

**University of Massachusetts Amherst**

---

**From the Selected Works of Peter Elbow**

---

June, 2006

# The Music of Form

Peter Elbow, *University of Massachusetts - Amherst*



Available at: [https://works.bepress.com/peter\\_elbow/18/](https://works.bepress.com/peter_elbow/18/)



Peter Elbow

## The Music of Form: Rethinking Organization in Writing

---

Written words are laid out in space and exist on the page all at once, but a reader can only read a few words at a time. For readers, written words are trapped in the medium of time. So how can we best organize writing for readers? Traditional techniques of organization tend to stress the arrangement of parts in space and certain metadiscoursal techniques that compensate for the problem of time. In contrast, I'll describe five ways to organize written language that *harness* or bind time. In effect, I'm exploring form as a source of energy. More broadly, I'm implying that our concept itself of "organization" is biased toward a picture of how objects are organized in space and neglects the story of how events are organized in time.

---

*As much as writers need to understand writing, they need to understand reading and readers more.*  
—Colomb and Griffin 292

*[F]orm is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite . . . This is the psychology of form as distinguished from the psychology of information.*  
—Burke *Counter-Statement* 31–33

*Socrates makes it clear . . . that such naming of parts [of speeches— as prescribed by contemporary rhetoricians] is not true rhetoric, which should be based on an understanding of what moves the soul.*  
—Fahnestock 33

CCC 57:4 / JUNE 2006

620





Imagine a painting, drawing, or photo whose organization you admire. An Ansel Adams photo? A Vermeer seventeenth-century woman pouring water into a basin? Try to see the image in your mind's eye. Take a moment to think about how it is well organized. I've chosen Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. (The painting can easily be viewed at many Web sites by Googling "nighthawks hopper." Particularly good is <http://www.artchive.com/artchive/H/hopper/nighthwk.jpg.html> from Chicago's Art Institute.)

It shows a brightly lit city diner—virtually white—surrounded by black night. The right side of the painting is dominated by bright light—but with a prominent dark line running down through it. The left side of the picture is dominated by darkness—with an equally prominent white line running down through it. The center is dominated by a square of virtual blackness—however we see it through the white frame of the diner's interior. The dark seated figure to the left balances the brightly white counter man to the right.

Now a thought experiment. Imagine an ant trying to look at that painting by crawling around on it. He can't see this picture very well. He can't get away from it, can't get any perspective—particularly to appreciate its organization. While he's on the black night, he can't see the white diner; while he's on the bright counter man, he can't see the dark diners. The ant's problem is a problem of space: he's too close. If he could fly he could get a "bird's-eye view" or "snapshot."

But this space problem is also—and more deeply—a time problem. The ant can take in only a little bit at once. Even though time may be a factor in our experience of pictures as we move our visual focus around, yet, as we do so, we still have a real if sometimes peripheral vision of the whole picture. For us, the whole is always somewhat in view. But not for our poor little ant.

When we read a text, we are like the ant. The text is laid out in space across multiple pages, but we can only read one small part at a time. We may jump around the text, grasshopper-like—especially with long texts—looking at chapter titles and other headings, browsing the openings and closings of chapters, looking for "perspective." Some texts lead off with an abstract—as this journal now asks. Books have tables of contents. But still we can take in relatively few words at a time.

"Everything depends on the temporal dimension" (Fish 159). With this sentence, Stanley Fish highlights a central principle that lies under much of his criticism. He champions what he calls an "affective stylistics" that centers on the reader's experience. He argues against



formalist readings [where] meaning is identified with what a reader understands at the end of a unit of sense (a line, a sentence, a paragraph, a poem) and [where] therefore any understandings preliminary to that one are to be disregarded as an unfortunate consequence of the fact that readings proceed in time. (3)

The notion that a text “can be taken in at a single glance” is something he calls “positivist, holistic, and spatial” (158).<sup>1</sup>

**If texts are spatial phenomena and yet our experience of them is necessarily temporal, how can we best organize texts for readers?**

So here is my question: if texts are spatial phenomena and yet our experience of them is necessarily temporal, how can we best organize texts for readers? How could we organize paintings for ants? In a nutshell (which is often, of course, as here, a visual metaphor for something nonvisual), what is good organization for events that take place in time? I am contrasting not just two dimensions—space and time—but also two physical modalities: seeing and hearing.

### Organization in Music

Music is a paradigm for well-ordered events in time. Consider a humble example, “Happy Birthday.” Try humming it to yourself—just the tune, no words. How is this melody organized? Surely it’s neatly shaped and well balanced—as you can see from this visual diagram:

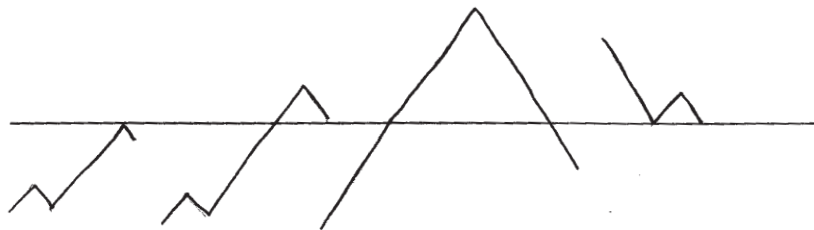


Figure 1. Melody shape in “Happy Birthday”

But this impression of balanced structure is misleading. Yes, those four neatly shaped phrases are pleasing in their balance and symmetry, and this has some part in our experience of good organization in the tune, but it’s not the most important source. Architectural balance is not the main way that music is organized.

Try humming the first phrase again and stopping. Notice how this leaves you in a state of expectation: nonclosure, nonsatisfaction. The second phrase





ends with more closure, but there is still that feeling of actively waiting for something that hasn't yet occurred. The third phrase ends most unsatisfied of all. Closure finally arrives with the last phrase.

Analysts frequently note how music works by setting up expectations that are sometimes fulfilled but often delayed or not satisfied. ("Dissonance propels the individual voices ahead, and in doing so supports the drive of the individual melodic lines" [Erickson 97]. See also Meyer.) Music tends to bring us to a state of final satisfaction by way of a journey through nonsatisfactions, half satisfactions, and temporary satisfactions: degrees of yearning and relief—itch and scratch. This process is what literally holds the piece together. (Music teachers like to tell children the story of a famous composer upstairs in bed when someone downstairs plays the first chord of the musical "amen" at the end of so many Protestant hymns. And stops. The composer can't sleep till he goes down to play the resolving tonic chord. The sound *pulls* him from his bed.)

Notice that the sequence of expectation and satisfaction in "Happy Birthday" works at both the local and the global levels. Locally, we are pulled at the end of each phrase to the next one by the harmonic itch. But there's also a global energy in a larger progression: each phrase reaches higher than the one before toward ever-increasing tension—till we get to the fourth phrase that answers the repeated upward reaching with a final downward movement toward rest.

So music forces us to see two questions where first we saw only one. We started with "How is something structured or organized or shaped?" But music invites a slightly different question: "How is it held together, bound, or made to cohere?" In the case of visual phenomena like paintings or photos, we don't usually feel so much difference between those two questions: How it's structured seems pretty much the same as how it's held together or made to cohere. But music highlights the distinction. Yes, "Happy Birthday" is structured around those four highly symmetrical subtunes. But in the realm of time, it's the experience of yearning and relief, dissonance and consonance, that holds those four phrases together and keeps them from floating off on their own. In this essay, I'm interested in the role of energy or dynamism in organization: the binding of time, the music of form.

My topic is the organization of writing, but it's useful to stay a bit longer with music to explore some of the sources of energy that create anticipation and eventual satisfaction—itch and scratch. Burke was explicitly interested in musical form:



[M]usic, of all the arts, is by its nature least suited to the psychology of information, and has remained closer to the psychology of form. Here form cannot atrophy. Every dissonant chord cries for its solution, and whether the musician resolves or refuses to resolve this dissonance into the chord which the body cries for, he is dealing in human appetites. (*Counter-Statement* 34)

One source of energy-based form is tonality: C-major; A-minor. Tonality itself is a phenomenon of coherence or holding together—a set of notes that feel as though they “go together.” Harmonic dissatisfaction and expectation are traditionally rooted in tonality. (I don’t know whether the music of all cultures builds on this pattern of expectation and resolution).<sup>2</sup>

Rhythm is probably more powerful than tonality as a source of energy that binds time and pulls us forward. Indeed, rhythm tends to trump melody. It’s often easier to identify a familiar song from its rhythm (without melody) than from its melody (without rhythm). Notice, for example, how each of the four melodic phrases of “Happy Birthday” begins with the same “dotted” rhythmic figure: Dumm da-dum dum. This recurring rhythmic motif helps hold the larger melody together. (Does “Happy Birthday” seem too trite? Mozart uses the same rhythmic motif in the same way in his famous forty-first symphony; and Haydn in the minuet of a fine string quartet.)

Rhythm could be called the essential source of energy that binds time. Rhythm is nothing *but* time. Or rather nothing but repetition in time: energy and movement through time. The underlying rhythm is meter, and like the meter in poetry, it sets up an expectation of regular accents. What happened before will happen again in the “same place.” If you beat out some common musical meters and put a normal accent on the first beat, you will feel how these meters harness energy. For example 2/4 (march!—left, right, left, right); 3/4 (waltz); 6/8 (a pairing of three-beat units, with an accent on the first pair). “The clock goes tick, tick, tick, tick, all day long. But let the human ear approach, and the clock goes tick, tock, tick, tock, and the ticking now ‘becomes’ rhythmical because the listening ear wants it to be” (Fussell 16).

But when we speak of rhythm in music, we are often referring to the complications or variations that occur *against* the underlying meter. Those variations tend to yield a surplus of energy and force when they conflict with the expected beats. Poets get the same effect when they write words in a rhythm that violates the expectation of the poem’s meter. E. M. Forster famously applied this principle to the large shape of novels, describing rhythm as “repetition with variation” (in his *Aspects of the Novel*).



Rhythm is most obvious when it occurs across the brief intervals of time that I've been describing: the rhythms of heart beat or breath. But there are macro rhythms, larger cycles, that bear on us just as powerfully: rhythms of the sun (day and night, sleep and waking, the four seasons); the monthly cycles of the moon; the seasons of a whole life. These too are often embodied in music and language—for example, in a cycle that moves from the rhythms of sleep, to waking, to frenzy, and then back down again at the end to rest. (Arnold Wesker exploited this rhythm powerfully in *The Kitchen*.)

### Organization in Texts

Music points us to the central question here: how do we bind events in time? *Spoken* words are just like music: they exist in time, and we take them in by ear. Written texts may be laid out in simultaneous space, but good writers tend to heed, consciously or not, the fact that readers have an experience that is more temporal than spatial. The problem of organizing a piece of writing is not so much a problem in “structure”—building a visual or spatial creation and giving some kind of satisfying visual/spatial relationship among the parts. It's more a problem in binding time.

**Written texts may be laid out in simultaneous space, but good writers tend to heed, consciously or not, the fact that readers have an experience that is more temporal than spatial.**

Admittedly, *some* degree of organization can come from the visual spatial dimension of a text. We can vary the length of paragraphs, vary the fonts, use bullets, subheads, and charts. Visual designers give us striking or complex page layouts to liven up a text. For brochures and much technical and business writing, it's crucial to break up the page with visual interest. Actually, if most designers had their way, they'd banish full pages of text—which they tend to call “boring.” But that just reveals how deeply they are tempted to treat the organization of written words as wholly spatial. Good book designers can somewhat increase the sense of coherence in whole books. Nevertheless, when faced with ten or a hundred pages that we must read rather than skim, there's not much organizational satisfaction we can get from visual design. (Mary Hocks gives interesting insights about the visual rhetoric in digital or online texts, but in this essay, I'm concerned with conventional linear texts—whether we read them on paper or on a screen.)

