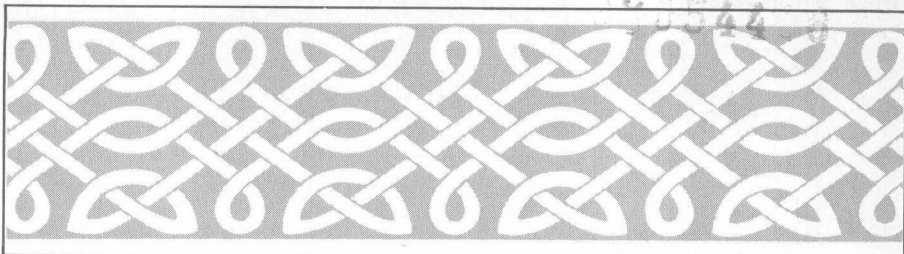


SUSAN MILLER

# THE WRITTEN WORLD

Reading and  
Writing in  
Social  
Contexts



# **THE WRITTEN WORLD**

**Reading and Writing  
in Social Contexts**

**Susan Miller**

University of Utah



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*For Nathaniel Miller and Gavi Price:*  
Young readers of the world create its best future.

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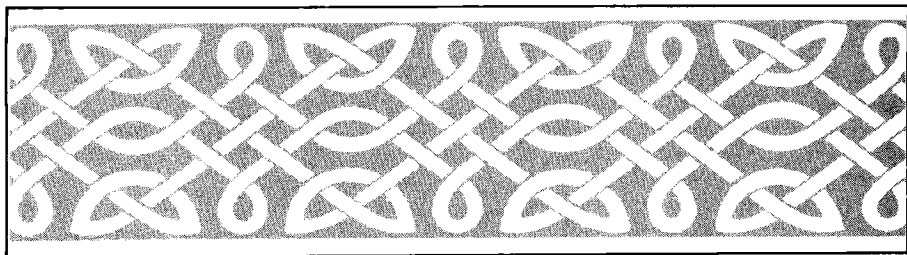
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# To the Teacher

We use anthologies of readings for many purposes in our writing courses. Anthologies include materials that extend our students' range of reading experience as we use them to teach methods of critical reading. They allow students, as a classroom community, to share a fund of topics and rhetorical models they can discuss and question. They provide points of departure for the wide variety of writing assignments we make. They lead students to their own analyses of content and persuasive strategies; to imitations of style, form, or voice; and to many forms of personal response.

*The Written World* aims to meet these needs, but I have selected its contents, designed its arrangement, and composed its apparatus with something more in mind. I want to offer what many other anthologies lack—sustained attention to the contexts of both writing and reading. Students need to understand that ordinary but active human processes both take life from and result in writing and reading. In this book, I have persistently asked students to think about the origins and effects of reading and writing, both their own and others'. They are invited to appreciate how diverse and complex the reasons for writing can be.

Consequently, *The Written World* works against a flatly textual approach that removes the selections from their own contexts and purposes. It doesn't suggest that students simply receive a text as an example of "good writing." Instead, it encourages them to see the cultural and individual energies that produced a text and to realize how these are at work in its words. While it is never entirely possible to complete this sort of recovery, I want to insure that students' own reasons for writing, and their ways of doing so, are not isolated from the class materials designed to expand them.

In order to do this, I have highlighted some basic human uses for writing in distinct communities of readers and writers and have organized them into five categories. These uses include telling stories, making public arguments and policy, creating documents and preserving cultural wisdom, enriching our singular and social selves, finding distinct ways of talking and thinking about a subject, and monitoring the distinctly literary pitfalls and play within written worlds. I have entitled the chapters “Written Voices: Writing to Record Stories and Statements of Public Policy,” “Visible Language,” “The Writer’s Contexts: From Self to Community,” “Written Worlds,” and “Writing about Writing: Diversions and Dangers,” respectively.

