

READING AS INVENTION

A REVIEW/ESSAY

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Marilyn S. Sternglass, *Reading, Writing, and Reasoning* (New York: Macmillan, 1983), 211 pages.

We often ask students in our composition classes to write responses to something they have read — an essay, a poem, a book. The written response to literature is in fact the assignment most basic to our discipline. It just makes good sense, then, for composition texts to discuss the special problems writers face in responding to readings and the kind of mental action involved in the process. Many texts do this, but all too often superficially. Sternglass' new text — *Reading, Writing, and Reasoning* — goes well beyond mere lip service to show teachers and students how the three processes of reading, writing, and reasoning are often coextensive: "the writing process . . . incorporates reading and reasoning strategies in the topic formulation stage," (p. xi). Sternglass' text examines how the reading process itself (and failures in the process) influences the written response to the reading, and how the reasoning process figures so prominently in the way students read a text and the way they write about it.

The underlying assumption of *RWR* is that "guided practice in the combined processes of reading, writing, and reasoning fosters greater improvement in each process than does consideration of each as an isolated, separate skill" (p. ix). *RWR* provides students with the exercises they need to develop these skills and explains the theory behind the exercises. (This dual purpose leads to some problems, as we shall see.) Sternglass does not consider reading an event isolated prior to the writing process; reading is itself the be-

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ginning of the writing process, the first stage of invention. Changing the way we usually perceive the relationship between reading and writing is one of Sternglass' major contributions. But her chief contribution is her development of a prereading technique. Just as prewriting methods aid students in writing, prereading is a systematic heuristic guiding students to read more critically.

Sternglass bases her prereading technique, as she says, on the psycholinguistic model of Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith, which demonstrates that reading is a predictive activity, that "readers' background information contributes to their engagement with the written material" (p. x), that in other words the active reader brings as much meaning to the text as the text supplies the reader. Sternglass' prereading technique is aimed at developing the student reader's ability to contribute to texts. Prereading is intended to "evoke prior knowledge, establish purposes in reading, and cultivate the ability to predict what may be found in the readings" (p. x).

The technique requires that students articulate, in writing, the associations and expectations they bring to texts. Before we read a book, we examine its cover, we respond in some way to the title and to the author's name — in short, we begin to construct a context for understanding the text, we begin to expect certain things and to bring certain associations to our reading. Adept readers can determine a book's thesis, its intended audience, its line of reasoning, even its mode of development — as well as register approval or disapproval — simply by examining the cover. And who among us has not judged a work on the basis of the publishing house? (Sternglass would probably say that it is impossible *not* to judge a book by its cover.) The skilled reader brings to a text myriad associations, many of them subconscious, just as portions of a professional writer's inventive strategy may be internalized and subconscious. Even those responses that are conscious are second nature for the skilled reader. But not so for the unskilled reader. So Sternglass' prereading technique helps students become more aware of the associations and expectations they bring to works and teaches them to articulate these associations until they become second nature.

Chapter One introduces students to the six steps of prereading:

1. Jot down a few of those associations and expecta-

- tions made when first encountering the work.
2. Preview the selection *quickly* and write ten key words or phrases about the work.
 3. Before reading the selection more carefully, write a paragraph using the key words and summarize the content of the work.
 4. Write three or four questions that you expect the work to answer.
 5. Make a prediction about the form the selection will take (narrative, argumentative, etc.).
 6. Reread the selection more thoroughly.

These stages are intended to help the student reader become a more active reader, a reader who anticipates meaning and who creates meaning — a critical reader whose mind is not merely a tabula rasa against which ideas either splat like inkblots or bounce off leaving no trace, a reader whose mind critically engages the text and reconstructs it. Step three, especially, gets students into the habit of reconstructing texts — perhaps the core of critical reading.

After reading the text, the student evaluates the pre-reading and determines whether the expectations were realized or, if not, why not. The discrepancies that will inevitably occur between the student's initial expectations and what is realized in the rereading will be a measure of the student's ability to anticipate texts accurately. (The discrepancies may also say something about the text itself: well-written texts no doubt succeed for the most part in meeting readers' expectations; poorly written texts either do not meet the expectations, or do not raise any in the first place.) As the reader matures, the gap between initial expectations and eventual realization should narrow.

Chapter Two introduces students to incipient forms of reasoning — simplified induction and deduction — and asks them to examine how these patterns function in the essay provided. (One impressive characteristic of *RWR* is that all the readings used are incorporated into the text.) Chapter Three is a perfunctory treatment of the writing process, showing students how to connect the reading to their personal experiences (the basis for the proposed writing assignment) and how to construct a thesis. Students are then encouraged to adopt either induction or deduction in writing the essay. The book moves to progressively more complex reading/writing processes — summarizing, analyzing and

synthesizing, revising and editing, each chapter developing a more advanced skill. *RWR* also discusses, albeit briefly, the different aims and modes as well as research methodology. There are two chapters — their presence puzzling to me — on interviewing and vocabulary.