So the key question for writers is this: where does the energy come from that binds written words together so as to pull us along from one part to the next and to make us feel that all the parts are held together into a magnetic or centripetal whole? Since reading is a series of events in time, my claim is that



**Successful writers lead us on a journey to satisfaction by way of expectations, frustrations, half satisfactions, and temporary satisfactions: a well-planned sequence of yearnings and reliefs, itches and scratches.**

the answer is the same one that applies to music. Successful writers lead us on a journey to satisfaction by way of expectations, frustrations, half satisfactions, and temporary satisfactions: a well-planned sequence of yearnings and reliefs, itches and scratches. This is a central insight from Burke. (“Form, having to do with the creation and gratification of needs, is ‘correct’ in so far as it gratifies the needs it creates” *Counter-Statement* 138.)

Sentences themselves illustrate this truth about the experience of language. Sentences are little pieces of energy or music—they have rhythm and melody—even on the page. Or, rather, they have energy, rhythm, and melody if the writer has been successful. A good sentence pulls us in and leads us on to the end; it sets up expectation and relief. Sentences, even when silent on the page, are little musical problems in trying to hold mental experiences together. This is most obvious in certain sentence patterns with explicit markers of expectation. “Even though the theory seems to explain most of what happened, . . .” With these words, the writer plants an expectation or itch.

I’m intrigued with subtler examples like this: “‘Happy Birthday’ has a beautifully symmetrical structure.” Here is a simple declarative sentence with easy closure. Yet writers often use sentences just like this in such a way as to float the expectation of a silent *but* waiting in the wings (lurking in the future). Teacher responses to student papers ritually start off with statements of direct unqualified praise (“Lots of good work here!”), yet the student can always feel that lurking *but*. (We see this subtle inexplicit itch in the second phrase of “Happy Birthday”: it closes with the same two-note cadence that ends the whole song, both melody and harmony, yet this mid-song cadence leaves us unsatisfied. Thanks to Ruth Weinreb for this point, personal communication.)

We feel something misfiring when a writer leads us to expect a *but* that doesn’t come—or a composer makes us expect a beat or a melodic or harmonic progression that doesn’t happen. And yet, of course, writers, like musicians, often set up expectations *in order* to foil them—whether it’s an unexpected turn of syntax or turn of plot. When they do this successfully, they somehow please us by frustrating our expectation—thereby usually building in new pieces of energy or movement in time. Stanley Fish tells impressively detailed stories of how readers’ expectations are set up and then played with. For example:







In a matter of seconds, then, line 7 [in a famous Milton sonnet] has led four experiential lives, one as we anticipate it, another as that anticipation is revised, a third when we retroactively identify its speaker [as different from what we'd thought], and a fourth when that speaker disclaims it. (156)

Sentences are the basic building blocks of energy in words. That's why lots of writing teachers and stylists focus so intently on them. (In his widely read book on style, Joseph Williams works mostly with sentences.) But I ruin my writing experience and drive students crazy if I am too preoccupied with sentences alone. For we can read long passages of well-energized sentences and still experience a serious lack of organization. Whole texts need larger global pieces of energy. It's not enough if paragraphs or sections hold together and pull us through from one to another; we also need a sense of the whole as whole (a matter that Williams treats, but very briefly). This energy comes from the same forces that hold music together: sequences of expectation and eventual satisfaction—larger melodic or harmonic rhythms or examples of what I am calling the music of form.

Movies are like texts: visual phenomena that we experience in the realm of time. We could show our ant a movie of Hopper's *Nighthawks*—moving the camera around the painting, zooming in and panning out the way Ken Burns makes movies out of still photos in his TV documentaries. Movie directors have the same problem as writers: how to bind time. Music plays a big role here, by the way. When we attend to the music in a movie, we usually hear how hard it's working to make us feel sequences of expectation, tension, climax, and release.

Thus stories, movies, and music help us notice that crucial difference between organization as spatial arrangement and organization as energy holding temporal events together. In well-organized visual works, we usually feel a successful shape—some kind of balance or pleasing relationship among elements (even when shape is not obvious at first because of messy detail, for example in Breughel). In contrast, well-organized music is likely to be messier from a structural, spatial, “visual” point of view. “Happy Birthday” is a tidy tune, and eighteenth-century symphonies can seem neat, but when we consider nineteenth-century romantic symphonies it's obvious that neatness, balance, and symmetry are not what holds music together.

Critics are always making diagrams or charts to show the structure of plays, novels, movies, and symphony movements. But these visual figures are often exercises in trying to justify our sense of coherence by finding structural



neatness—where in fact the elements are not neat. And even when the symmetries are really there (as in “Happy Birthday”), they are often not the main sources of form. Diagrams are more helpful when they focus not just on events or characters or plot elements but on points of itch, partial scratch, and full scratch—and recurrences of theme, rhythm, and motif. Shakespeare’s plays often hold together as experiences in time, but there is seldom a neat structuring among their sections.

But even though visual diagrams of structure are not so good at capturing what really organizes works we experience in time, there is something much deeper that they capture beautifully: the fact that when people want to talk about organization, they usually make visual diagrams—they resort to space. It’s as though we can’t talk about organization except through the spatial dimension. (“Storyboards” are the normal way to look at the organization of movies.) Our concept of organization seems hostage to a hidden spatial metaphor—one of Lakoff and Johnson’s “metaphors we live by.”

In short, our very understanding of what organization means—with its implicit spatial metaphor—seems better suited to describing the organization of objects in space than the organization of events in time. If we want to do better justice to the form of temporal events, we need more attention to the problem of written language as buried in time—and the potentialities for binding time.

### **How Readers Compensate for the Temporal Dimension of Reading**

But writing is not music. Writing offers various resources to help readers compensate for its embeddedness in time—resources largely unavailable in music. Writing centers on a semantic dimension (verbal meaning) that we don’t usually find in the abstract, nonsemantic medium of music. (It’s unusual when Bach spells out his own name in notes). We can’t summarize a piece of music into an all-at-once snapshot. (“Tell me the main point in Brahms’ third symphony—I don’t have time to listen to it.”) But we *can* summarize many pieces of writing and get a useful picture of what the whole thing is saying—more or less all at once, almost out of time. I’ll look first at how *readers* compensate for the way language is trapped in the glue of time. In the next section, I’ll turn to the role of writers.

I’ve met scientists and engineers who brag that they never *read* articles; they read the abstract, look at tables and graphs, check out the bibliography, and browse the discussion. In effect, they are trying to see the article all at





once—to get a spatial bird’s eye view, not a temporal ant’s-eye view. When we take notes as we read, we’re often trying to transform a long temporal experience into a visible representation that we can later take in quickly—sometimes even at a glance.

Research in cognitive science indicates that readers naturally tend to produce mental representations of a text—mental hypotheses of what a text is saying and how it’s structured. As we start to read something, it’s only a tentative hypothesis, but as we go further, we get more data and often revise our hypothesis. Perception itself works this way. With our first glance at something, the mind makes a hypothesis based on the first input and then continually checks and revises that hypothesis based on further input. As long ago as 1967, Ulrich Neisser gave a classic account of how different vision is from photography. The eye may have a lens that throws an image on the retina, but this is not “seeing.” For one thing, the “camera” keeps jiggling; the eye continually jumps around and throws a welter of different images on the retina. Most important of all, the brain gets nothing like an image. Our understanding of what we “see” comes from a welter of electrical impulses that constantly change through time. The brain gets data in which there is no “resemblance” to the nice coherent chair we see. It has to *construct* and then *confirm* a chair-hypothesis from nonvisual electrical data.

Gregory Colomb and June Anne Griffin have written a long, interesting essay on coherence in writing that presents lots of recent findings from this tradition of cognitive science—findings that pertain more directly to reading itself. (“[O]ur experience of coherence emerges from information that is strikingly discontinuous” [278].) They acknowledge that most of this research is about the comprehension of meaning more than the arrangement of parts—and mostly on very short texts, often just a sentence. But they make interesting arguments about coherence; how the human mind makes written language hang together.

Colomb and Griffin argue that the human mind itself has a natural tendency to go through this process of making mental representations in order to compensate for the fact that spatial texts are buried in time for readers. The mind tries to extract a more or less nontemporal essence: “To see a text as coherent, we must be able to interact with it as a single, focal point of attention. In phenomenological terms, we can keep it in mind all at once” (277). Their not-quite-explicit theme is how readers escape from time into space. They constantly use the word “see” for “understand” (and note “focal point” in the previous quotation).<sup>3</sup>



Their theme is coherence in the reader, not in the text—“coherence as a quality of experience” (276). They focus on how readers assume, seek, and create coherence: “[T]he expectation of coherence is so strong that readers will often find it even when a text seems to support it poorly” (287). They recognize that this idea goes against common experience: “Since the apparent unity of our understanding is what leads us to judge the text as coherent, it’s hard not to attribute that coherence to the unity of the text itself” (288). But their essay is engaged in *resisting* that assumption, and they are intriguingly skeptical about the enterprise itself of giving advice to writers about how to achieve coherence (289).

### How Writers Also Compensate for Time

Colomb and Griffin don’t deny that the text can give us help us in our task of creating an experience of coherence. As readers, we want writers to send us some picture postcards. That is, writers can insert what we might call spatial compensations for the problem of time: *signposts* and *maps*. (I gave a classic postcard/signpost early in the previous section when I said that I’d treat the role of readers in that section and the role of writers in this one.) Certain genres of expository prose—most school, academic, business, and professional prose—

**Readers are on a journey into the unknown, but if they are provided with signposts and maps, they won’t feel lost.**

are often felt to carry an implicit duty to provide readers with “verbal representations” of the whole work: thesis statements, statements of how the sections or subarguments are laid out, topic sentences, abstracts, titles and subheads.

Teachers and handbooks talk a lot about the thesis statement in particular.

Readers are on a journey into the unknown, but if they are provided with signposts and maps, they won’t feel lost. I’ve often wished writers of complex books or essays would provide *us* with the one-page condensed outline that *they* pinned to their wall to keep them from losing their way as they wrote. (Some word processing programs allow you to press a few keys and reduce your text to its outline or headline form. Wouldn’t it be nice if this were available to readers?) In effect, these are all efforts to compensate for time, if not elude it. “In this essay, I will argue X”: this is *metadiscourse*—discourse-outside-of-discourse, language that tries to climb above the ongoing temporal flow (though not all signposting is metadiscourse.)<sup>4</sup>

I am not writing this essay to celebrate signposting, premapping, summarizing, or the orderly arrangement of parts. They are already well celebrated. Yet, given my interest in alternative ways to organize writing, I better acknowl-

edge the powerful reasons why teachers give so much emphasis to these traditional ways to get some leverage outside of time:

- Most obviously, if we write material for scholars or students—or if we are writing a purely pragmatic document whose only goal is to convey ideas and information (as is the case in much on-the-job writing)—it would be discourteous *not* to use this structural play-it-safe form. Such readers don't want an experience in time, they want a bird's-eye view of all the meanings at once. Indeed, readers are often not readers but skimmers, looking first to see what can be *skipped*, and then how to mine the other texts and sections *only* for what might be useful. ("What's the main point in Brahms' third symphony" is the kind of question a music student might indeed ask a friend while cramming for the exam. A music scholar might ask a similarly reductive question about a more obscure work.)
- Signposting and mapping can help us as writers, too, not just as readers—even if we are not writing for skimmers. We ourselves may not have such a clear "picture" of what we are trying to write or how we ought to arrange our sections. We don't yet quite understand our main point or what logical relationship exists between it and some other things we know damn well belong somewhere. If we have to start with a summary and map, we are forced to work out our thinking more clearly.
- Finally, this approach to organization will help with readers who have an *a priori* expectation of signposting and mapping. I'm trying to persuade such readers not to be so narrow-minded about organization, but I must be clear with myself and my students that when some people read a book or essay and don't find well-placed thesis statements or an organization into neatly separated sections, they say "This text isn't well organized." They are not open to experiencing a different kind of organization no matter how much I praise it—an energy-based organization derived from the kinds of time-binding qualities I've been pointing to in music and that I will soon explore in texts. Teachers are particularly prey to deciding that something is not organized on *a priori* grounds, for when we read student papers in stacks of twenty or more, we easily slide into holding up each paper against a mental template of features that are supposed to be there—rather than genuinely *reading* it through time. We are short of time.



