argued (for example by Liberman and Liberman, 1992), that reading (and writing) are "unnatural" activities because they are not as universal as speech and do not appear as spontaneously. But by such a criterion, almost everything human beings do must be considered "unnatural," including wearing shoes, sitting on chairs, and using wheeled vehicles, and the value of making such a statement becomes limited. Speech itself should probably be put in the same "unnatural" category, because children will not develop it if they do not hear others talking and receive considerable help from them. Support for the view that writing but not speech is artifactual is taken from the *modular* theory that spoken language is an actual "hard-wired" neurological "module" in our brains, since it is universal, learned early and rapidly, and seemingly independent from other cognitive systems (Fodor, 1983; Mattingly and Studdert-Kennedy, 1991). But by the same token, we must all have modules for car driving and television watching, since few people have difficulty learning these when they have an opportunity. Besides, if we have a language module in our brains specialized only for speech, how can one account for the fluency with which deaf people can acquire a visual language at least as rich and elaborated as speech (Klima and Bellugi, 1979; Sacks, 1989). Modularity theory has a certain appeal to philosophers, but no physical basis for it has been found.

And talking is not learned all *that* quickly (it takes a number of years) nor is writing learned particularly slowly, once it is solidly under way (usually when learners start to see themselves as writers). Talking tends to *begin* before writing because children usually encounter speech earlier than writing, because situation-dependent language is initially easier to understand than context-dependent, and because writing demands a particular dexterity with tools.

(Notes to Chapter 6 begin on page 250.)

7 The Writer-Reader Contract

There are three parties to every transaction that written language makes possible: a writer, a reader, and a text. And of the three, the text is the pivot. Although texts may be (and often are) studied independently of the other two, neither writers nor readers can exist without a text. Writers must produce texts and readers must interpret them, and the text always stands between the two, a barrier as well as a bridge. Writers cannot reach through a text to the reader beyond, any more than a reader can penetrate the text to make direct contact with the writer. Like a river that permits communication between one shore and another, the text is also an obstacle that keeps the two sides apart.

In this book I have little to say about texts in themselves. Rather my concern is with the relation between writer and text, with how they interact with each other, just as the remarks I have had to make about reading are directed to the relation between reader and text. I have talked about writing almost as if the text were a mirror, reflecting back upon writers what writers themselves produce, as ideas develop in the act of writing. I have also talked about reading as if the text were a mirror reflecting in the other direction, generating meaning only to the extent that readers can themselves bring meaning to the text. Thus I have depicted text as a two-sided mirror rather than a window, with writers and readers unable to see through to each other but gazing upon reflections of their own minds.

Does this mean that writers and readers have nothing to do with each other? Obviously it should not. Writers cannot put what they like into a text, not if they wish the interpretation that a reader will bring to the text to bear some relevance to their own intentions. Readers have expectations that

authors must respect if authors aspire to making their text meaningful. And readers are not free to infer anything they like from texts, not if they wish to stay in touch with the purposes of the author. Authors have expectations about readers that readers must respect. The text is where the two sides meet, where writers and readers exercise their influence upon each other.[1]

My aim in this chapter is to consider how writers and readers interact on the middle ground of the text. I want to consider text as the intersection of intentions and expectations, where the writer's art and the reader's skill converge. To do this I must look once more at how writers develop and express their particular intentions and how readers reciprocate with appropriate expectations.

