

## CHAPTER 8

# EMERGENT FORM AND THE PROCESSES OF FORMING MEANING

The writer's emergent strategic judgments about construal of situation, places of engagement, effective actions, relevant resources, and stances contain many implications for the form the text will take, both at the level of genre and of details that make a particular text. Strategic choices shape what aspects of the situation and the particular object of concern will be represented, how other contexts will be brought to bear, and how the writer will attempt to engage the minds and spirits of the readers. The text is the form into which all these considerations are crystallized and dynamically conveyed to the readers. That form must be recognizable and meaningful to the readers to allow them to make sense of what the writer is doing and then act upon it appropriately.

## WELL-KNOWN GENRES AND SEDIMENTED FORM

Sometimes a writer may be able to characterize the situation and action in well-defined, stable, non-mistakable generic terms—now it is time to send out an announcement of the upcoming party or now is the time to write a letter threatening legal action unless the bill is paid. Each of these has well known characteristics with a certain limited range of choices, known to those who regularly practice them. If a writer has difficulties with either, it is likely either because of lack practice in the genre or because exceptional circumstance put some strain on genre expectations. Further, each genre places specific requirements on what must be accomplished through particular textual means, no matter how inventive the writer is in carrying out some of the textual functions. So whether the writer expresses a festive and welcoming atmosphere with pictures of balloons or a joking excuse for the party, or expresses dignity with formal calligraphy on parchment, the invitation needs to identify who is invited, who is doing the inviting, the nature of the event, date, time, place, some indication of the dress or formality, and perhaps directions and a request for response. This is true whether the invitation is publicly posted on a lamppost or personally

addressed on a specially printed card. Equally the letter threatening legal action needs to identify the recipient and sender, the agreement and obligation, the date and place for response, and other details that indicate the legal consequences. In most cases legal threat needs to be cast in sober legal business letter format to be taken seriously; having it sent by an attorney further emphasizes the seriousness. These well-known genres have created packages of situations, actions, resources, author stances, and audience roles all wrapped up in well-known forms. All you need do is fulfill the requirements of the form and deliver the package.

As the action situation and the genre choice emerge, some writing decisions follow quite directly. Of course much substantial textual work still is to be done in selecting appropriate and effective words to fulfill the requirements as well as other related, non-textual work. Before you finish writing the invitation, you need to arrange for a place to hold the party and a commitment for its availability at the time, as well as to make sure that you have the funds for the promised entertainment and refreshments, and so on. Similarly in writing the legal letter you need to gather together all the relevant legal documents and agreements to know what details to include, how defensible your position is, and how to properly threaten within this particular legal situation. If you want to add legal muscle, you need to hire a lawyer, and the law firm has had to develop a suitably powerful looking letterhead. All of these other actions will bear on how the text will appear, what specific language and information is used, and how the text will be interpreted.

## **THE WORK TO DO WITHIN GENRES: MAKING OF MEANING**

In working within stable, familiar genres you would do well to look to previous examples and existing genre-specific guidelines to know the formal requirements, what the readers will expect, and the choices that are likely to be effective. But you also need to look to the particulars of your situation to make the text do the specific work you need done in this case. For some genres simple fulfillment of requirements may be all that is needed. Submitting an order for a new product needs to be accurate and complete as to what is ordered, where it is to be shipped, how payment is to be made, and so on. It must be addressed and transmitted to a business that sells the product and can deliver it as requested, and you must have the authorization to order and make payment. Once you have presented this as clearly as possible in the most familiar and easily interpretable way, your job is done. Any extra information, attempt at

humor or a personal touch, or political comment might confuse the business-client relationship.

On the other hand, you may need further work on the text beyond the required minimum. While sometimes a standard party invitation is enough, at times you may want to encourage participation or raise anticipatory joy by clever words, interesting graphics, personal photographs, or some other individualizing device. To do this successfully you need to go beyond the typical formal elements of the genre into the spirit of the event and the specifics of the situation. For a wedding invitation you might want to look into the values and dreams of the couple and the role of the partnership in their lives to provide clues as to what makes this celebration special. The standard legal letter, in the other example, may not be sufficiently threatening to be effective in a particular case, given what you know of the circumstances and the callous attitude of the offenders, so you may need to look into the offenders' vulnerabilities and fears to know what will spell trouble to them and get their attention. In both cases, nonetheless, the inventiveness remains within the expectations of the genre, though heightening its force.