In effect, I'm claiming that readers can be blind (deaf) to coherence that's actually in the text. But Colomb and Griffin would warn me against too much talk about what's "in the text." Their focus is on the role of the reader; they'd probably shrug and say "Of course." When readers bring the wrong expectations or preparation, or read for the wrong reasons, of course they experience no coherence. What else is new? If we read a poem of fourteen lines and don't find any sonnet organization, we are likely to be put off—or at least distracted.

As my epigraphs show, I, too, emphasize coherence as an experience in the reader. But I don't want to push that point too far; otherwise we're just blaming the victim/reader for not *creating* coherence in *every* text. Just because the experience is in the reader, that doesn't remove the need for features in the text to help create those experiences. Do we really want to settle for texts that only work for readers who are ideally prepared?<sup>5</sup>

### **But Time Cannot Be Eluded—Fortunately**

So I salute the virtues of these structural formulas for organizing essays and books. The five-paragraph essay is the paradigm form and is often prescribed in high school (a kind of "slam bam thank you ma'am" organization). Nowadays, high-stakes writing exams encourage teachers to put even more emphasis on the five-paragraph essay. (They forget to notice that the practice of frequent freewriting exercises on examlike topics is also perfect practice for high-stakes essay exams.)

These structural devices may be useful ways to help readers see around the corner of time. But no matter how well a writer signposts and maps and arranges, the reader cannot escape time. The very process of making mental representations and then revising them unfolds through time. Cognitive scientists emphasize the temporal sequence of hypothesizing and revising even in the act of perception.

And suppose we give our readers perfect signposts and maps of an elegant arrangement of parts so that they are never lost or confused. The question remains: what will make them continue to read? Do those structural techniques provide any *energy* to make us want to read? Suppose we give the ant a perfect micropicture of the whole painting and a map of how to walk to appreciate it: What would ever make that ant want to follow our path—or even keep walking at all? There has to be some incentive, pull, or hunger: well-planned sequences of itches and scratches. (Roland Barthes' *Le Plaisir du Text* brought prominence in reading theory to the concepts of desire, pleasure, and even *jouissance*.)

Current notions of cohesion points to local links between individual sentences or sections. Links are good; they grease the skids, but they don't pull. I'm interested in what we might call *dynamic cohesion*—where we're pulled from element to element. Current notions of coherence point to global semantic webbing that make readers feel that all the parts of a text are about the same topic. That's valuable (and not easy). But I'm interested in *dynamic coherence* where the parts of the essay don't just sit together because they are semantically linked; rather, we feel them pulled together with a kind of magnetic or centripetal force. Dynamic cohesion and dynamic coherence create the music of form.

Suppose we've made clear thesis statements and maps of organization, but readers are tired and bored or in a bad mood? If we can pull readers through and give them pleasure and satisfaction from reading, they are more likely to carry on and even to be more sympathetic to the ideas we are trying to sell. Consider the typical problem of textbooks: they are impressively well organized in all these signposting ways (along with the best graphics that money can buy). Yet they often put readers to sleep.

Consider an interestingly different case where we suffer for the lack of dynamic organization or the binding of time. We are reading a scholarly article. We find everything arranged so well as we read that we say, "This essay is beautifully organized!" We can "see" ahead and find every point in its proper section or chapter. But in spite of these aids, we still have trouble following and understanding it. We *don't* experience things hanging together or gelling as readers. In a real sense, we feel lost. Yet we may not "*feel lost*" because of the ingrained notion that good organization *means* good mapping and neat sectioning. Besides, we can see that the writer did a good job of putting everything in its proper place, and we know how difficult that is. We feel we are in safe hands—a powerful need for readers. We soldier on, saying, "This complex article is well organized. If I read carefully enough and take good enough notes, then I will finally make it all cohere in my head." But if we manage, it wasn't the text that helped us create that coherence; we had to do it all with our sweat. I believe the writer owed us more help.

So my goal here is to turn away from these traditional features of organization and coherence that try to compensate for the fact that texts are buried in the dimension of time—valuable as they are. In the next five sections, I'll try to explore the mystery of organizational features that don't compensate for time; they *depend* on time.



### Binding Time in Prose: Narrative

When we look across the universe of writing, it's easy to see the most common way that writers bind words and pull readers through a text. Narrative or story is a universal way to set up sequences of expectation and satisfaction: "In the beginning . . .," "Once upon a time, there was a little girl whose parents had died . . .," or "Inspector Clouseau noticed something odd about the flower in the buttonhole of the corpse's Saville Row suit." Sometimes a story can pull readers even when they know just where they're being pulled—as for instance with many fairy tales and works like *Oedipus*.

But it's nonnarrative writing that I work at most—expository and analytic essays—and that's probably true for most readers of this essay. Poetry, fiction, and literary nonfiction are ideal places for the kind of energy-based organization I am exploring here, but my concern is how it can work in more conventional genres of nonfiction. So how does dynamic organization work in successful essays and books with no story line—especially in school or academic genres? (Certain scholarly forms like history and biography hang on to a narrative base. Keith Gilyard and Victor Villanueva use a hybrid of narrative and analysis in their semiautobiographical scholarly books. Perhaps there's a *kind* of narrative structure when critics analyze a text one section at a time from beginning to end, but usually there's no real pull.)

For most essay writing, the spatial/visual bias in our concept of organization leads to the most frequent advice: start by making an outline. But consider the nature of outlines. They promote a visual "perspective" on organization—they try for the bird's-eye view rather than the ant's-eye view. The word *outline* itself is a visual metaphor—implying again that organization is a visual phenomenon. Outlines tend to imply a structure that works for vision: balance or shape among large separable elements. Put everything related to A in the A section, put everything B-like in the B section, and all the C elements in C.

But notice what this does to our experience as readers: while we're in A, we can't see into B or C; while we're in B, we can't see into C or A—and so on. The reader-ant has no perspective. Of course, we can remember some of A while we are in B, but our memory fades. Much of our frustration as readers, whether we're reading student papers or professional texts, comes from our need to be reminded of something the writer had actually given us earlier. ("But I already *told* you that," the writer complains about our complaint.) Outlines promote the common visual seeing-it-all-at-once assumptions about organi-





zation and neglect the more mysterious questions of where the energy comes from that binds long stretches of language into felt forms through time.

Music that seems well organized is seldom “outlined” in this way. Its elements tend to be more interwoven, overlapped, or intermeshed. Even in classical sonata form, we hear theme A and then B—but we’re not done with either. Now it’s back to A again in a complicated or developed form—perhaps with bits of B; then B in a complicated developed form; and then A and B again near the end (and this is a simplified story—even for eighteenth century music). If the musical elements were neatly segregated from each other, there would be little to pull us from A to B. (Of course, there is often no overlap between movements of a symphony or sonata, but by the same token, there isn’t usually much pull or coherence between movements. Movements are often stand-alone pieces, however nice it is to string them together without applause. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, single movements of longer pieces were often performed alone. And the withholding of applause between movements is a relatively recent cultural fetish.)

This interweaving in music leads to lots of repetition and anticipation. Again and again, we hear the same melodies, melodic motifs, and rhythmic motifs. All these features make things messier and even more random-seeming from a visual point of view, but they help coherence and pull us along. (Of course, the progression is not really random. We see something close to randomness in many musical overtures—and in such cases we don’t experience much pull or dynamic coherence.)

Think about speeches. They, too, thrive on redundancy, tending to bind time with repeated images and phrases. (Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” is riddled with other repeated phrases and metaphors.) Heavy-handed repetition can make readers say, “Stop repeating yourself,” but a quiet redundancy often helps hold good writing together. Linguists constantly point out how language itself only communicates because it harnesses so much redundancy. A diagram of all the semantic redundancy in most sentences or longer discourses would be quite messy.

### **Binding Time by Using Dynamic Outlines**

I’ve named narrative as the most obvious and perhaps most powerful way to bind time in writing—and noted the role of redundancy. I’ll describe four more methods—ones that pertain more directly to expository or analytic writing. I’ll use this section and the following three.





If I'd made a conventional outline of the present essay, it might have started off like this:

- Art
- Music
  - “Happy Birthday”
  - Structure vs. Coherence
- Language
  - Narrative Writing
  - Nonnarrative Writing

But a neat, freeze-dried, bird’s-eye outline like this has two big problems. First, it couldn’t help me in the beginning when I might have needed it most—for I couldn’t create it till *after* I’d already done the writing that permitted me to figure it out. (When students are asked to hand in early outlines with their final drafts, teachers sometimes discover that the outlines were written last.) Second, an outline like this doesn’t contain the energy that pulls thought forward—and pulls the reader. Outlines of this sort reflect a visualist cast of mind. Single words or phrases—without verbs—can only *point* or name an area—thus the spatial trap.

But there’s a different kind of outline that helps bind time. It consists of sentences—the simpler the better, but each with a verb. Sentences contain energy and give dynamic movement (like melodies or harmonic progressions that pull us through to the end). They can pose problems and work through solutions. Mere *areas* contain no energy or “pull.” The dynamism of sentences is most obvious in certain kernel sentences that can actually generate a whole essay and serve as a kind of macro-outline:

- Most people think . . . , but really . . .
- It used to be . . . , but now . . .

(See Ponsot and Deen for other such sentences, and for powerful teaching techniques that exploit their generative conceptual energy for creating whole essays.) Beethoven is notable for his ability to take a simple sentence—sometimes an almost trite melodic or rhythmic motif—and build a rich sophisticated movement out of it.

Sentence-outlining is particularly helpful for sections of essays where we get tangled up or conceptually lost. My freewriting and drafting often produce



good ideas, but then I can't figure out how the ideas go together—and, not infrequently, I find myself committed to ideas that seem to conflict with each other. In these periods of confusion, I start by writing out a crude little sentence for each individual point I find in my exploratory material: “germ” or “telegram” sentences—but always with a verb. I write them out in the order I find them. When I see these tiny germ sentences laid out, I am finally in a good position to figure out what I am groping to say or what actually makes sense—and how to order my points so they tell a coherent story of thinking. This process gives me a sequence of sentences like this:

- How is “Happy Birthday” structured?
- Looks like four balanced units
- But it really holds together by itch and scratch
- How is this different from structure in space or paintings?
- Music shows how events in time are held together

Often, I need to work back and forth dialectically between my sentence outline and the draft it is generating—changing first one and then the other, on the basis of what I learn from each.

Sentence-outlines are often fairly detailed, so they can work out the guts of the thinking. Mere word-or-phrase outlines tend to point to larger areas without articulating the conceptual or semantic energy that gets you from one to the next. I'm not trying to discount the uses of the visual dimension. A “bird's-eye view” of the whole essay can give useful “perspective”—an overview of an entire essay in a small space. But such outlines are often tacit about the logic within and between sections—or the lack of logic. (Axelrod and Cooper suggest sentence outlines in their textbook, but they call them “scratch outlines” and describe them as more casual than “formal outlines [e.g., 450–51].” To me, they require more careful thinking and work.)