These categories roughly follow the history of literacy, which has been entirely intertwined with the changing nature and scope of reading communities. That is, changes in composing and its technologies have increased opportunities for writers to expand and change the written world, finally making it possible to create separate fields of writing and to write commentaries on other writing. Neither reading nor writing has ever been a static set of “operations” on words, for both have acquired new connotations as manuscript culture, print culture, competitive publishing, democratic educational opportunities, and competing media have evolved. As these developments created interdependent communities of readers and writers, they also changed the nature of these communities. Each distinct moment has both challenged us and enriched the complex, specific ways in which we now map an originally sketchy universe of writing.

I have ordered these uses of writing and reading, and the forms they have taken, chronologically. This arrangement does not require you to teach your course as a sequential history, but it does allow students to see how printed words shape our constantly changing personal, public, and self-referential worlds. The text of Homer is no less sophisticated than a contemporary novel like *Riddley Walker*, but culturally unified Homeric audiences certainly preceded the sophisticated and solitary readers of Russell Hoban’s futuristic fiction, which is composed in a style that reflects on writing itself. Thus, the two selections result from different imaginative perspectives on what composition can do, both from the writer’s and from the readers’ or listeners’ points of view. While a speech may be no less well formed than a case study, the motive for composing a persuasive public address preceded the motive for writing to contribute specialized data to members of an international academic discipline.

I realize that the history of writing and reading has been incremental, not strictly sequential. Each of the five major divisions of this book includes a mixture of examples from past and present that allows the instructor to focus on a variety of themes. I have done this both to give you flexibility and to enable students to see the continuity from earlier uses for writing to current ones. For instance, the examples of an ongoing conversation about “character” in Chapter 4 include selections by Aris-

totle and Joan Didion that raised new issues for consideration by the established community of readers and writers. These two selections, and those with them, comment on one another, showing a textual community around the issues of individuality and the self. In each of the other chapters, I have organized the examples in categories that represent common motives, writing situations, or imagined audiences, so that students can see reading and writing as specific, consequential processes that they may use themselves to understand and change their own experience.

I hope that these functional, recursive categories will highlight purpose and activate reading in a way that other anthologies do not. Whenever the writing in question is more complex than a grocery list, asking the question "What is this piece of writing *doing*?" generally produces two groups of responses. The more familiar reactions may take up textual issues like authorial voice, format and organization, kinds of evidence, and language and style. But a second set of answers, often avoided in textual approaches, also results. These reactions describe a reading's best possible outcome from its author's viewpoint; the responses, both implied and actual, of its readers, the personal and social situation in which the writing occurred, and the student's possible analogous writing in a similar set of circumstances.

The apparatus of this book doesn't ignore the first set of answers. Both the questions for individual analysis and the suggestions for writing call for fairly close, traditional analyses of language and form, and direct the student to deal with the text itself. But these questions are also part of a larger drama of reading. Each chapter provides a brief introduction that explains the purposes and processes that its selections share. Individual headnotes explicitly address the motives and situation from which a piece was written in order to connect an author's motives with the student's experience. Often, headnotes also suggest ways of reading that direct attention to the writer's purposes and to readers' responses to the selection.

The questions following the readings fall into three groups that roughly follow a common sequence for teaching. "Rereading and Independent Analysis" questions ask for investigations of language, structure, and other prominent features of a selection. These are suggested as old-fashioned homework that can be brought to bear on later class discussions and writing, but they might also guide classes on specific textual features. They often direct students to make notes or write brief statements, so that writing will sustain reading, not follow later as only a "product."

"Suggested Discussion and Group Activities" often rely on evidence compiled in response to analysis questions, as do the suggestions for writing. These prompts for discussion engage students in group and class projects that will allow them to bring their individual interpretations to a group for response and modification. For some teachers, these may be the center of work for each piece. The final "Writing Suggestions" are not meant to be make-work but instead call on the student to apply readings



and individual experience to both private and public written forms. These are organized into “Response,” “Analysis,” and “Finding a Purpose” assignments. These suggestions often specify a situation, audience, and genre so the students may take a controlling rhetorical stance and thereby see themselves taking meaningful action through writing, whether by exploring, persuading, or explaining.