THE INTENTIONS OF WRITERS

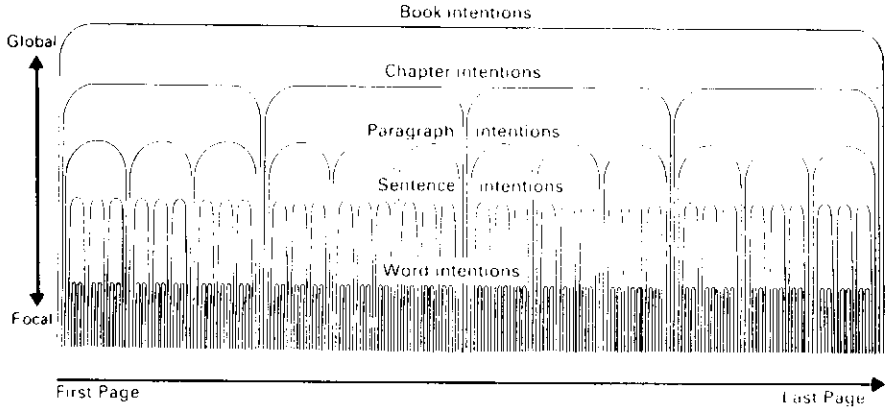
For convenience, the particular kind of text that I shall consider will be a book—in some cases the book you are at present reading. I need the substance and complexity of an extended text for the points I wish to make. But I propose that the general principles of my analysis apply to every kind of text, to short stories as well as novels, to plays and poems, magazine articles and newspaper reports, to business and personal letters and memoranda, to textbooks and term papers. Later I shall briefly indicate how the general principles might be relevant to various kinds of text.

In Chapter 4 I tried to illustrate the differences and interrelations among global and focal intentions generally with the example of a person going to a library to borrow a book. I shall now try to examine the intentions specifically involved in writing a book with an equally mundane analogy—driving a car. At the most *global* level, an author's intention to write a particular kind of book might be likened to a driver's intention to reach a particular destination, while chapter intentions to accomplish the author's overall aim might correspond to the driver's intentions about taking a particular route. At the opposite, more *focal* extreme, an author's intentions about the next word or phrase or sentence to be written correspond to important but transitory short-term intentions of the driver, to avoid an upcoming pothole or pedestrian or to reach the next traffic light before it changes to red. The more focal intentions of both author and driver depend to a large extent on the immediately pressing state of affairs; they are unpredictable more than a few moments in advance. But short-range focal intentions are also determined by the longer range overriding global considerations. The pothole is to be avoided, but preferably not by diverting to a different destination. I should end the present sentence in some manner that is coherent with its beginning, but not in a way that would distract me further from my more general intentions for this paragraph and for the entire book.

The interlayered, multifaceted intentions underlying the writing of a book are represented in a very schematic form in the following diagram, an attempt to depict how an author's intentions may arise and be disposed of at different points and with respect to different considerations. Each arch represents the conception of an intention (on the left), its extent or duration, and its accomplishment (on the right), when it ceases to be a consideration.

An author's most global intentions for a book as a whole arise before the book is even started and influence every step of its writing. In particular, these fundamental intentions about the entire book influence the general arrangement and context of chapters, although each successive chapter is also influenced by the chapters that have most recently gone before. Intentions relevant to each particular chapter influence in their turn every paragraph in that chapter, although successive paragraphs are also influenced by the paragraphs that have most immediately gone before. And so the intentions cascade down through sentences, phrases, and words. The author's intention at every point—about the next word, the next phrase, the next sentence—is influenced both by the immediately preceding words, phrases, and sentences and by the more general intentions for the paragraph, chapter, and book as a whole.

This word, this sentence that I am writing *now* was not a concern of mine when I began this book, or even the present chapter. My global intentions have brought me to the point where I am now, and my global intentions will, I hope, carry me to the end. But at each step of the way I have to attend to focal concerns—most specifically to the very next *word* I always have to write—if my more general intentions are to be realized. The driver's overriding aim is to reach a particular destination, but the driver had better concentrate on successfully negotiating every yard of road on the way if that destination is to be reached.



Layers of intention in writing a book.

Of course, writing and driving are not the same. The goal of a book is not necessarily its destination; I am not writing the present volume in order to say whatever I happen to say on the final page (though I shall be happy to reach the final page). For many books a better analogy might be a journey whose main purpose is the journey itself—for example, when the driver wants to explore or enjoy a certain stretch of countryside. For such a journey the destination marks the conclusion rather than the culmination of the enterprise. The purpose of the present book is in a sense realized in every sentence I write. I am not leading up to a grand finale.