**Often, I need to work back and forth dialectically between my sentence outline and the draft it is generating—changing first one and then the other, on the basis of what I learn from each.**

There is happy news here. We don't have to give up stories just because we are writing essays. The leverage in a sentence outline comes from telling a kind of *story of thinking*. (I think of sentence outlines as “talking outlines” because they ask for the kind of syntax you'd use if you wanted to *speak* your train of thought to someone—which is of course an excellent idea. Conven-



tional outlines with single words and phrases are usually “unspeakable.”) A story can satisfy a reader’s need for logical coherence, yet also pull readers along. Many good analytic or expository essays—even academic essays—are actually a kind of story of thinking where the points “follow” each other convincingly. The individual steps may often be logical—or at least not in violation of logic. But the longer trains of thinking seldom follow a sequence of true inductive or deductive logic. Productive and interesting essays are more often informed by a narrative cast than by a static scheme like, “Here are three reasons for supporting or opposing X.” (We do no favor to logic or clear thinking if we use the word *logical* to mean merely “reasonable” or “not self-contradictory.”)

### **Binding Time with Perplexity**

If we don’t have an actual story to drive our essay, the most obvious way to create a “story of thinking” is to start with an itch—not a claim or an answer but a question or problem or perplexity. Many essay writers (especially students) don’t avail themselves of this kind of itch because of a pervasive assumption that writing is for what you’ve already figured out: it’s fine to express perplexity and confusion when we talk informally or think to ourselves, but writing is only for what we’ve already made clear. Thus, when most people are engaged in the act of writing, they tend to stop when they get to something about which they aren’t sure. They start writing

**If we don’t have an actual story to drive our essay, the most obvious way to create a “story of thinking” is to start with an itch—not a claim or an answer but a question or problem or perplexity.**

again after they’ve dealt with the perplexity. “Writing is a record: why record confusion?” (In his book *Induction and Intuition in Scientific Thought*, the Nobel biologist Peter Medawar explores how the conventions of scientific writing tend to suppress the element of perplexity. Scientists are led to present their ideas in the form by which they are tested and proved, and this tends to leech away most of the energy-driven process by which they were worked out.)

Writing straight into perplexity often leads us to create structures that pull readers in and pull them along. It also helps us as writers, leading us to more ideas and richer thinking and usually helping us untangle confusion more quickly than when we stop and merely “think.” But, of course, perplexity is not enough by itself. A literal record of our zigzagging mental path through a perplexity will usually be an incoherent mess.

We need to build *out of* our perplexity a focused story and economical line of thinking. Thus, in writing this essay, I could have worked my way through my perplexity and streamlined my thinking with the help of a number of local

sentence outlines—and then started off with a thesis statement: “Our concept of organization is confused because it conflates two ideas that are quite different: how objects are organized in space, and how events are organized in time.” This would have been a kindness to skimmers. I could have started with this sentence without changing anything else in the rest of my essay—or, of course, used it for the abstract.

But even though this is a perfectly clear and helpful sentence, notice how static it is—and how static most abstracts are. So I made a rhetorical choice to try to start my essay by creating an itch for readers with a perplexity. Of course, I’m also trying to give some help to skimmers by providing some signposts and subheads (more about this later). My goal is to persuade readers to enter an experience in time, not just an out-of-time grasping of concepts. So as I gradually forced myself to work through my perplexity and create a final organization—as I sought an economical and clear train of thinking—I tried nevertheless to retain some of the syntactic, semantic, and narrative texture of perplexity to help readers experience these ideas.

Skilled writers have always known about the value of starting with a problem and hooking readers with an itch or dilemma. The term *hook* has become a cliché in journalism—which is where it probably started—and also in writing classes. But it’s usually applied only to personal, informal essays.

I find that a good number of student writers actually do have the impulse to start their essays with the problem and then work through to the conclusion. (“I think my students are afraid that if they tell the reader up front what the essay will say, the reader won’t stick around for the details.” Federenko.) But this instinct often tempts students to produce essays that are long and unclear. It’s hard to pull off the rhetorical strategy of withholding one’s main point. This explains why teachers so often insist on the anti-perplexity structure of announcing the main point in a thesis sentence at the start.

But I’m not just looking for the easiest way to avoid reader confusion. If that were all I wanted, I could simply preach the five-paragraph essay. I’m trying to understand form as a source of energy. Story is the most obvious source, and harnessing perplexity exploits a genuine kind of story for analytic expository writing—a journey from perplexity to resolution.

When a writer invites and articulates perplexity, we see someone, in effect, of two minds (or more than two). Writing from perplexity invites us to do justice to both minds or multiple opinions—one at a time or in debate. Thus it harnesses not just narrative but drama. It’s sad how many essays are shallow because the writer had only one mind—succumbing to the pressure to make it



up before starting. Even when perplexity leads us to a single and exact conclusion that we could present all-at-once in a bird's-eye claim, we have a better chance of making readers experience that claim and be pulled through our text if we find some way to do justice to the conflict that gave rise to it. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has coined the concept of *flow* for the experience of complete absorption in a task where time passes almost without awareness. For the experience of flow, the task should be challenging, but not *too* challenging, and should involve a sense of discovery or newness. Perplexity is a prime ingredient in the various activities he describes.<sup>6</sup>

For perplexity in music, consider the fugue. Listeners get the perplexity of wondering how the fugue subject will be handled. And for the composer, too, it's virtually impossible to know ahead of time how to solve all the puzzles that will be encountered. (Bach wrote his "Musical Offering" as a series of fugues and contrapuntal pieces on a theme set *for* him by the King of Prussia.)

### Words That Record vs. Words That Enact

We can notice a subtle source of form as energy if we distinguish between language that *records past thinking* and language that *enacts present thinking*. Of course, most good writing is a record of past thinking: If a piece of writing were really a record of all the writer's thinking as it occurred in process, it would almost inevitably be a wandering mess. Yet those of us who read much of the kind of spontaneous writing that turns up in freewriting, journals, letters, and

**Is it possible to have the advantages of both—a well-ordered record of past thinking that nevertheless preserves and even enacts the life, presence, and energy of thinking in process?**

emails usually notice more than a few passages of language that are strong *because* they enact thinking in progress. Such language often has a distinctive energy and gives readers a heightened sense of contact with the writer: presence. Such language also tends to increase the sense of movement—events happening through time.

Is it possible to have the advantages of both—a well-ordered record of past thinking that nevertheless preserves and even enacts the life, presence, and energy of thinking in process? Yes. We see this sometimes even in scholarly prose. Sometimes a whole essay seems to enact the drama of a change from one position to another: *X seems clearly true for the following good reasons. . . . But closer examination shows that really Y is a better conclusion.* Or more complex and dialogic: *A. But no, B. Yet consider the force of C. Nevertheless D.* Many essays that follow a macro structure like this seem contrived in structure, not live (which doesn't prevent the structure from being effective).

But it's a particular problem when we feel those Xs or As as straw men—positions the writer never really took seriously. Yet some writers sometimes manage this structure in a way that conveys the felt presence of a mind in action.

We also see many smaller examples of thinking-in-action at the level of individual sentences or paragraphs. Francis Christiansen is interested in language that conveys a mind in action when he describes the advantages of the “cumulative sentence”: It “is the opposite of the periodic sentence. It doesn't represent the idea as conceived, pondered over, reshaped, packaged, and delivered cold. It is dynamic rather than static, representing the mind thinking” (156). (In *The Oxford Guide to Writing*, Thomas Kane speaks of some prose that is a “picture of the mind thinking.” Note that he calls it characteristic of “loose” rather than “tight” organization [84].)

Consider this tiny example from a previous page:

Sentences are little pieces of energy or music—they have rhythm and melody—even in writing. Or, rather, they have energy, rhythm, and melody if the writer has been successful.

Freewriting led me to this sequence: a statement followed by a correction. I decided to keep the two sentences even though, strictly speaking, the first one says what I decided afterward was false. “Why waste time saying it wrong when you could say it right the first time?” But this and other kinds of thinking in process, if handled successfully, can pull a reader along without annoyance because of a sense of shared mental action. We can also describe this in terms of voice: the writing enacts a dialogue in which we hear a change of voice as the later bit responds to the earlier bit, or makes a metacomment. (See Palacas on voice and intonation in parentheticals; and Crismore on voice in metadiscourse.)

I've been speaking as though thinking-in-action always undermines clarity. “Don't confuse me with a voyage through ideas you've already discarded. Just tell me your conclusions.” But thinking-in-action can actually *aid* comprehension. Notice the pattern in my example above: *X. Well, actually, not quite X, but a complication of X.* One of the best ways to help readers understand a complex idea is to start with an oversimplification. A simple claim is easily stated and easily grasped; complications and qualifications can be added later. This strategy can function not just in sentences but in paragraphs or even whole essays: *Roughly speaking, my claim is X: . . . [perhaps even for five pages] But of course, it's not that simple.* This kind of progression is interestingly compa-



rable to something in musical structure: melodies or themes are often presented in a simple form and then complicated in the development section.

Teachers and academics often pounce on risky formulations that are vulnerable to attack. But when writers worry too much about preventing attack,

**But when writers worry too much about preventing attack, they forget something basic about rhetoric: it's not really so bad if readers happen to resist, for in resisting they usually involve themselves and contribute energy to the process of understanding a train of thought.**

they forget something basic about rhetoric: it's not really so bad if readers happen to resist, for in resisting they usually involve themselves and contribute energy to the process of understanding a train of thought. Good speakers and orators usually focus more conscious attention than writers do upon the essential rhetorical problem of keeping the audience awake and involved. They look out at their audience and

see them yawn and lose interest; they know how ineffective it is to build a speech out of nonstop sentences to which readers merely assent. (Exception: speakers at a pep rally for allies may be looking for nothing but cheers. Additional exception: it's usually bad for students when teachers resist, even temporarily.)

The pressure to avoid attackable sentences tempts many academics and students to create sentences with all the needed qualifications and complications already built in. This is one reason why academic prose is often difficult or laborious to follow. The spatial and visual bias reinforces the goal of all-at-once-ness. But when we try to build in all qualifications so our sentences are fully true or valid, we often construct sentences that are too complicated—and also too boring—for their lack of energy or pull. A simple clear sentence is very likely to be false—almost by definition. But if we remember the time dimension in reading and make it one in a sequence of sentences, it can be a source of dynamism that holds writing together.<sup>7</sup>

### **Binding Time with Voice**

Of my five sources of energy, I treat voice last because it can be so powerful in holding pieces of writing together through time—not only narrative writing but also expository or analytic writing. A strong or effective voice is a small-scale feature, but it can give global coherence (just as small-scale meter can bind a large musical movement). When people use the metaphor of voice to describe certain passages of text, they are usually calling attention to one or both of the following features:





- (1) Words that somehow make them *hear* a voice as they read. This kind of “audible” voice gives readers a sense of what Robert Frost called a “speaking tone of voice somehow entangled in the words and fastened to the page for the ear of the imagination” (Frost 15). This illusion of audibility increases the sense of rhythm, movement, and immediacy in the text. Heard language tends to draw readers into and through the words, increasing our experience of energy. (See Barthes on the drawing power of what he calls “The Grain of Voice.”)

In addition—and this is too little remarked upon in discussions of voice—there is a potent *informational* benefit from audible voice. When we hear naturally spoken language—or when we hear a difficult text read out loud well—we don’t have to work so hard to understand the meaning: the music of prosody *enacts* some of the meaning so that we “hear” it. It’s as though the meaning comes to us rather than us having to go after it. So if a writer is skilled enough to write sentences that readers actually hear—hearing the accents, rhythms, and melody in the silent words on the page—readers will actually “hear” some of the meaning.

- (2) A piece of writing is also commonly said to “have a voice” when it gives readers a sense of a person or a speaker in or behind the words (even if there is no strong audible voice). The writing usually conveys a sense of what *kind* of person it is. It doesn’t matter whether we infer an actual writer, a persona, or an “implied author” (Booth). Voice in this sense—what I call “dramatic voice”—also works effectively to hold a complex text together. For example, some successful essays are *not* well unified in ideas as they genuinely shift points of view, but they convey a sense that a single person is exploring these differing ideas that are in dialogue or even in conflict with each other; or that a single person is moving through a progression of ideas that represent change. (Burke says the *Phaedrus* is successfully organized through a process of “transformation”—see footnote 9.) Of course, a strong and believable dramatic voice won’t stop readers from complaining about a lack of unity in thinking. *Ethos* doesn’t cancel *logos*. But *ethos* can trump *logos*, as Aristotle observed—calling it the most powerful of the three sources of persuasion. Sometimes a convincing *ethos* handled well can make a reader welcome movement to new thinking, rather than complain that the ending doesn’t fit the beginning.



