

Nonacademic Writing **6**

The Social Perspective

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The past several years have seen a great deal of interest in the writing people do as part of their work. As other chapters in this book will indicate, this job-related writing is worthy of our interest and serious study. In exploring this sort of writing, researchers can take one or a combination of three major theoretical perspectives—the textual perspective, the individual perspective, and the social perspective. In this chapter I discuss the foundations of the social perspective and how it might contribute to research in nonacademic writing. Although the social perspective is least well established, I will argue that it can be a fruitful perspective from which to study nonacademic writing. To illustrate the three theoretical perspectives, I will refer to the following four examples of writing situations in nonacademic settings.

- An editor working for a major publisher in New York neglects to answer a query from an editor in another division. A few days later she writes a brief memo on the company's memo stationery, apologizing for her failure to respond. She uses the excuse that the request became buried on her desk. She follows the company's memo format, but she adds a letterlike closing that says: "Excavatingly yours."

- A supervisor of bank examiners in Colorado has the responsibility of teaching newly hired examiners how to write reports. Since

examiners travel extensively and are not well paid, his staff is young and turns over rapidly. The supervisor is now revising an examiner's report on a small bank in southwestern Colorado that has made several questionable loans. In the margins he notes several problems with the report: the lack of reasons for several conclusions, the omission of important factual details, and general wordiness. At the end he explains to the young examiner why the overall tone is inappropriate for an examiner's report. He reminds the examiner that the report will be read at a board of directors' meeting and that it will be the basis for any reform in the bank's management. He tells him to stick to the specific regulations that were violated and to avoid derogatory remarks about the practices of rural banks.

• A nurse in Boston changes jobs and begins work at a psychiatric hospital. At his previous job at a large general hospital, the nurse's section of a patient's chart was a checklist. The psychiatric hospital, however, requires discursive notes on the chart. The nurse photocopies a few examples during his first day on the new job. He uses these examples as models when writing the chart for a schizophrenic patient. He observes that the notes are written in phrases and that certain abbreviations occur frequently, such as *pt.* for patient. He begins describing his patient's behavior:

Very anxious and agitated, seclusive to room except when preoccupied with phone. Poor personal hygiene. With much coaxing, *pt.* finally took a bath but refused to wash hair. *Pt.* very paranoid. States "Someone is trying to burn down my trailer."

• A wildlife biologist works for an environmental engineering firm in Houston. She serves as project manager for an ecological survey of the proposed site for a liquefied natural-gas terminal on Matagorda Bay in Texas. She is part of a team that is preparing an environmental-impact statement for a major oil company, and she is composing on a computer the final report on terrestrial ecology. This report will be submitted with other reports on aquatic ecology and hydrology. Major subsections of the report include (1) wildlife habitats, (2) checklists of species, (3) endangered species, and (4) commercially important species. In writing the "checklists of species" subsection, the biologist relies on several master checklist files stored on computer diskettes. She loads the master checklist file

for birds, a file that includes all species known to the Texas coast. She edits the file using her field notes on the birds she sighted while visiting the site, marking either "present," "absent," or "probable" beside each species. The biologist knows that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) gives special attention to endangered flora and fauna, and she includes in the report a separate subsection for habitats of endangered species. She documents her own findings with independently published sightings.

PERSPECTIVES FOR RESEARCH

Each of the writing situations just described—the editor's memo, the bank examiner's report, the nurse's notes, and the environmental-impact statement—differs substantially from typical classroom writing tasks. An overriding question for researchers of nonacademic writing is how these differences might best be understood and described. The three perspectives mentioned at the beginning of this chapter represent general lines of research that attempt to answer this question. They are, in fact, collections of approaches, collapsed and simplified here for purposes of comparison.

The Textual Perspective

The primary concerns of linguistics and literary criticism during much of the twentieth century have been the description of formal features in language and texts. Following from the assumptions of these traditions, much writing research has analyzed features in texts. This line of inquiry has long been dominant in the study of business and technical writing. One goal of this research has been to describe features that typify particular genres, such as what elements appear in the introduction of a marketing forecast. Another goal has been to produce more "readable" texts. Readability has been defined traditionally in terms of quantifiable linguistic features such as sentence length and word length—the basis for the popular readability formulas of Flesch and Gunning (reviewed in Selzer, 1983). Only recently have discussions of readability included factors such as the suitability of texts for potential readers (see Redish, et al., chapter 3, this volume).