Many genres have the expectation of novelty, originality, fresh thought, particular situational aptness or other invention even to fulfill successfully the basic requirements of the genre. The genre directs the character of the invention, points the writer toward particular kinds of work, and whets the readers' appetites for a particular kind of surprise. Jokes (unless they are in special categories of old and familiar jokes such as "groaners") require a surprise in the punchline, usually involving a pun, juxtaposition, incongruity, or other disruption of ordinary thinking—but it cannot be too shocking or sobering. While Op-ed columns in the newspaper are typically of a certain length, within a recognizable style, and about current events, yet each one is expected to present a fresh perspective on the events that show a special wisdom, insight, perspective, or knowledge that will stimulate the reader's thinking. To do this the columnist has to watch for interesting stories about which he or she has something fresh to say. Much of the work of writing such columns is in identifying events to talk about and the perspective from which to discuss them.

## **THE WORK OF ACADEMIC GENRES: LEARNING THROUGH PROBLEM SOLVING**

Most student papers in fulfillment of university assignments similarly need to respond to an instructor's expectation of fresh thinking on the students' part, often specified and directed in the assignment. This fresh thinking typically will

require the use of ideas and methods presented in the course and discipline, and will typically be based on reason and evidence, but will include some novel critical perspective, evaluation, analytical reasoning or other recognizable intellectual work. The student to succeed must not only recognize the general requirements of the assignment, but also the specific expectations of novel work added, to distinguish this paper from and above others in the class at the same time as being recognizably within the framework of the course and assignment.

In university settings student writing is often assigned to develop student analytical thinking, and ideally students and teachers enter into a productive dialogue about the disciplinary material, growing from students' engagement in the subject matter and the ideas being raised in the course. Academic genres, particularly in classroom or seminar settings, frequently have strong dialogic expectations—reprising ideas and materials already developed as part of the course as well as bringing fresh but appropriate external resources as part of the student's creative, critical, informed contribution. Furthermore, readers (or interlocutors in this educational dialogue) are usually looking for the organization, linkages and reasoning that provides evidence of a mind at work on disciplinary questions, using disciplinary resources and tools—that is, a mind that is being disciplined through the disciplinary task.

From this perspective, the genre the students are working in, directed by the prompt or assignment, becomes a problem space in which the students are learning by working through disciplinary issues using disciplinary tools and varieties of analytical, synthetic, and critical reasoning. The formulated argument of the paper then becomes both an expression of the student's answer to this problem and evidence of their thinking, reasoning, and learning.

## **GIVING SHAPE TO THOUGHT: THE PARADOXES OF FORM**

In such assignments the disciplinary learning and the writing become inseparable, and the instructor is likely to evaluate and respond to the paper precisely as a piece of disciplinary work, revealing the student's disciplinary understanding. There is sometimes an even deeper reading of the student's development which can be evaluated and responded to, concerning the student's depth of engagement and commitment to the field and its fundamental intellectual perspectives. That is, sometimes the instructor may be looking for evidence that the student is not just displaying disciplinary reasoning—even novel, clever reasoning—as an acquiescence to the authority relations in the classroom, but that somehow the student has made the disciplinary perspective

his or her own, has integrated disciplinary thinking into his or her own internally persuasive resources (to use Bakhtin's terms, 1981) as something to believe and use in viewing the world. While the indicators of that engagement may be fluid and task specific, they would indicate thought that extends beyond the immediate problem and the obvious resources as part of some further intellectual transformation within the student.