And I am certainly not proposing that everything is ever laid out in an author's mind in the formal and organized manner my diagram might suggest. The diagram is like a terrain that reveals its features as it is explored but never exists in its entirety in the traveler's understanding, certainly not in all its detail. At any particular moment an author's attention might be concentrated upon a *particular* word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, and chapter—although there is always the possibility of distraction—but an author is never concerned with *every* word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or chapter. Global intentions free the author's mind from concern about particular words and sentences that have gone or are yet to come. Indeed, for long periods the author need not think about words and sentences or even paragraphs and chapters at all. The mere fact that a book is being written, or intended to be written, sustains the author's purpose.

Nor does the diagram indicate *how* the book is written. I was careful to indicate that the progression from left to right across the bottom of the diagram represents the sequence of pages from first to last, not the passage of time from the beginning of writing to the end. Not only is an author likely to modify future intentions, even global ones, as the book progresses, but the record of past intentions, the words that have already been written, may be changed, sometimes radically, as a consequence of experience at wherever the author happens to be. Indeed, entire sentences, paragraphs, and even chapters may have their order changed after the author has written them, in the revision and editing that will be a major consideration of the next chapter. There is no way in which a static two-dimensional diagram could represent this dynamic, time-manipulating aspect of writing.

And finally, the diagram is an idealization. Certainly it does not accurately represent the specific concerns of an author at any given moment of writing. As I write these particular words I may have forgotten my more global intentions for the paragraph, chapter, or book as a whole, so that I am, temporarily at least, unsure of where I am going. The words as they flow may distract me completely from my overriding aims, so that I finish up with a completely irrelevant digression. On other occasions the words may not flow at all; I may be sure of fairly general intentions but, as far as the actual words are concerned, have nothing but a vacancy. I lack focal intentions; I cannot

think of what to say. I have a block, and perhaps I shall have to modify some earlier intentions or push ahead and come back later for the fulfillment of the particular focal intentions that frustrate me now.

Although the diagram necessarily effaces all of the uncertainties, changes, and flaws that are part of the actual production of words in text, it constitutes a summary of how all the author's intentions, global and focal, are related to the words that are produced. My choice of words at this moment is determined—ideally—by my intentions concerning this particular sentence, this paragraph, this chapter, and the book as a whole, and I could, if I so desired, attempt to specify what in fact my intentions are for this particular sentence, paragraph, chapter, and the entire book.

It would be interesting to explore how many words would be required to specify these varying interrelated intentions. I suspect it would take me as long to determine and set out the intention behind a particular sentence, a particular word even, as it would for the paragraph, chapter, or book as a whole. Indeed, this may be a yardstick for the intellectual or cognitive "size" of an intention in writing. Whether global or focal, the intention has to be susceptible to being summed up in a sentence or two; it cannot be more than we can attend to in the forefront of our mind at any one time. The moment an intention becomes too complex to be contemplated in its entirety, an even more global intention has to be formulated to enable us to keep the parts of the whole together. This phenomenon is known in the psychology of perception and memory as "chunking," the organization of a number of parts into a more concise and independently manipulable whole.

So my diagram constitutes a static idealization of the constantly changing patchwork of an author's intentions as they become manifest, fixed, and immutable (eventually) in the text. And I am left with the question of how in fact authors transform their intentions into text. Intentions are intangible; they are abstractions, with no substance until they are expressed in action in some way. What do authors *do* in order to realize their intentions in written words? The answer I propose brings back the other term that I have used so much in recent chapters. Authors express or fulfill their intentions through *conventions*.

INTENTIONS AND CONVENTIONS

Conventions do not determine what an author writes. *Intentions* determine what an author wishes to say, and *conventions* permit it to be said. Conventions offer the means of expressing an intention.