What Sternglass handles in *RWR* she handles well, but there is much about the writing process that she does not handle at all. While examining quite thoroughly the way the writer comes to understand a subject (writer and subject being two of the four elements of the communication act), *RWR* does not consider seriously enough the role played by the other two important elements of communication: audience and language. When a writer responds to an essay, the intended audience and the language for the response exert their influence, even as early as invention. But when they are discussed at all in *RWR*, audience and style are relegated to the revising and editing stages. In treating audience and style so, *RWR* does no less than other texts, but Sternglass' theory outlined in the Preface and the incisive analysis of prereading led me to expect much more. In its neglect of audience and style, *RWR* leans more toward reading than writing; it is in fact more a guide to reading than a guide to writing.

Related to its neglect of audience and style is what I see as an unfortunate presentation of the reasoning process. Sharing the view of most composition texts, *RWR* talks about reasoning in terms of what I call the Christmas shopping analogy: the notion that the writer "picks" a form of reasoning, as he would a suit, from a coat rack of given forms, tries it on for size and, if it fits, giftwraps it for the reader — whom it may or may not fit. This reductive, "off-the-rack" analogy is, unfortunately, the one students are too often given. A more useful and accurate analogy might be what I call the tailor-made analogy: the notion that a writer may look to a certain pattern for guidance, but essentially the writer designs a reasoning pattern and tailors it for the reader, whom it must fit. Looking beyond the simplicity of the off-the-rack and tailor-made analogies, we can see reasoning as a pattern of thought *developed by* (not given to) the writer to present subject to reader, for whatever purpose. Reasoning in the writing process is the writer's working out of a pattern of thought through which writer and reader can come to share a similar understanding of a subject. Concern for audience — "measurement" of the reader, if you like —

is thus a necessary and vital concern in the prereading and reasoning stages; some concern for style — the words which will reconstruct the subject and present the reasoning — is similarly essential.

RWR is no more culpable than other texts of using a reductive analogy to discuss reasoning, but it is perhaps more negligent than some in its wholesale removal of concern for audience from the process.

RWR is a seminal work, and like some other texts that lay new foundations for our discipline, it has a problem finding its own audience: it tries to address students and teachers simultaneously. The audience problem resides in Sternglass' habit throughout the text of explaining the reasoning or the theory behind a certain exercise. While the teacher and the bright student may find this enlightening, I fear the less critical student — the one for whom the book seems to be intended — may find the theorizing a bit disconcerting. The following passage serves to illustrate:

Because there are any number of relationships among ideas that writers can explore, and because every writer's own unique background contributes to the formulation of synthesis for the writer, there is no predetermined topic that must serve as the synthesizing idea for any particular writer. (p. 13)

Yanking quotations out of their original contexts always mars them, but in this case the damage has been slight; context did nothing to make the generalized style appropriate for the freshman composition student. Though the concepts themselves are not difficult to comprehend, the composition students I am familiar with will not respond well to such a passage. They will label it, and maybe even the whole text, "boring." But then Sternglass is clearly writing such passages for teachers, not students. *RWR* may best be utilized as a teacher's text: a work that a teacher uses to inform classroom instruction, but which students do not purchase or read.

This brings us to an important question we should raise about any text: in what courses and with what students will it work? *RWR* follows an unfortunate, to my mind, habit of composition texts in *not* identifying an intended audience (doing so might limit a text's sales) — though worse yet is some handbooks' habit of identifying the broadest constituency possible: "writers." *RWR* could work well for most

freshman composition or reading courses, and perhaps senior high school classes. It is aimed at students who can comprehend what they read but who need to develop higher cognitive reading functions: the ability to interpret, to reconstruct, to summarize, to evaluate, to analyze. But I think that *RWR* will have to be supplemented in any class by something else: lectures or handouts, if not other texts.

My few complaints about *RWR* are really only an acknowledgement of what we already know: no textbook is perfect. (Perfect meaning in this context, "Does things the way *I* would want them done.") The few flaws in *RWR* do not supercede the overall value of the work: it reminds us not to take reading and reasoning skills for granted when we teach writing, and goes beyond that to show us how *not* to take them for granted. *Reading, Writing, and Reasoning* is the kind of text from which teachers themselves will learn much — and perhaps a freshman text can receive no higher praise, or serve no greater purpose.