I have included selections at various levels of difficulty, from both past and present, so that teachers can explore contextual reading with various groups of students. I hope this wide range of selections will introduce collegiate reading and writing in ways that usefully precede their later practice in specialized academic settings. I have been especially concerned to provide what strictly “cross-curricular” collections usually overlook: information about how separate texts may together form a textual community with identifiable customs and purposes. In my experience, this fundamental issue is not prominent enough in introductions that focus on textual rather than contextual issues.

The selections include many familiar examples, but I have also attempted to expand the reading canon, for what I hope are obvious reasons. The unusual selections here are meant to enhance traditional views of quality and significance, to give you flexibility, and to increase opportunities for the readings to interpret each other.

In everything, I have tried to show students how reading and writing are connected, mutually supportive activities. Following George Hillock’s essay, “What Works in Teaching Composition,” as well as my own teaching experience, I have avoided rigid “natural process” and “presentational” attitudes. Students are encouraged to learn the actual processes that writers use, but they are also expected to gain information and use it as they work with this book. The exercises therefore take a flexible “environmental” stance, suggesting various specific tasks and requiring students to see their reading as a source as well as a model. I have aimed for a reasoned mixture of limited, staged analytic tasks; modeling; and various peer and teacher collaborations. In concert with the text’s arrangement, there are questions about changing contexts for reading and writing, and at times an exercise will refer the student to other selections. The questions address particular problems that unite the selections with their writers’, and readers’, historical, social, and literary expectations.

There is now widespread support for understanding and teaching that language constructs experience as often as it preserves it. I hope this anthology will help those who have become uncomfortable with existing texts that focus on the value of readings but do not reawaken the desires and situations that first invested the pieces with value. *The Written World* aims to show students that reading and writing contain many ongoing conversations determined by, resumed, and joined for many reasons.



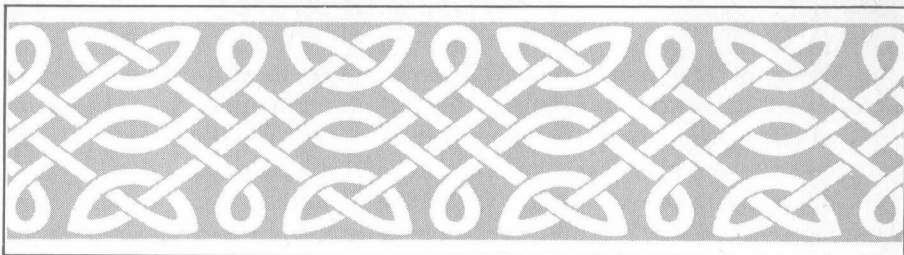
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*Susan Miller*



# To the Student

## The Uses of Writing: Actions Through Language

If you think of writing as something you do in an English course (perhaps you like it, perhaps you don't), you probably also separate writing from reading, which you do in many situations. My purpose in gathering the group of readings in this collection has been to help put these two activities—writing and reading—together, to show you how *your* writing has everything to do with the reading you do in this course or anywhere.

When I say this, I don't mean "writing" as something to be "corrected," but as an action. This book's title, *The Written World*, is meant to suggest that written words serve two important purposes. They are ways to save thoughts and record events, but they are first ways to think and act. They create their own universe of language, entwined with daily experience. As the unique species that uses language, we fulfill some of our most important purposes entirely *in* language, by writing and reading. Both activities have become common enough over their history to allow us, as individuals and as socially organized groups, to use them in many important ways. They communicate and preserve ideas, they allow us to investigate shared events and problems, they establish laws and communicate beliefs, and they permit us to know ourselves better.

You may not at first see how these purposes for written language actually affect you, a student whose writing and reading appear so different from the writing and reading you are assigned. What I have in mind, therefore, is to show you through this collection some actual uses of writing, and to invite you to read and write for similar reasons. The many kinds of writing represented here have everything to do with you. They established our shared communities by fixing beliefs and social structures that

still affect us. They communicated some of our most enduring ways of looking at the world that is not written, but lived in every day. They gave individuals a way to realize their own best (and worst) selves by using written language to try on roles and reach out to others. And they became specialized written “conversations” that we enter and leave, gatherings in language that enrich us and give us a chance to leave our mark on them.