One of the regular challenges students have as writers, if they are indeed working from their own deeply internal thought, rather than thinking of the writing as simply an external set of forms and requirements to be fulfilled, is that they get lost in their thoughts and their writing may remain elliptical as internal thought often is (as described by Vygotsky, 1986.) Further, because student writers may have a sense that they know what they are talking out, the writing may not be intelligible to a differently minded audience. Because they have lived through an episode and may have multiple visceral memories of the situation, they may not share details necessary for others to picture and understand the situation. Certain personally important words may be used in idiosyncratic ways or with a force understood only by the author. So an important part of students learning to write for these situations is to expose and elaborate enough of their thought and experience so that their thought becomes intelligible to the reader.

These expectations about what might appear in the final paper raise paradoxes of internal processes and external production which riddle education as an enterprise, as educators evaluate external behaviors and products to determine students' internal development. Educators set challenging activities and establish responsive environments in order to foster internal development, and regularly make attributions about students' intellectual and emotional selves on the basis of their behaviors and products. These paradoxes are heightened in schooling because of the focus on the development of students' minds, but actually the tension between external form and internal thought runs throughout writing. Writing, as all language, is a vehicle to evoke meanings in other peoples' minds. Readers in turn believe that the thoughts they glean from a text had their origin in the mind of the writer. Even a pro forma social nicety or a lie must still be selected and thus thought. Yet what is transmitted are the words on paper or on the computer screen—an external object made of signs, which can be manipulated and evaluated as a formal construction. Nevertheless, the signs index thoughts entertained and projected by the writer and thoughts evoked in the readers, although the reader's thoughts may not match those projected by the writer.

The complexity and personality of thought leads to an indeterminacy and creativity in what the formal realization might be. But that formal realization

requires that we work with forms and make choices about formal elements. That tempts us to treat writing on the purely formal level, for that is where skill seems to reside. Yet we are always engaged in the task of making meaning and wrestling with form to express that meaning.

## **BEING PRACTICAL ABOUT PARADOXES: BIDDING THE MUSE**

One way to deal with these paradoxes of inner meaning and outer form is to wait for a moment of inspiration when one's perception of the situation, impulse for meaning, and sense of possible form crystallize in an intuitive sense. Such moments of writer's intuition can be very powerful and can direct writing strongly. Certainly a writer should cultivate the ability to identify and respect those moments when they appear, but their appearance at best will be sporadic and unpredictable. Most of our writing does not arise in the leisure that allows us to write poems only when the spirit moves us and the vision is clear. Even in that luxurious situation, such moments of illumination are more likely to strike if we are regularly at our keyboard or have pen in hand, struggling with meaning and form, at the altar of the muse, ready to recognize and transcribe when the muse visits us.

So what can we do until the muse arrives or even in the likely case the muse never visits? We can work from the outside in, or from the inside out, or moving back and forth.

## **FROM THE OUTSIDE IN: UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF FORM**

For fairly stabilized genres in fairly stabilized social circumstances, models, guidelines, advice, instructions, or textbooks can tell us what to include, how it should be organized, how it should be expressed. These directive documents range from detailed instructions about how to fill out government forms, to collections of model letters, to reference books on how to write a scientific article, to self-help books on writing scripts for television. They may even lay out very specific technical requirements for specific fields, such as proper terminology and citation form for scientific articles in chemistry, or all the items that must be included for an application to be considered. Increasingly, especially in digital environments, templates are provided (and sometimes monitored) to identify (and sometimes compel) topics and information as well

as to structure the presentation. Forms can even police our responses to ensure they are in the correct format. Although now machine monitoring of generic completeness is limited to fairly simple items in forms (name, address, etc.), we can only expect that this kind of structuring and monitoring will increase—including inspection of the content of more open-ended sections. In any event, even if such content expectations are not externally prompted, we can query ourselves and start to make lists of the kind of things expected in the document and specifics that we might want to include. Through such lists, notes, and outlines, the contents of texts can emerge and then be organized, giving us confidence and direction in what we say, even if we do not strictly adhere to this early planning.