At the most global level there are conventional ways of organizing any book, just as there are conventional means of producing books in the way that pages are bound inside covers and print is arranged on pages. A book is

conventionally organized in one way if it is a textbook, in another if it is a novel, in another if it is a dictionary or telephone directory. Understanding of the appropriate *genre scheme*[2] is a fundamental requirement for the author of any kind of text. There are also conventions for organizing books into chapters and for organizing chapters into paragraphs, and there are conventions for the order and cohesive manner in which sentences may be arranged. An implicit knowledge of the appropriate *discourse structure*[3] by which sequences of sentences may be put together is another basic requirement for any writer. Sometimes the order of sentences, paragraphs, and chapters in a book might simply seem to be a matter of logic, or common sense. Events may be described in the temporal order in which they occur, a country in the sequence in which a traveler might travel though that country, and a structure—such as a building or an institution—in terms of the organization of the structure (buildings usually from the ground up, institutions from the top down). But use of these particular orders is itself a convention; one could say that it is a convention to be logical, except that the convention usually *seems* to be the most logical, whether it is or not. Even stories have their own rules, termed *story grammars*,[4] which successful tellers of stories (and understanders of stories) implicitly know and respect.

At the most focal level, the choice and organization of words into phrases and sentences is conventional. As I tried to show in Chapter 5, the internal grammar that enables us all to put thoughts into words is a purely conventional mechanism. There is no intrinsic logic about the root forms of words, about the rules that modify these roots for particular purposes, or about the rules by which words are organized into sentences.

Apart from exceptions, every word an author chooses follows conventions that reflect intentions at all levels. For every intention that can be expressed in text there is a convention, and conventions are interrelated globally and focally in the same manner as intentions. Thus my diagram on page 89 could be relabeled to represent the interlocking conventions of texts, simply by replacing the word *intention* on every occasion by *convention*. Organization into chapters is part of the conventional structure of books; paragraphs have a conventional place in chapters and sentences in paragraphs. The particular convention for a word, sentence, paragraph, or chapter depends in part on the convention observed in the immediately preceding words, sentences, paragraphs, or chapters, and in part on the overriding, more global conventions.

"Apart from exceptions..."—that was a key qualification at the beginning of the preceding paragraph. Obviously not everything that is written is conventional or expressed in a conventional way. Conventions are not laws, and authors are under no compulsion to respect them (although there are penalties if they are infringed capriciously). Authors may contravene conventions from time to time, and even find themselves in situations where no appropriate convention exists. The complex frameworks of convention in

writing make the expression of intention possible in the first place and also permit writers to cultivate distinctive styles. Authors obviously have characteristic voices in their writing; no two authors would be likely to say the same thing in the same way. But then would two authors ever be likely to say the same thing? Differences in mode of expression reflect differences in what is said. To take extreme cases, are authors who write short sentences, like Hemingway, and those whose sentences are long, like Henry James, and those who sometimes ignore sentences altogether, like Joyce, really saying the same kind of thing in different ways, or did they try to express different things?

Language offers infinite possibilities for idiosyncrasy. But these possibilities exist not because the same thing can always be said in a variety of ways but because language permits so many subtle shades of meaning; it can reflect so many delicate tones of intention. Conventions do not force a person to say anything, but they offer many ways for things to be said.

Writers would have difficulty expressing any intentions if there were no conventions to be followed and occasionally contravened. The more appropriate conventions a writer knows, the easier it is to write. But conventions also help readers. The central point about conventions is that they are what people *expect*, and as I have already argued briefly, language is only understood because readers (and listeners) can form expectations about what is going to be said. Having tried to relate conventions to intentions, looking at their function from the writer's point of view, I can now turn to the role that conventions fulfill for readers.