Consider how many musical composers build a strong and recognizable style or “voice”—using the same set of audible ingredients that another composer builds into a different musical voice. It’s interesting to quote a couple of Bakhtin’s formulations about forging “one’s own” voice out of public language:

It [the word—or indeed the musical notes] exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own. (294)

And

The importance of struggling with another’s discourse, its influence in the history of an individual’s coming to dialogical consciousness, is enormous. One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse. (348)

We can look at writing either through the lens of text or the lens of voice. The text lens highlights the visual, spatial features of discourse—an abstract, universal, all-at-once system of disembodied semiotic symbols. The voice lens highlights time and hearing rather than space and seeing, and it foregrounds how all discourse moves through time and involves someone speaking to someone in a particular context. I celebrate the discourse-as-voice lens and the dimension of time in our visually biased culture of literacy. But I acknowledge the need for the discourse-as-text lens and the visual metaphor, too.<sup>8</sup>

## Two Tempting Conclusions

**(1) Only dynamic organization is true organization. We “always already” live in time. Therefore space-oriented modes of organization that depend on signposting and mapping are outdated, wrongheaded, and mistaken. Energy-driven organization trumps mere clear structure—vanquishes, removes, or refutes it!**

Serious scholars are not immune to the siren song of totalistic claims of this sort. For example: “All language is social—private language is a wrongheaded, mistaken notion.” Or “Everything is socially constructed—nothing exists in itself foundationally.” In much earlier drafts, I, too, was tempted by a totalistic claim. After all, the classic signposting ploy of “Say what you’re going to say, say it, and then say what you’ve said” (though it provides two things I celebrate in music, namely repetition and anticipation), tends to *remove all itch*. The anticipatory announcements put the scratch before the itch and tend to pre-

vent any itch from cropping up. Soporific textbooks are well structured in this way; five-paragraph essays usually lack the kind of dynamic organization that fits our real temporal life—not only because of the anticipatory signposting but also because of the wholly predictable structure. Conventional kinds of organization *prevent* the kind of energy-based organization that gives readers any reason for actually wanting to keep on reading.

But if I claim that nondynamic organization is bad because dynamic organization is good, I am falling into either/or thinking—the trap that Dewey constantly reminds us of. I especially don't trust totalistic either/or arguments because I've so often been whacked over the head with the "or." (About the flawed thinking that often flies under the banner of "all language is social," see my "Private Writing.")

I'm excited about the music of form, and I'm troubled by the seeming monopoly of traditional nondynamic organizational techniques in the teaching of writing (such as signposting, mapping, thesis statements, and the neat arrangement of parts). But I am not arguing *against* them. Both approaches to organization provide their own way of giving readers a sense of a text holding together. Conventional modes of organization work at clarity and predictability; dynamic time-oriented modes work at energy. My argument is both/and, not either/or.

**(2) Both kinds of organization may work, but they are incompatible. Only one or the other can function at the same time; they must work alone on opposite sides of a fence.**

It's tempting, for example, to argue that each approach to organization has its own sensorium: visual objects like paintings and photos require spatially derived modes of organization. Temporal objects like music and speeches require dynamic time-derived modes of organization.

Or in the case of writing, we might be tempted to claim that each approach to organization has its own genres. Dynamic modes of organization are used in poetry and fiction—and in the burgeoning realms of literary and experimental nonfiction. In all these genres, there is an implicit invitation to dispense entirely with neat structure and signposting and to rely entirely on

**Dynamic modes of organization are used in poetry and fiction—and in the burgeoning realms of literary and experimental nonfiction. In all these genres, there is an implicit invitation to dispense entirely with neat structure and signposting and to rely entirely on the more mysterious music of form.**



the more mysterious music of form. (On literary nonfiction, see Eldred and Root and Steinberg.) In contrast, the more conventional static modes of organization and coherence belong in transactional essays, that is, in most prose that functions in school, the academy, business, and the professions.

Montaigne, though he invented the essay (*essai*), chose mostly to work on the “dynamic” side of the fence. He often has a “try at” some interesting notion that doesn’t always emerge clearly stated. He characteristically binds time with many of the features I described earlier: language that tells the story of his thinking; language that enacts his perplexity; language with a beguiling voice.

Going further back in history, we can point to Platonic dialogues. They may not be poetry or literary nonfiction, but they don’t live on the same side of the fence with “normal” essay writing. They are messy and digressive and often switch registers and even genres in midcourse, yet the most effective ones bind time with perplexity, thinking in action, and the drama of voices. They give readers an experience of coherence—even while scholars can’t agree about the “main claim.”<sup>9</sup>

### Resisting the Temptation

But I am *not* telling a story about two kinds of organization living on opposite sides of a fence—separate but equal. The two *can* work together. Even though I’ve associated music with dynamic organization, “Happy Birthday” is also organized to some degree by the neat spatial architecture of those four submelodies. There are lots of spatially symmetrical structures in all kinds of music. (For an interestingly extreme case, consider twelve-tone music: it’s “perfectly” organized through the rigid repetition of exactly the same twelve tones in the same order over and over and over. This elegance is usually subliminal, but perhaps it can play a role in the experience of good listeners.)

In considering the integration of the two modes, let’s turn from time (“Happy Birthday”) to space (*Nighthawks*). Having sharpened our sensitivity to the music of form, we can now notice its role in visual objects, too. Even though pictures feed the bias for organization as spatial, good visual critics often remark on energy-driven dynamism in pictures, thereby implying the time dimension—which of course is inevitable in the process of seeing.

If we look again at *Nighthawks* with a sensitivity to the music of form, we can see (or rather sense or feel) some of the dynamic elements that bind time in our experience of it. Story is most obvious: the painting may not tell an explicit story as many paintings do, but it persistently evokes untold stories.



Many viewers instinctively construct a narrative for the romantic but somehow cold couple and the lone man with his back to us (thus the inevitable Humphrey Bogart “version” of the painting). Purely abstract paintings have no stories, yet they often evoke “movement through time”: a feeling for something “happening” in the spaces or fields of force among the lines or colors. How do our eyes move? Treating *Nighthawks* as an abstraction (which it interestingly invites us to do), there is a felt play of forces in the way the bent back of the counter man opposes but seems to be overborne by the heavy solid, immobility of the seated figures and everything else in the painting. All these time-oriented elements of coherence serve to organize or hold together our experience of the painting.

Voice might seem a tricky concept to apply to paintings, but art critics apply related terms all the time: tone, mood, feeling, attitude. Many of Hopper’s best paintings are held together by a strong, characteristic visual style: space and color are plain, clean, often brightly lit—and yet often somehow mysteriously ominous. It’s as though this is a “voice” we “hear” in much of his work, just as we sometimes hear a characteristic voice in the style of some composers.

So if we want a fuller account of the organization of visual objects—one that doesn’t leave out the experience of the viewer—we need to evoke the dimension of time and dynamic modes of organization. We often linger over a painting, photograph, poster, sculpture, building, or scene in the world. Visual experiences gradually sink in over time. When we come back to a picture a few minutes later—or days or years—we usually get a different experience. Later impressions often differ from first impressions. (I sometimes return to *Nighthawks* and find myself saying: “Wait. Maybe there’s nothing mysterious or ominous here; maybe the picture is intriguing because it’s such a good evocation of the merely humdrum.”) Yet as I move from early to late impressions of a well-formed picture like this one, I sense that the picture and my impressions of it hold together.

We may not linger over newspaper pages or humdrum news photos, but visual designers have learned to think about the eye’s path over objects that we consider trivial from a design point of view. Visual designers don’t forget the question of the ant: what would make him *want* to walk? Our eye, too, needs some desire or incentive to wander over a page or a painting. So even though we apply spatial criteria most naturally to spatial entities like pictures, and dynamic criteria most naturally to temporal entities such as music and speeches, the two styles of organization apply to both space and time.



Thus, we always have a choice of lenses for any entity. Each lens brings out organizational dimensions that the other lens tends to neglect or hide. This metaphor of “lens” (or “terministic screen”—both visual) suggests that we should always use the mode that shows more of what’s there, and hides or blurs the least. Thus if we want to do justice to how a work is organized, we should focus on the mode of organization that best fits it. Still, I’ve always been interested in the uses of the “wrong” lens. It usually takes a wrong lens to find trace elements that most readers or viewers don’t notice—and yet those elements may play an important role in how the audience reacts. (My ongoing interest in the “believing game” is an interest in exploiting the powers of the wrong lens.)

### **Both Kinds of Organization Can Work Together in Essays**

I’m happy to see the growth of literary nonfiction and various experimental genres that dispense with traditional organization, and surely they deserve at least some space in our writing classrooms. It’s interesting how many academics are writing up a storm of literary nonfiction, literary essays, and personal essays—and some of these pieces turn up in academic journals. *Jouissance*-driven and deconstructive essays are already old hat. The presidency of MLA seems to function as a stepping stone to the memoir. Dynamic modes of organization alone can organize nonfiction prose—including essays like those of Montaigne and dialogues like those of Plato.

But what interests me most in this essay (and what I think is most important for our teaching) is how both modes of organization can work together—especially in “normal” “conventional” essays and books. Throughout the writing of this essay, my mind has been on the professional essays we write as academics and the essays we ask students to write in high school and college. It often seems as though we must choose between traditional organizational techniques that try to elude or compensate for time and dynamic modes that harness and bind time. If we start with thesis statements and introductory mapping, we seem to undermine the possibility of building an essay out of perplexity. This is most obvious in clunky five-paragraph essays and wooden textbooks.

But it’s not that simple. Consider the case of narrative and how we are sometimes pulled along powerfully by the unfolding of exactly what we know is coming. And the time-binding power of good music is not destroyed if we’ve already heard it many times (though too many times too recently can be a problem). So, too, we *can* in fact be riveted by the dynamic energy of an essay



that starts off announcing its claim and structure. Time *can* be bound without surprise. There is plenty of scope for perplexity and energy in *how* an argument unfolds—especially when the claim is new or counterintuitive. (“In this essay, I will demonstrate that two plus two equals five.”)

Besides, perplexity is only one of the five approaches I’ve described. Many of the other dynamic time-binding modes of organization may be present in essays that use conventional modes of organization. But traditional advice on organization has not done justice to the energy-driven modes because of the bias in our understanding of organization itself. (“[M]elodies unheard’ only become so by slipping under the net of some kind of poetic formality and proportion, constraint or craftsmanship, on which their escape nonetheless depends” [Bayley 46].) Even when teachers and commentators speak of voice in a text, they seldom consider its role in organization or form. My argument is that we can help students write better “regular essays” if we pay more attention to these dynamic modes.

And so, in this essay (and I hope it’s not so very far from “regular”), I’ve tried to demonstrate the possibilities for using both modes of organization:

- I’ve obviously tried for dynamic time-oriented modes. I lead off with perplexity and create a kind of overall story of thinking. (Readers will have to judge whether I’ve sufficiently neatened this story.) I’ve used a certain amount of thought-in-action at the local level. I’ve allowed myself to be somewhat present with a noticeable voice—though mostly avoided what might be called “personal writing.” (I allow a bit of it in the later parts of the essay, following a general principle that I think students need to know: if you can demonstrate to readers that you can meet their conservative demands in the early pages of an essay, they often don’t mind later features they would have objected to at the start.)
- But I’ve also tried to use traditional modes of organization that compensate for the temporal experience of reading. I start off with an abstract and do quite a lot of local signposting about what’s ahead. I’ve built a roughly balanced larger structure—though I don’t signpost it: (a) texts as temporal rather than spatial—and how music creates organization in time; (b) traditional organizational features that compensate for the problem of time; (c) dynamic modes of organization; (d) how these two modes of organization function in relation to each other.