If researchers who take the textual perspective were asked to examine the four situations I cited at the beginning, they would

collect and analyze the texts the writers produce. They might, for example, compare the specialized vocabularies of the environmental-impact statement, the examiner's report, and the nurse's notes. They might compute T-unit length and clause length for each example. They might analyze the topics of individual sentences and determine how these sentence topics form topical progressions. They might, for example, study documents' tables of contents in order to identify conventions of organization. They might look at errors in the nurse's writing and measure "improvement." And they might comment on stylistic variations such as the closing of the editor's memo. Results of these studies would be used to make generalizations about specific kinds of texts—generalizations that are sometimes stated prescriptively as rules for style and format.

The Individual Perspective

This perspective has been strongly influenced by recent theory and research in psychology. For much of this century, linguistics and psychology in the United States were dominated by behaviorism, which declared mental strategies to be unobservable and beyond scientific investigation. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, behaviorist assumptions encountered serious objections. In linguistics, Noam Chomsky argued persuasively that behaviorist theory could not account for the complexity of human language acquisition, and thereby changed the direction of American linguistic research. In psychology, further challenges arose from several sources, two of which later became important in the study of writing. The European cognitive-developmental tradition—best known through the work of Jean Piaget—influenced American researchers studying the development of the thinking reflected in children's writing. A second tradition of cognitive psychology in the United States engaged researchers in creating general theoretical models of the reasoning that attends the writing process. Both these new lines of inquiry in psychology directed the attention of some writing researchers to strategies writers use in composing. For example, Emig (1971) tried to identify some of the strategies high school students used when they composed. Emig's work was followed by numerous other studies of the composing processes of elementary, secondary, and college students. The 1970s movement toward process-oriented inquiry into

how children and young adults learn to write eventually led to studies of how nonacademic writers compose (e.g., Gould, 1980).

For researchers who take the individual perspective, a text is not so much an object as an outcome of an individual's cognitive processes. The primary attention shifts away from the text to an individual writer's emerging conception of the writing task. Researchers taking the individual perspective would likely examine how writers make certain choices during composing. They would inquire about writer's goals in composing, either by retrospective interviews or by asking writers to voice their thoughts while they composed. They would consider how an individual's formulation of a writing task directs the production of the resulting text. For example, researchers might observe how the biologist divides the task of writing the environmental impact statement into segments and what she hopes to accomplish in each section. They might observe how the editor at a publishing house goes about creating a persona as she writes the memo and how she understands that persona to fulfill a larger purpose—in this case, gaining the reader's acceptance of an oversight. They might study protocols of the nurse's composing or consider the time he devotes to each stage of writing (e.g., Does he ever revise?). They might take the bank examiner's case as an example of failure to develop an appropriate sense of audience. One goal of these studies would be to describe the processes that are effective and those that are ineffective so that effective strategies can be taught to ineffective writers.

The Social Perspective

The social perspective also focuses on the process of composing, but this perspective understands process in far broader terms. In the social perspective, writing processes do not start with "prewriting" and stop with "revising." Researchers taking a social perspective study how individual acts of communication define, organize, and maintain social groups. They view written texts not as detached objects possessing meaning on their own, but as links in communicative chains, with their meaning emerging from their relationships to previous texts and the present context. The social perspective, then, moves beyond the traditional rhetorical concern for audience, forcing researchers to consider issues such as social

roles, group purposes, communal organization, ideology, and finally theories of culture.