Sometimes the guidance is more sketchy and open-ended, recognizing the differences of particular cases and the need for the creation of new meanings within the genre. This guidance may be more strategic identifying impulses or gists that need to be carried out or identifying larger sweeps of meaning. Such is the advice offered for scientific article introductions developed by John Swales (1990), that identifies a series of moves that a researcher needs to do to identify the rationale for a piece of research. One creates a research space by a series of moves that identifies a problem, establishes what prior research has been done in the literature and identifies a gap or opening in the research. Similar analyses have been done for other forms writing, identifying the usual set of moves in a genre, with the typical variations, additions, deletions, substitutions, and changes in sequence. These move analyses usually display a strategic logic in the selection and order of the moves, which are identified by examination of many real examples.

The tension between external form and the internal meaning-making suggests we take a somewhat sophisticated approach toward the formal requirements and practices typical in a situation. Models and guidance about specific contents, organization, appropriate language and phrasing, and other describable aspects of language put the appropriate tools of language at our fingertips, reminding us of the many things we already know or introducing us to new particulars that can extend our repertoire. But we also are helped by understanding the meaning to be conveyed that prompt these formal elements. Understanding the logic, the idea behind the formal requirements, first of all lets us know what we are doing, so we can direct our attention to the basic task of making meanings that fit the situation. The form does not displace the meaning, but helps us understand what kind of meanings we can create. Second, in moving us toward the underlying gist realized through the form, we can think about how to create the gist more forcefully and effectively. Third, if we understand what we are trying to accomplish in the genre in terms of detailed

meaning making, we are freed to try to alternative means—while still keeping in mind readers' expectations. While at times we may have to write exactly in the prescribed form or our reader will not accept our information, we often have some freedom to try new things as long as we respect and pay attention to expectations—explaining how we will fulfill expectations in a different way, or explaining persuasively why those expectations may need to be modified.

As we understand the meaning potentials and interactional gists that may be achieved in a situation, we may then also see that we can evoke more complex sets of understandings within the situation. By bringing the clusters of understanding packaged in multiple sets of genres we can develop meanings that draw on and resonate with several domains of activity, knowledge, ideas, and actions. If we consider genres not as fixed forms but recognizable clusters of psycho-social understandings, we have the possibility of invoking rich complexes of understanding in making our points. Of course, this requires clarity and focus in what we are doing so these multiple domains reinforce rather than confuse each other. This is all the more reason we need to look deeply into the worlds genres exist in and the worlds created by them.

## **FROM THE INSIDE OUT: MIDWIVING EMERGENT MEANINGS**

As discussed in previous chapters, our responses to situations are visceral and complex, bringing many resources to the task as a communicative situation takes shape. Whatever theory of internal language, intuitive judgment, subconscious or preconscious mind, affective thought, or brain architecture and dynamics one may hold, all views recognize that the resources and responses that give rise to our statements are only partially available to our conscious mind and planning. In forming utterances we act below our self-conscious monitoring of meaning production to tap deeper processes. Arranging our lives so as to make our deepest thought most available is an important part of our work as writers. We can identify our best time of day for writing and leave it open for writing without distractions. We can organize a conducive working environment and have our favorite coffee in our favorite mug. Developing rituals and routines that relax and focus our mind, or organizing daily work to begin with easier warm up activities, such as looking at necessary sources or reviewing the previous day's work are all part of the process of getting our mind in the right place to be receptive to our emerging thoughts. Such activities could be called prompting the mind, finding the right place to put your mind into, or assembling the right frame of mind—they all are forms of mental preparation.



Preparing the mind to write is not always easy, especially if the subject is challenging—intellectually, emotionally, socially, or technically. Such challenges may leave us with an uncertainty about whether we have something appropriate to say or whether we are capable of saying it. We may not feel comfortable and may resist committing ourselves to words (see Chapter 12 for elaboration of these psychological challenges). But we must assemble the courage to begin putting something on the page. Notes, outlines, plans, random sentences, free-writing journals are all low stakes ways to get the words flowing—not fully committing us to decisions, but yet producing something outside the self. Ideas may then begin to flow. Low-stakes writing can open some directions to take and even phrases to keep. For the rest the wastebasket and delete button are near at hand. At the very least we wind up with some text to look at, evaluate, modify, or replace with something better. Externalization reduces the cognitive overload of keeping everything floating in the head and perhaps decreases the confusion that occurs when juggling too many ideas at the margin of consciousness.