What about all my subheads, bullets, and numbers? They intrigue me as hybrid organizational devices. On the one hand, their spatial role is obvious in breaking up the page—giving some shape and clear visual emphasis in what are otherwise trackless pages of prose. They help readers step somewhat out of their helplessly temporal experience. They give the ant some sense of where he is on the painting. In particular, bullets and numbers give a kind of visual diagram of hierarchical logic. All these features are extremely traditional and almost obligatory for much writing in the natural and social sciences. In the humanities, interestingly, they seem to me somewhat discouraged; it's as though it's desirable to have many pages of trackless prose. Perhaps the devices seem too “unhumanistic” or “technical.” (Copy editors keep removing them from my manuscripts.)

On the other hand, I love the subtly phenomenological way in which these seemingly visual-based features also foster energy-driven organization—helping bind time for readers. Every time we get to a bullet or a number, our mind must automatically reregister the concept of which this bullet or number is an instance. We don't need a clunky spelling out (“My third example of why small classes are good for learning is . . .”). Many essays in the humanities disdain the repetition of the introductory phrase—but also disdain the bullets—and, as a result, we often have to work too hard to figure out what the present idea illustrates. Bullets help us rehearse the superordinate concept in our heads (“the third what?”). So here is an intriguingly fine-grained way in which both modes of organization function in a both/and rather than an either/or fashion.

### **It's About Time**

Thus I'm not trying to claim a monopoly for the music of form. But when I say to my wife, “All I want is 50 percent of the bed,” she laughs. So let me end with

**Many academics fail to bind time for their readers because of the convention that says we should suppress the very enthusiasm we need in order to get a hard essay written.**

the courage of my enthusiasm about the importance of time and hearing for texts. I feel justified in my enthusiasm especially because I'm fighting a monopoly of vision and space in our conception of organization.

In fact, a writer's enthusiasm can help hold a text together through time. Many academics fail to bind time for their readers because of the convention that says we should suppress the very enthusiasm we need in order to get a hard essay written. The convention of a detached disinterested voice is supposed to serve the goal of objectivity, but do we really serve that goal when we hide our bias? When older scholars have





accumulated more “academic capital,” they often write stronger prose with a time-binding voice because they don’t feel obliged to hide their bias.

The visual tilt in our understanding of organization is understandable. We live in a visual culture. The most recent part of the brain—the outer cerebral cortex with which we do most of our explicit or conscious thinking—is tied up with our most developed sensorium, vision. Many words meant to describe thinking are implicitly about vision and space, notably, *see, reflect, perceive, show, focus on, point, scheme, idea*.<sup>10</sup>

The visual bias in our understanding of organization shows itself most blatantly when people instinctively resort to spatial diagrams to represent the organization of temporal phenomena like music, speeches, and movies. Don Ihde explores the visual orientation in our culture from a philosophical point of view. In *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound*, he writes:

The rationality of the West owes much to the *clarity* of its vision. But the simple preference for sight may also become, in its very richness, a source of the relative inattentiveness to the global fullness of experience and, in this case, to the equal richness of listening. (8)

What is being called visualism here as a symptom is the whole reductionist tendency which, in seeking to purify experiences, belies its richness at the source. A turn to the *auditory dimension* is thus potentially more than a simple changing of variables. It begins as a deliberate decentering of a dominant tradition in order to discover what may be missing . . . (14, his italics. On this theme, see also Schmidt.)

Vision and space give relief from what I judge the deeper existential problem of time. Because we are restricted to a single instant in time, we are more helpless and lost; we cannot see the future “ahead” nor reliably remember the past “behind.” Space, “on the other hand” (i.e., on the left space as opposed to the right space!) gives us more perspective. We can see ahead and behind—left, right, up, down—usually to a great distance. Walter Ong (*Orality*) likes to stress an obvious fact that Aristotle noted but that we sometimes forget: we have more control over visual experience than heard experience. For example, we can close our eyes, not our ears.

But the dominance of vision and space leads to problems. The most obvious is simply the neglect of other dimensions—our “inattentiveness to the global fullness of experience” (Ihde). But there are more subtle effects. The human weakness for either/or thinking is deeply reinforced by this bias toward space. X and Not-X cannot coexist in the same space or both be true in the timeless realm of logic. But they *can* both be true in the realm of time: at this moment



for these conditions, X is true; then at another moment under different conditions, Not-X is true.<sup>11</sup>

Hearing—the modality that works in time—reaches an older, deeper, and more instinctual part of the brain than sight. Rhythm and movement reach inside us. Eyes tell us about the surface of things, but sound tells us about the insides of things. The Protestant hymn book attributes these words to Thomas Aquinas:

Taste and touch and vision, to discern they fail;  
Faith that comes by hearing, pierces through the veil.

*Koran*, or *Qur'an*, means “recitation” or “to recite.” The Old Testament God was heard, not seen. But though hearing is “old,” it’s not slow. It’s one thousand times faster than seeing. Jeff Goldberg reports on striking research:

“In order to be able to process sounds at the highest frequency range of human hearing, hair cells must be able to turn current on and off 20,000 times per second. They are capable of even more astonishing speeds in bats and whales, which can distinguish sounds at frequencies as high as 200,000 cycles per second,” says Hudspeth.

Photoreceptors in the eye are much slower, he points out. “The visual system is so slow that when you look at a movie at 24 frames per second, it seems continuous, without any flicker. Contrast 24 frames per second with 20,000 cycles per second. The auditory system is a thousand times faster.”

Creatures need hearing to tell them *where* a sound comes from, and this locating ability would be impossible without the capacity to register microtemporal differences between reception at the left ear and right ear.

George Steiner writes of the peculiar power of music (quoting also from Valery):

[I]t is precisely this realm [of music] which exercises over us “a sovereignty far greater than that of any other art” (Valery). It is music which can invade and rule the human psyche with a penetrative strength comparable, it may be, only to that of narcotics or of the trance (81).

Why is it that so many people listen to music for so many hours of the day—especially young people? Is there any comparable way in which so many people pursue an experience of organized space that compares to this hunger for organized time? The power of music surely depends on the features of time and hearing that I am trying to highlight here.





So even though I'm celebrating time and hearing, I'm not forgetting the opposite point that time is a prison. After all, my larger goal here is writing, and nothing I say in this essay undermines the larger fact that it does give us some relief from the existentially intractable medium of time in general—and in particular that writing is far less buried in the glue of time than spoken language. Written words can be preserved through time instead of always ceasing to exist at the moment of utterance. And when we learn to organize our texts with traditional techniques of structure, signposting, and mapping, we get some relief from the temporal dimension of reading. Yet by the same token, *if* we can provide readers with an experience of coherence and satisfaction *in* that intractable medium of time—if we can create some music of form—we can, I think, give them an experience of deeper coherence and satisfaction. We've brought organization and coherence to a realm of greater helplessness.

### **Coda: The Linearity of Texts—Or Singing in Chains**

It's become fashionable to disparage linearity and to condescend to the shackles of "linear thinking." Some scholars of literacy celebrate hypertext on these grounds: "[T]he increasing use of hypertext on computers is fast rendering linear representation of ideas obsolete" (Clark and Ivancic 214). Where conventional texts enforce a single pathway for readers, hypertext invites choice among paths (letting the ant become a grasshopper who can jump from place to place on the painting).

Yet conventional texts have always permitted readers to jump around—to jump, as it were, out of time into space. Many readers habitually do this—especially technical and scholarly folk and mystery readers who "cheat" to see "who dun it." One kind of hypertext is particularly good for helping us customize our jumps. A well-designed web-site gives an overview of possible paths—a "menu" of what's available—and continues to display the same choice-oriented hierarchical menu even as the reader proceeds down the tree. This menu-driven tree structure is ideal for helping readers elude time as they search through a huge body of text and avoid the linearity of an enforced single path.

But even though websites help us save time, they don't help us elude time. They let us escape an *enforced* sequence through a text, but they do nothing to help us escape sequence itself. Human readers are still stuck with the ability to read only a few words at a time.

The shackles of linguistic and textual linearity are most striking if we turn from reading to writing. In writing, we often have a gaggle of words or



ideas jostling in our head, yet the doorway of language allows only one idea at a time—indeed only one word at a time! Every choice is a choice among jostlers. No wonder writers dream of escaping linearity. But linearity will never go away as a problem for both writers and readers since it's inherent in the medium we swim in: time.

With space, it's a different story. Some TV sets permit enthusiasts to watch multiple channels at once. We can take in many pictures more or less at the same time, but few people can successfully listen to more than one sound track at a time. Some DVDs provide alternative endings of a film. Perhaps they could exploit the multiple screen method and show two or three endings at once. But we'd have trouble with the sound tracks.

Yet think again about this very "prison" of time and linearity in language—this inherent prissiness that says "You mustn't put more than one byte in your mouth at once": in truth, it is the glory of syntax and language. And of music! Imagine saying, "Let's get away from linearity in music." Without linearity, we could have no rhythm. Rhythm declares to each beat: "You must wait for your proper turn. Not too soon; not too late." Without linearity, there is no experience of energy in music, speech—or text. If all elements come at once, there is chaotic overload. (Musical chords give us multiple notes at once, but there's no music unless chords are sequenced in rhythm and time.) Without linearity, speech could not exist—nor could storytelling. Without linearity, no energy or sound in writing.<sup>12</sup>

I love a good website, but I've not been able to get much pleasure from my few experiences reading hypertext fiction. It's as though I'm listening to music, and after every note I'm asked, "What note would you like next, a half note or an eighth note? B or G sharp?" For me, this eliminates the rhythm, force, or energy in a narrative. No itch or pull. Perhaps if I read more hypertext, I'd learn to build in rhythm and energy and set up my own experiences of itch and scratch.

### **Postlude on the Teaching of Writing**

I'm obviously beguiled by the many theoretic issues in this essay, but what has driven it all along is my interest in the writing process and the teaching of writing. My goal is to enrich and complicate our teaching of organization in writing. I'm not arguing against the usefulness of traditional organizational techniques like signposting, mapping, and thesis statements—which can powerfully compensate for how texts are trapped in the glue of time. But students need to know more. The traditional techniques are not the only way to give

readers a sense that an essay hangs together and is well organized. In fact, they do nothing in themselves to involve and pull readers along, bind time, or add a sense of energy; and, indeed, they can deaden an essay if handled in a flat-footed way.

I'm trying to bring perplexity to the notion of organization or form in writing. We get different messages if we listen to what handbooks say about the arrangement of parts and the use and location of topic sentences—vs. if we listen to what Socrates, Burke, and Colomb and Griffin say about the experiences of readers. Perplexity seems appropriate—and I use the metaphor “music of form” not because it clears things up but because it makes space for some of the mystery that I sense in this topic.

These perplexities can take a concrete form as we engage in the realities of teaching. Consider contrasting comments I've found myself making to students on their essays:

- I'm confused here. I'm lost and annoyed.
- I'm confused here, but somehow it's not bothering me. You've somehow convinced me that my reaction is part of the plan and that everything will be fine.

Or:

- I appreciate how your clear signposting and mapping help me know where I am in this complex essay.
- You've done a good job of giving clear signposts and maps so that I'm never lost—but I have to confess that I don't feel any energy or mental force pulling me through this essay. By the middle, I get bored.

I can imagine colleagues who know me well laughing at this essay for being the longest and most roundabout defense of freewriting among the many I've made so far. For, of course, the regular practice of freewriting promotes all the things I celebrate here: rhythm, energy, movement, writing through perplexity, thinking in action, and voice. But I don't take freewriting as my focus because, of course, countless good writers through the ages have harnessed the music of form without ever using that artificial exercise of nonstop private writing.