In the first three chapters of this book, the purposes for writing include the following actions:

1. Telling stories and making public speeches to unite communities and to explore basic human problems
2. Creating documents that preserve the laws and wisdom of distinct cultures
3. Exploring the self in privacy, in the special dialogue of a letter, or in widely shared reflections on community experience

These three purposes are not neatly separable, as you will see when you read. But by putting them in categories, I hope to show you how writing and reading serve specific human needs to organize and share common experiences.

The last two chapters show more specialized purposes for writing, purposes that it has taken centuries for writing to accomplish. Continuing written conversations have become specialized, so that a group of written statements may stake out a particular subject or problem, or may represent specialized methods for asking and answering questions, similar to those that define the fields in which you take courses. Or, as the final chapter shows, writing and reading may be playful, and at times dangerous, activities that comment on other writing and reading.

These five uses by no means exhaust the reasons that people write, but they do clarify how writing has been and is a way of making something happen in a specific time, place, and situation. These readings show that writing exists to help us accomplish something for ourselves, for those we know, and for others who participate in our many roles and interests. In order to do these things, writers use many methods of composing. They think and talk a lot before they actually write, but they also use notes and written doodles to get ideas about what to say. And they share “rules”—agreements about conventional forms of finished writing. “Errors” that get corrected reveal contracts in the groups who use these rules, decisions made over time that assure that written words—which usually don’t have their writer around to explain them—will make the best possible sense.

Of course, all of these conditions for reading and writing apply to you. I point them out because writing—and reading—are never merely exercises. They are ways to achieve a new understanding, to change a situation, to continue to build knowledge others can use, and to entertain and regulate ourselves. They deserve, therefore, our most versatile attitudes and actions.

When you read, you connect your own moment of reading to the original situation in which a piece was written. A newly meaningful experience results. The uses of writing are never entirely fixed because each time someone else reads, say, an article or story, written words are revitalized in the new situation of the reader. When you write, your ideas, your knowledge, and your reasons for writing grow from ideas that others have used and purposes that others have had. In both reading and writing, you make new contributions to a written conversation that started before you joined it, within that conversation's established but elastic limits of meaning.

Your reading and writing are, therefore, related to each other—practicing one process helps you accomplish more with the other. With this book, I want to alert you to the possibilities for changing and enlarging your own world by using all of the resources in the written world.

## Looking for Purpose as You Read

Since it is not enough for you only to hear that writing and reading are actions rather than exercises, I want to be specific about the ways in which you can approach the selections in this book. As you read a piece of writing, keep the following ideas in mind to help discover the purpose and the kind of action that the writer was taking.

### 1. Identify the Context

"Context" is the whole situation around a piece of writing. It is the actual and imagined "place" where a particular text is located. To find the context of a selection, look for the qualities of this situation that distinguish it from the situations that produced other texts. Before you can understand a reading's "message," you need to know when, where, and why it was written. Use the introductions and headnotes in this book to help get a sense of the goals a writer had in mind for a specific group of readers. Think of yourself as one of those readers and try to answer these questions:

- What was the purpose of this selection from the writer's point of view? What outcomes did the writer hope for?
- In what time and place would these outcomes best be realized?
- Whom do you imagine to be the author and "ideal" reader of this selection?
- If you were making a movie of this written action, what would its setting be?

### 2. Get a Sense of the Whole Before You Focus on the Parts

Before you actually read a selection, use your answers to the first questions about context to help you predict a selection's content. Look over the

whole piece before you settle in to read one paragraph or sentence at a time. Read only the first paragraph, and try to guess what will follow. You might try writing a brief note about what you would write if you were in this writer's situation and shared this purpose. How would you have continued after this beginning?

Read the first sentence in each paragraph, and the last few paragraphs in their entirety, to make a mental outline that will help you understand and remember the whole piece. Then, before you read closely, try to predict the kinds of examples and evidence the writer might choose to support the points in your outline.