If we consider the examples at the beginning of the chapter, we see that neither the textual perspective nor the individual perspective gives us a way to understand how a wildlife biologist learns to write an environmental-impact statement, or why the nurse's section of a patient's chart at one hospital would not require any writing, or how the supervisor's editing of the bank examiner's report affects the audit of the bank and its consequences, or even why the editor's closing is funny. These questions all involve social relations, tensions, or conflicts that go beyond the text as a physical object and the writer as an isolated strategist. To ask these questions is to assume that writing, like operating a jackhammer, arguing a lawsuit, or designing an office building, is a social act that takes place in a structure of authority, changes constantly as society changes, has consequences in the economic and political realms, and shapes the writer as much as it is shaped by the writer. Questions like these could be avoided as long as researchers studied student compositions, but they arise as soon as we leave the academic setting with which we are familiar. Consequently, a writing researcher taking the social perspective needs not only new methods of research, but also a theory that explains how we can participate daily in an all-encompassing social world and yet still see the structure of that world. Before turning to questions of research methodology from the social perspective, I first will look at how such a theory might be constructed.

FOUNDATIONS FOR A SOCIAL THEORY OF WRITING

A central tenet of the social perspective is that communication is inextricably bound up in the culture of a particular society. Consequently, a researcher of writing who takes the social perspective must have some way of defining and describing that society in terms broader than the traditional rhetorical conception of audience (see Nyststrand, 1982). For those of us who have been trained to appreciate literary texts as works of solitary artistic genius rather than expressions of a culture, the task of describing a society seems formidable—if not impossible. There is some comfort, however, in

knowing that others ill equipped in theory and method have stumbled onto vast social questions concerning language and have not only survived but even changed basic notions about how we communicate. One such group of explorers—an appropriate metaphor here—were anthropological linguists who attempted to describe the languages of Africa and Asia during the years following World War II. They found that traditional definitions of language and methods of linguistic analysis were no better suited for the astonishing diversity of language in newly emerging nations than was the wool clothing earlier explorers wore to the tropics. These linguists met speakers of the "same" language living a few villages apart who could not understand each other. In many small villages they found that everyone was fluent in two languages or dialects, and that a speaker's choice of one of them often conveyed the social standing of the speaker or listener.

To cope with this diversity, linguists developed the notion of a speech community, which Gunperz (1971) defines as "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage" (p. 114). This notion of a speech community became a basis for the new discipline of *sociolinguistics*. Sociolinguists employed the idea of a speech community to examine how language is used to maintain social identity. For example, Blom and Gunperz (1972) studied a small Norwegian village where all residents spoke both Bokmål, one of the two forms of standard Norwegian, and a local dialect. They found that choices between the two dialects varied among speakers within the community. In some cases, choices between the two dialects signaled certain attitudes and beliefs. A similar phenomenon occurs in my neighborhood in Austin, Texas, where most residents are bilingual in English and Spanish. My neighbors typically greet each other in Spanish, then often switch to English if they wish to engage in prolonged conversation, then signal the conclusion of the conversation by returning to Spanish. Differences in language use can establish social identity even among speakers of the same language (cf. Hymes, 1972). For example, speakers of English would likely understand the literal meaning of utterances of inner-city blacks such as "Your momma so black, she sweat chocolate," but they might not understand that such insults comprise a form of verbal play called the "dozens" (Labov, 1972).

Although the notion of a speech community offers us some insights into the social dimensions of writing, the concept of a community connected by writing must be defined by different criteria. Many of the linguistic markers of speech communities (e.g., differences in pronunciation) do not have simple parallels in written language. Further, written language is actually a collection of genres. Written language is composed in and comes to us through many forms—in shopping lists, in newspapers, in dictated letters, in scripted newscasts, in signs, in receipts. As many commentators on literacy have noted, written language can be understood outside the writer's immediate community or outside the writer's lifetime (which is also true for electronically recorded spoken language).

We need, therefore, an alternative concept to accommodate some of the special circumstances of written language—a concept we might label a *discourse community*. In one sense, all persons literate in a language constitute a discourse community. But few, if any, texts are written for everyone who is capable of deciphering the words. Texts are almost always written for persons in restricted groups (cf. Bazerman, 1979). Persons in these groups may be connected primarily by written texts, as is the case with scholars on different continents who participate in a scholarly debate. Or they may belong to the same organization that has an in-house language and certain local discourse conventions. The key notion is that within a language community, people acquire specialized kinds of discourse competence that enable them to participate in specialized groups. Members know what is worth communicating, how it can be communicated, what other members of the community are likely to know and believe to be true about certain subjects, how other members can be persuaded, and so on.

