a more efficient way to address language issues. If you start by working on language issues because you feel overwhelmed by them, then you may spend an inordinate amount of time talking about a structure in a sentence that will or should never make it into the final draft.

6. What is the strongest aspect of the writing?

This final question applies regardless of the student you are working with. Everyone needs a pat on the back, especially if a student has come to you for help, because this probably indicates some insecurity about writing. In addition, presumably our goal as writing consultants and teachers is to help the students we work with become better writers, to help them develop their abilities to communicate and influence. Implicit in the notion of development is building, and it is hard to build if what we are doing is tearing apart. Yes, we may need to point out where some reconstruction is necessary, but we also need to point out where towers can be erected.

Some second language writers may be very insecure about their writing. As a result they may stick to simple grammatical structures, stereotypical examples, and lots of dictionary-derived vocabulary. Others are risk takers. They know they are going to make mistakes, and so they do not worry about making them. They write with abandon. Sometimes they come up with a piece that is very creative; at other times they attempt a level of complexity beyond what their language capabilities can handle. Although for different reasons, both of these types of writers need you to point out what's good in their essays.

The play-it-safe writers need the challenges that come from attempting more complex forms of expression. If they mention a festival in their culture but do not provide any details about it, they need to know you are interested in other cultures and their practices. That encouragement might lead them to try a passage full of descriptive adjectives and relative clauses. It also introduces the idea that readers have likes and dislikes.

With reckless-abandon writers, on the other hand, you want to point out the potential benefits of trying something they are not sure they can handle. Let them know you recognize that they tried to express a very difficult argument. You also want to help them channel their energy. Let them know what works, whether it is a hypothetical argument or a flashback scene as the introduc-

tion to a persuasive paper. Suggest another point in the paper to try the same technique.

The acquisition of a language's grammar involves a lot of experimentation. Learners hear a structure, think they have a general idea how it functions, try it out, and then re-evaluate their understanding based on whether or not it seemed to work. They generally will continue using it as long as no one starts saying, "What did you say?" (Note that they rarely have someone telling them, "Don't say it that way.") Grammatical competence develops through this process of hearing, trying, and evaluating the feedback.

I think competence in writing develops in the same manner. Learners develop their initial ideas about the functions and types of writing through the texts they are exposed to. They may then attempt some of these types. They need feedback in order to continue though. Unlike spoken communication, writing can be an impersonal act, especially in academia where too often students receive papers back with little more than a grade and possibly some negative generalizations if the grade needs to be justified. Our job is to communicate what works and to provide feedback that promotes growth.