But there is a simple writing practice that good writers *have* used down through the ages—and it may be the most practical “moral” of my essay: we should revise by reading our late drafts aloud. Most writers have seen this as a



way to increase clarity—and, of course, it does that. But I think a good part of the power of reading aloud comes from the way it helps us experience the inherent temporal and even aural dimension of any text: it gives us a vivid feeling of words operating as heard events through time. And it helps us hear where there is energy to pull the reader through and where our words sit limp and boring.

In short, good writers have always used dynamic modes of form as a source of energy to bind time and give a sense of coherence to large and complex texts. They have learned to get words to function as actions or events in time rather than just as things in space. Burke's theory of dramatism is built on this insight about language: "The titular word for our own method is 'Dramatism,' [which] . . . treats language and thought primarily as modes of action" (*Grammar* xxii). Walter Ong writes:

Deeply typographic folk forget to think of words as . . . events, and hence as necessarily powered: for them, words tend rather to be assimilated to things, "out there" on a flat surface. Such "things" are not . . . actions but are in a radical sense dead. . . . The fact that oral peoples commonly and in all likelihood universally consider words to have magical potency is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven. (*Orality* 32–33)

So I am asking writers, teachers, and scholars, to bring an additional lens to their thinking about the organization of expository or analytic essays. In particular, I'm hoping this essay can stimulate more attention and research to the role of dynamic modes of organization (including modes I haven't been able to figure out)—especially in allegedly "traditional," "square" essays where those features are liable to be overlooked.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. Fish may complicate his story by claiming—and then disclaiming—that *his* story of the reader's temporal experience of a text is better or more correct than other readers' stories. But either way, his main (almost foundational) claim stands firm: that reading is a series of experiences in time and that any interpretation of a text that takes account of these experiences will be different from an interpretation that considers only the text recalled as a whole—analyzed as if it were from a position in space.

Roy Harris celebrates what visible/spatial semiotic language can do that audible/temporal language cannot do. Still, he's clear on the limitations that time

imposes on spatial reading: “The formation, processing and interpretation of written forms all take time. . . . What an individual can do ‘at once’ is very limited. Beyond those limits, we move sequentially. So even if we can ‘take in’ a page at a glance, we can seldom read what is written on it at a glance, unless there is very little written on it and its spatial organization is not too complex” (45).

I used the analogy of an ant on a painting in my 1986 essay, “The Shifting Relations Between Speech and Writing”—which contained some seeds for the present essay.

2. Musical experience rests on some matters of physical law. Notes are widely experienced as more consonant when their frequencies are in the simplest mathematical relationship. For example, the octave is widely felt as the most “consonant” interval—surely because the ratio is two to one. There are twice as many vibrations per second in a note one octave higher than another. The vibrations of the higher note blend or disappear perfectly into the beats of the lower one. The intervals of thirds and seconds are widely felt as more “dissonant,” and their frequencies are not so closely related: the beats of one note don’t coincide with the beats of the other.

Yet time and culture also affect our experiences of expectation and relief. People no longer feel so much coherence in the old modes like the Dorian. And it used to be that when a piece moved from the starting key even to its closest relative—say from C major to G major—many listeners would feel this as a departure from “home.” They expected to be led back to where they “belong.” But in recent centuries, as composers have stretched and enriched harmony, most listeners have become somewhat desensitized to the pull of the home key. And with fully atonal or twelve-tone music, some listeners feel no itches and scratches at all.

3. They point to three kinds of representational models that readers create in reading: “a model of the text’s ‘content form,’ a model of its ‘global text structure,’ and a schematic model of its ‘architecture’. . . .” (283). Presumably we all do this as we read, even if we’re not consciously trying and instead just “reading along” and hoping that conscious understanding of the structure and meaning will happily materialize in our minds. But when students take courses in “study skills,” they are warned against “just reading along” and advised to engage in exactly this process: pause to make conscious hypotheses about meaning and structure; continually check and revise those hypotheses.

4. Axelrod and Cooper repeatedly ask students to check if their essays seem disorganized, and, if so, to use more topic sentences, forecasting, and summarizing (e.g., 329). In his handbook, Joseph Williams says to make the thesis sentence the last sentence of the first paragraph. Students are not infrequently asked to create topic sentences for every paragraph.

When Williams gives advice about signposting and mapping, he defines it as



advice about *cohesion* and *coherence*. Cohesion is local: it creates links between individual sentences and paragraphs. Coherence is global: it creates a network of echoed emphases throughout larger wholes, including the entire essay or book. Williams is drawing on the work of Halliday and Hasan, whose thinking was brought most prominently to our field in the pages of this journal in an influential 1981 essay by Witte and Faigley. Insofar as I understand Halliday and Hasan, their analysis of cohesion and coherence is far more fine grained than merely an emphasis on good signposting and mapping. They point to tiny semantic features scattered throughout a text (like reference, substitution, ellipsis, and many others). Indeed, they emphasize pervasive repetition and redundancy—those messy features that differ from neat organization. It doesn't seem to me that these fine-grained features help readers step outside of time; rather I'd say they help make the temporal experience of reading more unified *over* or *through* time: less interrupted or surprising or difficult.

It's interesting to note a change of meaning for *coherence* in our field. Traditionally, it pertained to structure or the arrangement of parts. "[T]he traditional concept of coherence [is] drawn from Bain's *English Composition and Rhetoric* (1866), which links it to arrangement, viewing it as an indication of the organization or form of a text" (Wieser 205). "It could be argued," writes Jeanne Fahnestock, "that arrangement was the first of the arts of rhetoric and that when its founders produced the first handbooks in the fifth century BCE, they stipulated the divisions and arrangement of forensic speeches" (33). The goal was a sequence of sections that improved your chances of persuading listeners.

But the concept of coherence has shifted from that early emphasis on arrangement (in order to promote persuasion) to a more recent emphasis on *meaning* (in order to facilitate understanding). Halliday and Hasan emphasize the role of semantic ties in helping readers understand that all the elements of a text are about the same topic or idea, rather than just a collection of points that bear on a general area of interest.

5. There has always been a tension between these two traditions: emphasis on the text and emphasis on the reader. Text emphasis is usually strongest in practical handbooks and other sources of advice for writers—where there's a natural temptation toward static advice.

Advice on where to put the rhetor's main claim, for example, remains consistent for two thousand years. A proposition that is well-known or uncontroversial can be stated at once, with support to follow. A claim that is unfamiliar or unacceptable should be postponed or only implied. (Fahnestock 34)

We see the same tradition in the Williams handbook that emphasizes specific features in the text:



Readers judge a passage to be coherent when the words beginning each sentence in it *cumulatively* constitute a limited and related *set* of words. Those words are usually subjects of sentences, but not always. (83–4)

He also stresses the role of emphasis in creating themes that run throughout a text.

You help readers identify those themes in two ways:

- Repeat them as topics of sentences, usually as subjects.
- Repeat them elsewhere in a passage, as nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

Readers are more likely to notice those themes if you state them at the end of the sentence that introduces a passage, in its stress position. (107)

But there have always been irrefutable voices that interrupt this tradition and push the other view (in what is, admittedly, not an either/or matter). “Wait. Don’t get too preoccupied with coherence in texts. Look to the experience of the listener or reader.” This other tradition often leads to notions of coherence that involve movement or change or action since it focuses on *events* in the minds of the audience. This interruptive tradition begins early when Socrates complains about traditional static advice about arrangement in speeches (Plato *Phaedrus* 272). As Fahnestock noted, Socrates said that a true rhetoric “should be based on an understanding of what moves the soul” (33). Burke and Colomb and Griffin carry on in this reader-oriented tradition.

6. Many textbooks suggest “problem-solution” as one *kind* of essay and sometimes provide a layout or organization to go with it. Joseph Williams writes about the power of problems to drive an essay—and about the various ways to handle this technique in “Problems into Problems: A Rhetoric of Motivation.”

Judith Goleman has an intriguing essay about the problem of form, and it is driven by perplexity. On the one hand, she forcefully critiques the way the field of composition has been dominated by an oversimplified notion of form as unity (“one central idea”—“formal, unified arrangement” [60]). She convincingly describes the “gain in meaning” (69) that results from writers using a “dialectical and dialogical rhetoric” (62) that involves multiple perspectives. She builds a requirement for perplexity into her essay assignments (as I do, “stipulat[ing] that the students’ work must proceed from a question about someone or something that puzzles or intrigues them” (63).

Yet when this assignment leads a student to write an intelligent and moving essay that is built around a central ambivalence or contradiction that is never resolved—an essay “riven with contradiction” (69)—Goleman finds *herself* riven with contradiction. So even though she criticizes the simplification and loss of meaning that comes from a traditional insistence on “one central idea,” and even though



she uses the word “poststructural” as a term of praise, and even though she is deeply moved by this paper, she admits at the end that she’s troubled by the lack of resolution or unity. Goleman ends with a kind of parody of the traditional concluding thesis statement (using words from her student’s essay): “*I do not know . . . I just do not know*” (70; italics and ellipses in the original).

7. The danger of attack is particularly strong in the field of philosophy. Here is one philosopher’s ambivalent praise for a colleague’s ability to write steel-plated prose:

The argument is heavily armored, both in its range of reference and in the structure of its sentences, which almost always coil around some anticipated objection and skewer it; [Bernard] Williams is always one step ahead of his reader. Every sentence seems constructed in such a way as never to need withdrawing: it is fully shielded, immune from refutation. Williams is so well protected that it is sometimes hard to make out the shape of his position. The sentences seldom descend to elegance, and lucidity seems less highly prized than impregnability, though there are certainly flashes of humor and no lack of verbal resource.” (McGinn 70)

Before I leave this theme of how academic writing tends to arm itself against attack, let me venture a hunch. I sense a difference between essays in refereed journals and those in academic books. If referees for a journal disagree with an individual essay they are reviewing, this is often enough to keep the manuscript from being published—or to force revision into dull tameness. In contrast, I sense that individual essays for a scholarly book collection are harder to blackball. Book collections are usually refereed too, but academic editors and publishers are often willing to include essays that a respected referee considers seriously wrong. Book editors and publishers often use the criterion of whether something is interesting and fruitful, as long as it’s not downright irresponsible. And referees, too, when they comment on whole books are often more willing to say something like this: “There are a couple of essays in this collection that are wrong-headed, but still the whole project is interesting and important.” (But this generalization is risky. When I co-edited a book of essays about freewriting, the not-so-scholarly editor/publisher blackballed an essay he thought was controversial. In our commitment to the essay, we eventually had to find a different publisher.)

8. For an analysis of the voice metaphor, see Elbow, “About Voice and Writing.” For a summary of criticisms of the voice metaphor for writing, see Bowden. She would replace the metaphor of “voice” with the metaphor of “web”—feeling it would be better for exploring what people now explore with “voice.” But “voice” is a stubborn metaphor that helpfully insists on a conceptual link between writing and the realm of time and sound. By replacing “voice” with “web,” she would further enshrine writing into the realm of space and vision.



9. Looking at the *Phaedrus*, Burke gives an interesting picture of complex dynamic organization in action and how different it is from spatially-derived neat structure:

For a Platonic dialogue is not formed simply by breaking an idea into its component parts and taking them up in one-two-three order (the purely scholastic aspect in Aristotle's method of exposition). A Platonic dialogue is rather a process of *transformation* whereby the position at the end transcends the position at the start, so that the position at the start can eventually be seen in terms of the new motivation encountered en route. . . . [A]s seen from without, the change from one level of discourse to another would be a kind of jolt or inconsistency, a somewhat random or opportunistic juxtaposition of partially disrelated subjects. Yet, as seen from within, this change of levels would be precisely what the dialogue was designed to trace. (422 *Grammar*)

Burke thus insists that form doesn't come from neat structure: "breaking up an idea into its component parts and taking them up in one-to-three order." (In addition, I sense that Burke is implying a problem with a spatial/visual conception of organization in his contrast between *outside* and *inside*. He says we get a misleading understanding of form "as it looks from without," and he celebrates form "as it looks from within." Even though he uses the verb "looks" in both phrases, I sense a critique of the visual here. That is, a vantage "from without" is ideal for seeing, while a vantage point "from within" is problematic for seeing. Often it's impossible to *look* at something "from the inside." And even when it's possible, we usually have to contend with darkness or distortion. In normal conditions, sight tells us only about the outside of objects; we need sound to tell us about the inside.)