Scholars for a long time have recognized that academic disciplines are a type of discourse community, each with its own language, subject matters, and methods of argument. In this seminal book, *The Uses of Argument*, Toulmin (1958) theorizes that although arguments have basic structural similarity, they also are distinguished by fields. He offers academic disciplines as examples of fields, pointing out that patterns of arguments in fields such as physics are very different from those in disciplines such as history or law. Willard (1983) broadens Toulmin's account of a field to include instances of ordinary discourse. In addition to academic disciplines, which Willard calls *normative fields*, Willard distinguishes encounters

fields (communication among strangers), *relation fields* (communication among associates, friends, and spouses), and *issue fields* (schools of thought that often cross disciplines such as Freudianism). Willard describes fields as rhetorical in operation. Fields sanction what knowledge is accepted, what subjects might be investigated, and what kinds of evidence and rhetorical appeals are permitted.

The academic discourse communities receiving the most study to date have been the sciences, with most attention coming from an extensive research program in the sociology of science (reviewed in Bazerman, 1983). Following Merton's (1957) observation that the growth of scientific knowledge reflects its social organization, many researchers have examined groups, subgroups, and hierarchies among scientists. Researchers have considered how scientific articles serve the social organization as both a means of communication and a means of earning rewards. Hagstrom (1965) drew the analogy of the scientific article as a form of primitive "gift giving," where the scientist offers the "gift" with the expectation of receiving some sort of later recognition from the community. Latour and Woolgar (1979) argue for a different model, where scientists publish to earn credibility, which in turn furthers their interest in the "game" of science. Another issue in this research program is the nature of scientific knowledge. The old notion of an independent and rational body of scientific knowledge has collided with many demonstrations of the human construction of scientific facts (e.g., Feyerabend, 1975; Toulmin, 1972), and "new" scientific knowledge has been shown to emerge from an agreed-on body of old knowledge (e.g., Price, 1963).

It is tempting to import wholesale the research issues raised in the sociology of science for the study of nonacademic writing. But before any such ambitious research program can begin, certain questions of definition must be addressed. One of the most crucial is how to differentiate academic and nonacademic writing. In examining nonacademic writing, we find many overlapping communities. For example, the biologist writing an environmental-impact statement abides not only by certain disciplinary conventions in biology, certain legal forms determined by the Environmental Protection Agency, and certain unstated and stated conventions particular to her company, but also by a complex set of conventions of political language (consider the use of the term *endangered species*). If the notion of discourse communities is to be illuminating, it must not be used

without attending to how such communities might be identified and defined and how communities shape the form and content of specific texts. Chapter 9 by Miller and Selzer in this volume suggests how analyses of texts written in specific communities might proceed.

In the case of academic or professional discourse, it is relatively easy to see writing as a social activity. It is more difficult to see how a "private" act of writing, such as an entry in a diary, might be construed as a social act. Take an extreme example, where the writer of a diary encodes her entries in a cipher that only she knows. Theoreticians of the social perspective, such as Lev Vygotsky, would argue that such a coded diary entry would be no less a social act than the environmental-impact statement. Vygotsky (1962) contends that there is no such thing as "private" language, or even "private" thought:

Thought development is determined by language, i.e., by the linguistic tools of thought, and by the sociocultural experiences of the child . . . The child's intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is, language . . . Verbal thought is not an innate, natural form of behavior but is determined by a historical-cultural process [p. 51].

The historical-cultural process to which Vygotsky refers is simply that children do not learn words from a dictionary but through hearing them uttered in social situations to convey specific intentions and to achieve specific ends (see Bizzell, 1982). Words carry the contexts in which they have been used. Granted, Vygotsky does discuss "inner speech," but his conception of inner speech is not the same as private language. Although inner speech is not voiced, it consists of fragments of speech the speaker has drawn from the community in which he or she lives. More important, inner speech takes the form of a dialogue, which implies the continuous presence of an "other."

