Making Meaning

READING AND WRITING TEXTS

Eric Gould
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER, COLORADO

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[PREFACE]

Making Meaning is designed for freshman composition courses and rests on the premise that there is a fundamental relationship between reading and writing. The following special features of the book develop this relationship and offer students a practical and pleasurable approach to improving both their reading and writing skills:

- *Reading and writing are taught together as acts of interpretation.* Students are shown how they make meaning when they read and write. They are offered useful interpretive strategies: making inferences, questioning, filling in gaps, synthesizing information, comparing texts, and focusing reactions. Students are encouraged to tolerate ambiguity, to consider alternative meanings, and to revise their responses. They are also asked to write response statements and to develop these into critical interpretations. To assist in the process of interpretation, a variety of oral and written exercises are offered in each chapter, including questions for group and class discussion as well as informal and formal writing exercises.

- *Reading and writing are treated as social acts,* as ways of creating a dialogue with other readers and writers, and of becoming conscious of how social assumptions condition the meaning we make. Students are shown how to draw upon their cultural and gender-specific values as ways of becoming more critically aware of what they do when they read and write.

- ***Making Meaning** contains a wide range of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary readings:* texts drawn from the media, information and research sources, essay collections, college textbooks, fiction, poetry, and drama. The book also provides information about how different kinds of texts function in our society. Each chapter is dedicated to exploring the rhetorical strategies of a genre that students are likely to encounter in college and daily life. Students

should pay special attention to how texts reveal (and sometimes conceal) their historical, political, gender, and other cultural implications.

- ***Making Meaning*** *teaches reading and writing about social environments, media images, and TV and film narratives before dealing with written texts.* We learn to read our physical environments before we read writing. In addition, media narratives have a more direct and "realistic" impact on us from an early age than does writing. While the emphasis in *Making Meaning* is on written texts, students are encouraged to develop interpretive skills by working with media texts first, then adapting the interpretive process to more abstract and specialized written texts, such as essays, research materials, and literary works.

In effect, *Making Meaning* teaches reading and writing in its social context and as a part of cultural studies. It shows students how to interpret cultural texts—both popular and academic—and how to explore the social assumptions of their own reading and writing. It deals with the power that comes from being a conscious reader, able to interpret a variety of important discourses in our society and to produce persuasive writing out of those reading experiences.

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I thank Steve Rutter and John Strohmeier of Wadsworth, who have believed in this book from the start and with whom it has been a delight to work. Richard Mason has meticulously and thoughtfully seen *Making Meaning* through its editorial and production stages. Several reviewers have helped to focus *Making Meaning* in practical ways, insisting on its social implications. They include Bonnie Braendlin, Florida State University; Lee Chambers, University of Denver; Gretchen Flesher, Gustavus Adolphus College; Mary F. Minton, Virginia Commonwealth University; James E. Porter, Indiana University–Purdue University; and Mark Reynolds, Jefferson Davis State Junior College. I have found their careful reading and commentary indispensable. And most importantly my wife, Diane, has provided, as always, the inspiration, advice, and encouragement that has counted most for me.

Eric Gould
University of Denver

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[CHAPTER ONE]

Reading and Writing About Texts

The Social Act of Reading

Few daily activities are as essential as the act of reading. A common definition of *reading* is that it is the way in which we make meaning out of writing. This definition is true, of course, and the reading of writing is a major focus in this book. But, reading is not confined to writing; in fact, reading is the way in which we become conscious of the world in general and how we make meaning out of it.

Long before we can actually read writing, we learn to read the world around us—and we never stop learning how to do this. To function in society, we must negotiate our way through changing environments and situations. We try to make sense of many representations of reality: people's moods; the layout of buildings; educational, political, and economic systems; environmental settings; the language of clothes, food, and entertainment; transportation systems; and so on.