## **BACK AND FORTH: BETWEEN EXTERNAL FORM AND INTERNAL IMPULSES**

As we get text on a paper, our ideas take material shape, as a painting emerges from an empty canvas. The impulses to project meaning turn into particular words and sentences, inscribed contents, sequences of thought, and pieces of text organization. At the first level we may simply consider whether this is what we wanted to say and whether it is intelligible to others or could be said more effectively. But then we can see where it is headed—what is necessary to complete the thought or elaborate it to be more fully understood, and what next point needs to be addressed.

As the text emerges, thinking moves more and more from discovering what it is you want to say to craftsman-like working with the actual text. Even then, crafting text still can be a continuing process of discovery as you have to answer questions about how one part relates to another, or what is an accurate example or specification of an idea, or whether audiences will object and how objections can be addressed. As we construct the document we literally make meaning, articulating impulses and organizing them into a document that becomes the conveyer of that meaning. Work on the document sharpens the public meaning, which then becomes the words which we stand behind. In that process we need to keep questioning about how true that text is to our impulse—for only by that questioning can we maintain a commitment to your words. On the other hand, the written words become our commitment

as we struggle with how to make them say what we want, thereby creating a more elaborated meaning.

## **DRAFTY DRAFTS AND INTERIM TEXTS**

A writer works with the meaning as it emerges. This may mean you may come up with a key phrase but with no clear idea where it will fit within the text. Get it down. Or a paragraph explaining a key concept may be a good place to start, or a description of a key location, or a reminder list of some things you want to make sure you cover. If in a research article the research methods you employed are easiest to write, begin there. On any pieces of writing, the introduction is the hardest part. You could skip it at first or just try anything to warm up, with the knowledge that you can delete it, change it, or substitute something later once you see what the body of the text actually winds up saying.

As you build the first draft, it can be quite drafty, with much air flowing through it. If you have sections that are difficult to address or which require further research or other activities, then you can skip them over, but do leave as many words as you can to guide you when you return to fill in the holes. When you first begin writing, it does not even have to be a draft of the final text. You can write some interim document, such as a freewrite journal or a description of the materials you have available, just to get your thoughts and plans out. Many kinds of projects require different documents at various points long before the final document gets drafted; the interim documents get the writers to a position to be able to write the final document. For example, major research projects may start with a brief proposal long before the research is done. Reading notes on related studies may capture important points for the new study or identify important procedures. Collecting information, whether from experiments, surveys, or archives, produces a variety of texts, notes, data documents, or files. Rearranging and displaying the information in tables, narratives, graphics and other formats can help make sense of them. Then analysis may produce a whole different generation of documents. Short interim presentations of work in progress for supervisors, colleagues, or sponsoring organizations can help clarify actions, thinking, and results to this point. While all these may be written long before final articles or books, they help the writer think through the project, figuring out what to say and what material to include. Phrasing, descriptions, and even whole sections that will find their way into final documents emerge. Often people writing large projects find it useful to publish shorter articles that become the basis of larger books.

If you trust the process, meaning and form will gradually emerge over the long period to produce a text that crystallizes your meaning. Trusting the dialogue between yourself and the emerging text can give you courage to face the uncertainty about how the page will be filled and what will fill it. This dialogue is enriched by engagement with the materials one is writing about and with others interested and knowledgeable on the subject. Too often in schooling we view each text as a one-time effort to be produced in a limited time span, with few texts and other humans around us. Outside school, we are more likely to write as part of an ongoing interaction with others, so that we develop our thoughts, positions and actions in each exchange. The process is ongoing and being caught up in it is the means by which we produce texts for it. It is rare that a full and crisp vision will impel the writer from the beginning. Rather we must learn to take courage from a process driven by our best efforts and deepest impulses to communicate. We can do no more. Trust the process.