Vygotsky's contemporary, M. M. Bakhtin, applied these same notions to written texts. It is not clear whether Bakhtin and Vygotsky knew each other or influenced each other. (Bakhtin remains mysterious in other ways as well. Apparently some of his works were published under the names of his associates.) In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, originally published under the name V. N. Volosinov in 1929, Bakhtin claims the textual perspective (which he

calls "abstract objectivism") distorts the nature of written language by separating a text from its context. Bakhtin goes on to say that the textual perspective mistakenly assumes that meaning can be separated from a specific situation, that the textual approach inevitably emphasizes parts at the expense of the whole. He also faults approaches that center on the individual; these approaches he claims, miss the nature of language. Like Vygotsky, he insists that language is dialogic, that a text is not an isolated, monologic utterance, but "a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication" (Volosinov, 1973, p. 95). A text is written in orientation to previous texts of the same kind and on the same subjects; it inevitably grows out of some concrete situation; and it inevitably provokes some response, even if it is simply discarded. In short, the essence of a text—any text—is inextricably tied up in chains of communication and not in the linguistic forms on the page or in the minds of individual writers.

RESEARCH ON WRITING FROM THE SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

A broadly defined research program that explores writing from the social perspective would first examine what constitutes a discourse community. It would probe the fluid and multiple nature of discourse communities, and how communities overlap and change. Such a research program would examine how a particular discourse community is organized by its interactions and by the texts it produces (see chapter 8 by Paradis et al. in this volume). It would examine what subjects are considered appropriate in that community and how those subjects are determined. It would examine how genres evolve within a community. Finally, it would investigate how a community sanctions certain methods of inquiry.

Such a research program would integrate considerations of individual writers and particular texts into a broader view of the social functions of writing. It would explore how individual writers come to know the beliefs and expectations of other members of the community, and how individuals can alter the community's beliefs and expectations. It would consider how individuals cope with texts—how they learn to read texts and how to make meaning in texts in a particular community. It would investigate how conventions

shape and are shaped by the processes of writing and reading. It would examine not only how individuals learn to represent themselves in a text, but how that representation emerges in response to a specific situation. In addition to the familiar aspects of the composing process, this research program would consider how all language is interaction, how all texts entail contexts, and how texts accomplish interactions between writers and readers rather than embodying meaning entirely by themselves. Consequently, this research program would not only examine an individual's composing processes, but would also follow the completed text, examining how it is disseminated, who has access to it, who reads it and who doesn't, what is read, what actions people take upon reading it, and how it influences subsequent texts.

Moreover, this research program would not separate the study of texts from the study of technologies used to create texts. These technologies include not only writing implements, but also symbol systems and the knowledge to interpret those systems. New technologies arise in response to needs, and members of discourse communities must know how to apply new technologies to existing functions for writing (see chapter 4 by Halpern in this volume; see also Faigley & Miller, 1982; Halpern & Liggett, 1984; Williams, 1981). For example, in writing the endangered-species subsection of the environmental-impact statement, the biologist uses computer software to form a pie chart that illustrates the percentages of wildlife habitat affected on the proposed site. The knowledge that readers use to interpret the pie graph is as critical a technology to this particular writing act as the technology that led to the development of the computer hardware and software.

The central questions for research taking the social perspective are ones that concern the contexts in which texts are written and read. These questions will be addressed in theoretical, historical, and empirical research. Theoreticians who adopt the social perspective can look to a long tradition of scholarship in rhetoric and more recent work in semiotics (e.g., Barthes, 1968); literary criticism (e.g., Fish, 1980); the philosophy of science (e.g., Popper, 1963); social psychology (e.g., Vygotsky, 1962); and cultural anthropology (e.g., Geertz, 1983). Historians can examine the functions of writing in small communities or the effects of literacy on large ones. Empirical researchers must be able to connect theoretical approaches to the mundane writing events of everyday life.