Reading, then, is above all an ongoing process of *socialization*. We develop a familiarity with and understanding of our society through reading everyday life and many other representations of reality. When confronted with new experiences, we try to make them credible in terms of our reading experience. In short, through reading we develop models for what reality is or can be.

Reading Everyday Life

Let's start our exploration of the reading process by briefly summarizing what takes place when we try to make sense of everyday life, for that, as you will see, carries over into our reading of all kinds of texts.

Constructing Reality Through Language. We attach concepts to events in the world through our use of language. We understand everyday life not as a nameless reality but as a set of events to which we can give meaning.

When we read, we are not only conscious of things, we are conscious of things that have meaning for us. We understand their function in society and the concepts attached to those functions, and we can relate those concepts to our own experience.

Take the American flag, for instance. The flag is more than a collection of stars and stripes in red, white, and blue printed on a piece of cloth. It suggests more than its physical presence. The number of stars and stripes represents the number of states in the union. The flag stands, in a conventional way, for the entire country. We are taught about this concept of the flag at an early age. We learn to define a flag by talking about it and using concepts others have attached to it. A flag functions to identify people as forming a nation, for example, and to carry the powerful social concept of nationality. It also carries the related concept of nationalism, which is open, of course, to many interpretations by different groups.

Understanding Events by Placing Them in Social Contexts. What we call *reality* is a social construction, something we learn through the language we use and share with others. We have long related the concept of nation to that of nationalism, and nationalism becomes associated with the concepts of defense, superiority, and pride. We develop notions of foreign policy. As a nation, we share many complex constructions of reality that we use to communicate with each other about the common experience of being American.

Social constructions of reality, when shared by many, are codes by which societies understand themselves. The word *code* is probably best known to you as something used in espionage or international affairs—a secret communication. A message that is in code is designed to be read only by those to whom the message is directed. A code is shared by only a few readers; if you don't know the secret code, you can't read the text.

Unlike espionage codes, social codes are not secrets, but they can be secretive and complex. They are networks of concepts, models for reality, that form our common knowledge of what the world is like. They become a basis for communication and culture. We begin to learn these codes from an early age, and we soon become aware of how they can change, like codes of sexual behavior or design. Some codes, on the other hand, change very little. We share much the same understanding of the traffic code now, for example, as we did twenty years ago. The code of

good behavior in social situations is another example of a code that has been relatively stable over the years.

When we read anything, we apply those learned social codes, or models of reality, to experience. In this way, reading everyday life is a process of continually contextualizing and recontextualizing the world. We can't understand anything without putting it into a context of prior knowledge and experience. Things have meaning for us only so far as they relate to other things that we know something about. Thus, we continually revise our codes for essential knowledge.

[*DISCUSSION*]

Consider the classroom in which you are reading or discussing this chapter. Look closely at the furniture, layout, and design of the room. Describe them carefully. Then answer the following questions:

1. What specific concepts do you find implied by the layout and contents of this room? Consider aspects of the design and furniture, attaching concepts to each (for example, desks designed for ease of writing).
2. Compare those concepts to others you know of from previous classroom experiences. Have the rooms been similar or different?
3. What educational design codes do you think provide the context for the items in the room you are in now? Do they imply someone has planned the classroom with a concept of what a good educational environment should be like? What do you think that concept is?
4. What do you think would be an ideal classroom setting? Why?

Creating Complex and Even Contradictory Messages. Our society presents itself to us in many complex (and even contradictory) codes, from the design of a college curriculum to the design of a city. As we try to make sense of even familiar objects around us, we find they play different roles for different people, and for us, too. A national flag can be a symbol of both identity and aggressive nationalism, depending on who is reading it and where the flag is found. Every code is dynamic and capable of change, like those of gender role playing in social situations or concepts of what should form a core education. Objects and events never have fixed concepts attached to them; their meaning depends on their function for readers.

Consider, for example, a street full of well-manicured green lawns in a suburban environment. According to the Smithsonian Institution, there are approximately twenty-five million acres of lawn in the United States—an