10. *Scheme* derives from the Greek *schema*: "shape, form, figure, appearance." *Idea* (a word rooted in Plato's use) derives from the Greek word "to see" (as *species* derives from the Latin root word for *vision*). Certain phrases are more blatant still: *point out*, *point of view*, *throw light on*, *frame of reference*.

Amazingly even, *rhythm* may be more deeply rooted in space/vision than in time/hearing. There's some uncertainty about the original etymology, but *rhythmos* or *eurhythmia* ("good-rhythm") were semitechnical Greek terms for describing paintings and sculpture—pointing to some aspect of formal design perceivable by the eye. Perhaps *dance* provided a bridge from space to time. (I thank Richard Graff for this insight—who cites excellent entries on *Rhythmos* and *Eurhythmia* in Pollitt, personal communication.)

But even though this deep link between thinking and space/vision goes way back, the assumption that *texts* are visual and spatial is newer than we might expect. Aristotle may have "refer[red] specifically to the text visualized as a written page rather than conceived of as something heard" (Knox, quoted in Graff). But Knox says Aristotle was the first to do so, and even there he stressed the *sound* of



the text in his advice to rhetors. What's more surprising is that texts were almost always spoken and heard in the medium of time till the tenth century—except for in certain parts of the British Isles:

The consistently [word-]separated script that Irish scribes invented for both Greek and Latin freed the reader from having to orally pronounce a text. Irish scribes and the Anglo-Saxon scribes who were trained by them used the term *videre*, meaning “to see,” as a synonym for *legere*, meaning “to read.” Inspired by Syriac models, they also perfected interlinear notes identifying grammatical functions that enabled a facile visual comprehension of difficult and otherwise initially ambiguous classical Latin grammatical constructions. The new word-separated format was used for a new genre of prayer book intended for personal silent prayer. This word-separated text format remained a unique phenomenon of the British Isles until the tenth century. Outside of Brittany and isolated Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monastic colonies, this format was unknown in the Continent. (Saenger 12)

See Walter Ong's *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* for an argument that Ramus was the crucial figure in the “spatialization” of writing and rhetoric.

11. The need for *time* to compensate for the limitations of logic has long been a generative theme for me. My analysis of the writing process rests on the premise that good writing requires incompatible cognitive processes or mentalities: a creative, yea-saying generativity and also a critical, nay-saying skepticism. The two mentalities cannot co-exist (except in moments of almost magical inspiration)—thus the difficulty of writing. But they both can flower in the realm of time, one after the other—giving us the full benefits of both. I take the same line with believing and doubting.

12. As an example of energy in time, consider the rhythm in this short passage from Leonard Bernstein's “Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*”:

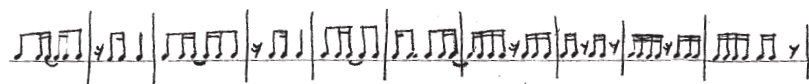


Figure 2. Rhythmic pattern from “Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*.”





We *can* look at music in space on the page, and good musicians hear sounds and rhythms as they look—just as most of us can hear sounds when we read a silent text. But an example like this one underlines the huge gulf between objects in space and events in time. The visual notes sit there quietly for our eyes, but when they are translated into time, there's an eruption of sound that virtually *compels* bodily movement. (If you can't beat out this complex rhythm from the "text," it's worth finding someone who can.)

13. *An after-note.* My deepest debt here is to a splendid book that I didn't reference in my text: Steven Katz's *The Epistemic Music of Rhetoric: Toward the Temporal Dimension of Affect in Reader Response and Writing* (Southern Illinois UP, 1996). More than ten years ago, I was lucky enough to read and respond to Steve's draft and discuss his thinking with him. It seems that his ideas became so much a part of what I thought *with* that I failed to think *about* them and credit them as I was writing my essay. I apologize for this professional and personal screw-up.

This essay grew from an invited keynote talk at the conference on the relationship between visual and textual graphics held by the American Institute of Graphic Arts in April 2002 at the Massachusetts College of Art. The essay has been percolating in various draft forms for a long time, and I've gotten helpful feedback from too many people to mention. But I want to give explicit thanks to Richard Graff, Louise Myers, Sushil Oswal, Elizabeth Sargent, Jan Swearingen, Robin Varnum, Ruth Weinreb, and the two CCC reviewers.

## Works Cited

- Aquinas, Thomas. "Hymn 314." *Hymnal 1982 According to the Use of the Episcopal Church*. New York: Church Pub. Inc., 1985.
- Axelrod, Rise B., and Charles R. Cooper. *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*. 5th ed. New York: St. Martin's P, 1997.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin: U of Texas P, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Grain of the Voice." *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- . *Le Plaisir du Texte*. Paris: Seuil, 1973. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.
- Bayley, John. "Silent Music." Rev. of *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry* by Anthony Hecht, *Collected Later Poems* by Anthony Hecht, *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath* by Helen Vendler, and *Speaking of Beauty* by Denis Donogue. *New York Review of Books*. 20 Nov. 2003: 46–48.
- Booth, Wayne. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961.
- Bowden, Darsie. *The Mythology of Voice*. Portsmouth: Heinemann P, 1999.
- Burke, Kenneth. *Counter-Statement*. Berkeley: U California P, 1968.
- . *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: U California P, [1945] 1969.

- Christensen, Francis. "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence." *College Composition and Communication* 14.3 (October 1963): 155–61. Reprinted in Christensen, Francis and Bonniejean Christensen. *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.
- Clark, Romy, and Roz Ivanic. *The Politics of Writing*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Colomb, Gregory G., and June Anne Griffin. "Coherence On and Off the Page: What Writers Can Know About Writing Coherently." *New Literary History* 35.2 (2004): 273–301.
- Crismore, Avon. *Talking with Readers: Metadiscourse as Rhetorical Act*. New York: Peter Lang, 1989.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.
- Elbow, Peter. "Bringing the Rhetoric of Assent and the Believing Game Together—And into the Classroom." *College English* (March 2005): 388–99.
- . "In Defense of Private Writing." *Written Communication* 16.2. (April 1999): 139–79. Rpt. in *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. 257–80.
- . "About Voice and Writing." Introduction. *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. Mahwah: Hermagoras Press/Erlbaum, 1994. xi–xlvii. Rpt. in *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. 184–221.
- . "Shifting Relationships between Speech and Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 36.3 (1985): 283–303. Rpt. in *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. 149–67.
- Eldred, Janet Carey. *Sentimental Attachments: Essays, Creative Nonfiction, and Other Experiments in Composition*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Heinemann P, 2005.
- Erickson, Robert. *The Structure of Music: A Listener's Guide*. New York: Farrar, Strauss & Cudahy, 1955.
- Fahnestock, Jeanne. "Arrangement." *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric and Composition: Communication from Ancient Times to the Information Age*. Ed. Theresa Enos. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996. 32–36.
- Federenko, Ed. "Note on Teaching." *Fly on the Wall*. University of Massachusetts Writing Program (October 1998): 1.
- Fish, Stanley. *Is There A Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980.
- Frost, Robert. Preface to *A Way Out*. New York: Harbor Press, 1929. Rpt. in *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*. New York: Library of America, 1995. 713.
- Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. Revised ed. New York: Random House. (1965) 1979.
- Gilyard, Keith. *The Voices of the Self: A Study of Language Competence*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991.
- Goldberg, Jeff. "The Quivering Bundles That Let Us Hear: The Goal: Extreme Sensitivity and Speed." *Seeing, Hearing, and Smelling in the World: A Report from the Howard Hughes Institute*. 2005. <http://www.hhmi.org/senses/c120.html> (consulted 9/9/05).
- Goleman, Judith. "An 'Immensely Simplified Task': Form in Modern Composition Rhetoric." *College Composition and*

- Communication* 56.1 (September 2004): 51–71.
- Graff, Richard. "Reading and the 'Written Style' in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31 (2001): 19–44.
- Halliday, M. A. K., and Ruqaiya Hasan. *Cohesion in English*. New York: Longman Group, 1976.
- Harris, Roy. *Signs of Writing*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Hocks, Mary E. "Understanding Visual Rhetoric in Digital Writing Environments." *College Composition and Communication* 54.4 (June 2003): 629–56.
- Ikeda, Don. *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1976.
- Kane, Thomas S. *The Oxford Guide to Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 1983.
- Knox, B. M. W. "Books and Readers in the Greek World: From the Beginnings to Alexandria." *Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 1. Ed. P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985. 1–16.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.
- McGinn, Colin. "Isn't It the Truth?" Rev. of *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* by Bernard Williams. *New York Review of Books*. (10 April 2003): 70–73.
- Medawar, Peter. *Induction and Intuition in Scientific Thought*. Originally: Jayne Lectures, Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1969. Now incorporated into *Pluto's Republic*. New York: Oxford UP, 1982.
- Meyer, Leonard B. *Emotion and Meaning in Music*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1956.
- Neisser, Ulrich. *Cognitive Psychology*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1967.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York: Methuen, 1982.
- . *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958.
- Palacas, Arthur L. "Parentheticals and Personal Voice." *Written Communication* 6.4 (Oct 1989): 506–27. Rpt. in *Landmark Essays on Voice and Writing*. Ed. Peter Elbow. Mahwah: Hermagoras Press/Erlbaum, 1994.
- Plato. *Phaedrus*. Trans. W. C. Helmbold and W. G. Rabinowitz. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1977. (Liberal Arts Press, 1956).
- Pollitt, J. J. *The Ancient View of Greek Art: Criticism, History, and Terminology*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1974.
- Ponsot, Marie, and Rosemary Deen. *Beat Not the Poor Desk—Writing: What to Teach, How to Teach It, and Why*. Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook P, 1982.
- Root, Robert L. Jr., and Michael Steinberg. *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*. Needham: Allyn and Bacon, 1999.
- Saenger, Paul. "The History of Reading." *Literacy: An International Handbook*. Eds. Daniel A. Wagner, Richard L. Venezky, and Brian Street. Westview Press, 1999.
- Schmidt, Leigh Eric. *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Steiner, George. *Real Presences*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989.
- Villaneuva, Victor, Jr. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Urbana: NCTE, 1993.

- Wesker, Arnold. *The Kitchen: A Play in Two Parts, with an Interlude*. London: Cape, 1961. New York: Random House, 1962.
- Wieser, Irwin. "Coherence and Cohesion." *Encyclopedia of English Studies and Language Arts*. Ed. Alan C. Purves. New York: Scholastic P, 1994. 205–07.
- Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. 7th ed. New York: Longman, 2003.
- , "Problems into Problems: A Rhetoric of Motivation." <http://wac.colostate.edu/exchange/williams.pdf> (consulted 5/05).
- Witte, Stephen P., and Lester Faigley. "Coherence, Cohesion, and Writing Quality." *College Composition and Communication* 32.2 (May 1981): 189–204.

### Peter Elbow

Peter Elbow is professor of English emeritus at University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He directed the Writing Program there and at SUNY Stony Brook, having also taught at M.I.T., Franconia College, and Evergreen State College. He wrote: *Oppositions in Chaucer*; *Writing Without Teachers*; *Writing with Power*; *Embracing Contraries*; *What Is English?* and *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing* (which was given the James Britton Award by the Conference on English Education in 2000). With Pat Belanoff, he wrote a textbook, *Being a Writer*. In 1986, CCCC gave him the Richard Braddock Award for his essay in *CCC*, "The Shifting Relationships between Speech and Writing."