POSSIBILITIES FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

In the social study of language, two major lines of empirical inquiry have emerged—one quantitative and the other qualitative. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches can be valuable in studying nonacademic writing. The quantitative approach is exemplified by work in sociolinguistics, such as Labov's (1966) findings that certain linguistic features are stratified by social class. The qualitative approach is exemplified by research in anthropology that is collectively known as *ethnography* (see chapter 14 by Doheny-Farina and Odell in this volume). Because qualitative research offers the potential for describing the complex social situation that any act of writing involves, empirical researchers are likely to use qualitative approaches with increasing frequency.

But if researchers take a qualitative approach, what do they examine? Let us consider again the situations posed at the beginning of this chapter. In the case of the editor, researchers might begin with the apparent tension between the constraints of the memo form and the tone sought by the editor—a tension that prompts innovation. Examining the causes of this tension leads to issues of the use of language by those whose business is the production of language, the use of language between two people at the same level of the corporate structure, and the use of language to personalize an apparently impersonal form. For example, researchers might collect instances of personalization (e.g., handwritten additions, capitalization or underlining, second-person address, private references) and ask writers why they chose to make personal additions.

In the case of the bank examiner, researchers might observe, over the course of a year, the supervisor's interaction with three or four trainees. In teaching the trainees how to write examiners' reports, the supervisor must also teach the trainees about the social organization of a bank. By understanding the social organization, examiners can help to correct the problems they uncover. To study how this social knowledge is transmitted, researchers would record the oral as well as the written communication between the supervisor and the trainees. They likely would interview trainees at different times to discover how social understanding evolves, and they would be sensitive to the reactions of bankers to the examiners' reports.

The case of the nurse also concerns the way writers under someone else's authority learn the conventions of a community. At

one hospital, nurses are allowed only a checklist. At the other, they can—and must—write; but at the same time, they must use certain conventions associated with the practice of psychiatric medicine and with the particular hospital. Researchers should be interested in how nurses acquire and internalize these conventions. Researchers might also wish to observe how these written reports are used by physicians in diagnosing and treating patients.

In the case of the environmental-impact statement, a researcher who takes the social point of view might try to identify the sources of the set format for such documents. One might also want to consider the effects of this format on the kinds of information that can and cannot be considered. Ohmann (1976), for instance, has analyzed the conventions of the Pentagon papers and their effect on U.S. policies in the Vietnam War. Or one might consider ways in which a specific report differs from the conventional format of the environmental-impact statement. Is there a tension, traceable in the structure of the statement, between the format and the issues of the particular case? For instance, is one section much longer than usual? Is the tone of the opening different from previous statements? What is revised in the course of writing, and by whom? What cannot be revised?

All these lines of inquiry spring from three general questions:

1. What is the social relationship of writers and readers, and how does the text function in this social relationship?
2. How does this kind of text change over time?
3. How does the perspective of the observer define and limit the observation of this text?

This last question forces researchers to consider what it means to observe and what it means to interpret. Debates over these issues have occupied cultural anthropologists for the past two decades. Anthropologists have developed two broad notions of *ethnography*: an older notion concerned with observation and a newer notion concerned with interpretation. Both notions are important to the study of nonacademic writing.

The older notion is useful for its focus on how to observe. One anthropologist says that ethnography involves the attempt to "record and describe the culturally significant behaviors of a particular society" (Conklin, 1968, p. 172). He goes on to say that

ideally, this description, an ethnography, requires a long period of intimate study and residence in a small, well-defined community, knowledge of the spoken language, and the employment of a wide range of observational techniques including prolonged face-to-face contacts with members of the local group, direct participation in some of that group's activities, and a greater emphasis on intensive work with informants than on the use of documentary or survey data [p. 172].

In a traditional conception of ethnography, an anthropologist lives (usually for a year or longer) in the culture being studied (usually a technologically primitive culture) and collects copious data by observing, interviewing, charting patterns, and collecting case studies. Although not every method might be used, the ethnographer will surely use more than one method in collecting data, and the chief data source will be the ethnographer's diary. The ethnographer tries to avoid value judgments and abandons assumptions from his or her own culture. Hymes (1980) says that ethnographic investigation is always open-ended.