### 3. Read Actively

Successful writing carries its readers along so that they subordinate individual details to their grasp of the whole. But as a reader whose purpose is to understand *how* this wholeness was achieved, you will need to reread, looking for the ways in which a piece of writing "works." Ask yourself these questions:

- What are the most important points this selection makes?
- What kind of evidence—examples, facts, logical reasoning—makes you trust these ideas?
- In what pattern is this content presented? Can you find the reasons that an author chose a particular order of arrangement?

## Writing for Your Readers

Any community that understands distinct written meanings shares habits of expression and a common vocabulary. The familiarity of this language allows the group to cooperate. Just as you need to know something about the habits of specific communities to understand the purpose of a reading, you also need to keep your own community's expectations in mind as you write. Every class you take is a small community of readers and writers who have a purpose for being there and expectations about what sort of approach, content, and results they will find. In your writing course, you can learn ways to control the effect your writing will have in many contexts by testing your writing against your classmates' and teacher's responses.

First, of course, you want ways to guide your own writing processes. Here is where the connection between reading and writing becomes most clear. The same questions that help you understand what you read can help as you write. They can guide you as you plan, write drafts, and revise, processes that often go on all at once. You will need to think about, answer, and reanswer the following questions, since the act of writing itself will change your direction and sense of the whole.

*Purpose:* What is my purpose? What would be the best outcome of this piece of writing? What information, new ideas, and perspectives will my readers have after they read? What will this piece of writing *do*?

*Readers:* What role am I taking for my readers? Whom do I imagine to be the ideal reader for this writing? What does this ideal reader want and need from my writing?

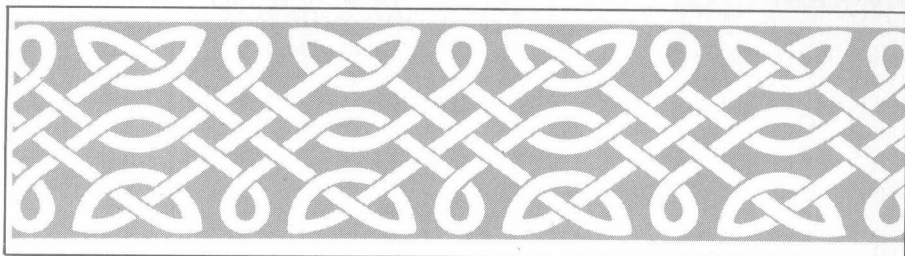
*Setting:* In what specific setting do I imagine this writing accomplishing its purpose? What are my limits of time, place, and possibility?

*Approach and support:* Considering my purpose, role, and reader, what is the best sort of evidence I can use to make my point? What do I need to include to accomplish my purpose? In what order should I present this material so the reader will follow my ideas?

*Language:* Do my sentences and vocabulary fit all of these choices? Have I chosen a level of diction, references to specific facts, and interesting comparisons that contribute to my purpose in this setting? Does each sentence clearly contribute to the reader's understanding of what I want to accomplish?

Answering these questions can help you learn to act like a “writer”—a person who uses writing for many specific reasons. Your answers will change even while you are writing, and may change again after you get responses from others. But your successful finished writing will be held together by your control of each of these elements of the whole.

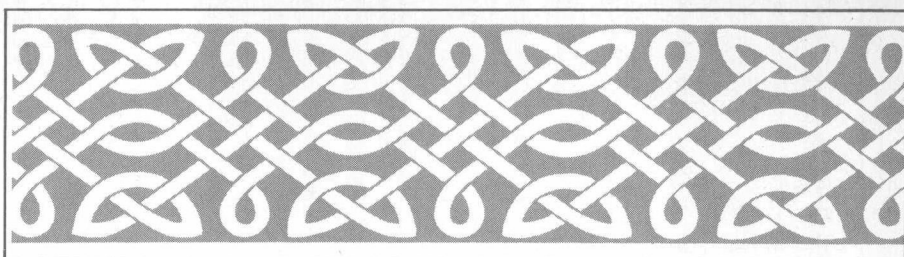
*Susan Miller*



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