The newer notion of ethnography is sometimes called *interpretive anthropology*. One of its chief practitioners is Geertz, whose essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture" (in Geertz, 1973), argues that a culture can be "read" not by starting with abstract concepts but by first microscopically examining the culture's most salient activities. Geertz's famous essay on the Balinese cockfight (1973) demonstrates how a single event can provide "a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of asserting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment" (p. 448). The function of the cockfight "is interpretative; it is the Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves" (p. 448). In a similar way a researcher of nonacademic writing can "read" in a manager's striking out the formal salutation "Dear Mr. Wittenburg;" and inserting by hand "Kent—" in a memo to a subordinate a great deal about how the community of the workplace is socially organized and maintained. As Geertz says, "Small facts speak to large issues" (p. 23).

The potential for qualitative research in nonacademic writing is great, but researchers should heed the warnings of anthropologists. One of the most critical is the insistence on a cross-cultural perspective. Some anthropologists question whether valid ethno-

graphies are possible by members of the same culture. These anthropologists argue that the experience of living in another culture makes the ethnographer aware of how much a sense of belonging to a culture depends on shared knowledge and beliefs. Although very few writing researchers will attempt ethnographies of the kind done by anthropologists, the need for contrastive analysis still exists. Researchers of nonacademic writing must continually reflect on their own perspective—on what they are likely to observe and not observe, and on how their own assumptions about writing and the world affect how they interpret what they observe (see Boon, 1982; Clifford, 1983).

Researchers should also be aware of the history of writing systems. Contemporary archaeologists have found that the development of writing systems grew out of economic necessity. The purposes of writing for the first five hundred years apparently were strictly commercial and administrative (Driver, 1948). Most surviving tablets record the property and accounts of temples; religious, historical, and legal functions for writing came later. Today we are in the midst of large-scale changes in the nature and uses of writing systems—changes brought about by electronic technology and again stimulated by changing economic and social needs. Computerized information services were first established to provide immediate access to financial news and other economic information, but these data bases quickly spread to more general kinds of information and even to hobbies. Electronic mail is as old as the telegraph, but with the advent of computer and satellite technology it has become an increasingly pervasive communications system, extending rapidly beyond the workplace. The point here is that writing technologies arise from perceived needs within communities. If world trade were less complex, the need to develop electronic communication technologies would be proportionately less. Consequently, the changing nature of nonacademic writing cannot be understood without examining changes in communities that produce nonacademic writing.

Researchers who take the social perspective show us that writing in a complex society is diverse and that our definitions of literacy must necessarily be pluralistic. They show us that writing is an act not easily separated from its functions in a particular discourse community. They increase our awareness of the social importance of what we teach. In chapters that follow, Odell (chapter 7); Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller (chapter 8); and Miller and Selzer (chapter 9)

explore some of the complex relationships between writing and the social, organizational, and professional contexts in which that writing is done.

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Beyond the Text

Relations between Writing and Social Context

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In the past decade all of us in the field of composition have become increasingly aware of the importance of rhetorical context. We have begun to see how a writer's sense of audience, voice, and purpose influence the features of a text (Rubin & Piche, 1979; Growthurst & Piche, 1979) and also the process of composing (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Matsubashi, 1981). Further, we have begun to realize that an awareness of rhetorical context might influence our evaluation of a text (Lloyd-Jones, 1977; Odell, 1981). In other words, teachers, theorists, and researchers have begun to look beyond the written text. But we may not have looked far enough. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Clark & Florio, 1983; Kantor, 1983; Bazerman, 1983; Witte & Faigley, 1983; Bartholomae, 1985; Herrington, forthcoming), we have tended to ignore the larger contexts in which writing is done. We have avoided looking at writing, to use Lester Faigley's terminology, "from a social point of view" (see chapter 6, this volume); we have given too little thought to ways a "discourse community" (see Bizzell, 1982) might influence writers' attempts to formulate and express their ideas. For writers in nonacademic settings, we have paid too little attention to the organizational context in which they do their writing. We have not considered the relationships between the process of composing and the knowledge,