EXPECTATIONS AND CONVENTIONS

I could also employ the analogy of a car journey to characterize the various kinds of expectation a reader might have about a text, the kinds of prediction the reader might make. Just as drivers might have certain *global* expectations about a journey as a whole—about the landmarks they should meet on the way—so readers usually have global expectations about a book, derived from their knowledge of the author, from the title of the book, and possibly from information from another source about the contents of the book. These global expectations would enable the reader to make certain predictions about the organization and content of the various chapters.[5]

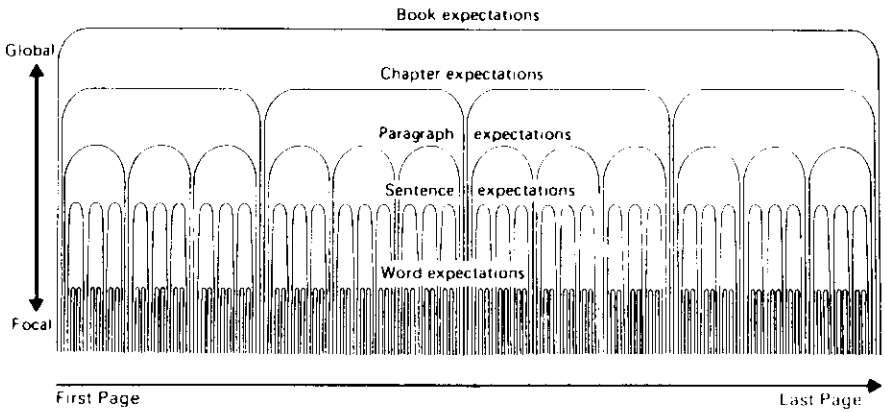
Similarly the reader at any point in a book usually has *focal* expectations about immediately forthcoming words, sentences and paragraphs, just as a driver usually has expectations about what might happen in the next few yards and hundreds of yards of road. For the reader these focal expectations would be derived in part from more global expectations about the book and the specific chapter as a whole, and in part from the immediately preceding

words, sentences, and paragraphs. All this can be put in the form of a diagram of cascading expectations identical with the diagram of cascading intentions on page 89 except that the word *expectations* replaces the word *intentions* on every occasion.

In Chapter 5 I discussed the importance of reader expectations if text is to be understood. By being able to anticipate what the author is likely to say in the present and immediately succeeding words and sentences, the reader can clear the ground of unlikely alternatives and become far better able to make sense of what actually the author is saying. In the same way it is far easier for a driver to "make sense of a journey" or to be less likely to become lost or have an accident when the driver is able to anticipate likely events along the route.

Once again, of course, the analogy is imperfect. Reading a book is not the same as driving a car, especially in terms of the constraints of time and space. A reader's journey does not have to proceed through a book from start to finish. The reader can miss entire segments, go forward or backward at will, and can generally choose how much time to spend at any point. Speed limits in reading are self-imposed, and there are no one-way streets.

The diagram is once more an idealized representation, this time of the relationship between a reader's expectations and the contents of the text. As you read this text you could, I hope, stop at any point and express in a few words certain expectations about the next one or two words, the next sentence, the next paragraph, and even the rest of the book. Try it when you reach the end of a right-hand page, before you turn the page over. I do not want to claim that you will predict *exactly* what the next word, sentence, paragraph and chapter might be; if you could do that there would be no need for you to read the book. But I hope you would have some expectations, otherwise a complete absence of comprehension would be indicated. It might



Layers of prediction in reading a book

indeed be interesting for you to examine your predictions to gauge the extent to which they are based on what you have just read and on your more global expectations about the paragraph, the chapter and the book. I would not expect you to be able to predict in the complex idealized manner represented in the diagram. Perhaps you will have fairly substantial expectations about the chapter and book but be in doubt at the more focal word and sentence levels because, for example, you are having difficulty in pursuing my particular argument at this time. On the other hand, you might be able to predict very well at the word and sentence level but be unable to relate this to more global expectations for the chapter or book.

Readers have expectations—but what exactly do they expect? How do readers translate anticipations of the text into actual predictions about the printed words that are in front of their eyes? They look for conventions. Readers anticipate not only what the author is likely to say—within a relatively narrow range of alternatives—they must anticipate the author's language as well. To the extent that a reader can anticipate the conventions an author is likely to observe at the book and chapter levels, that reader will be able to make relatively global predictions. To the extent that the reader can anticipate the conventions of language and expression that the author is likely to employ at the word and sentence levels, the reader will be able to make relatively focal predictions. The more unconventional the reader finds the text, the less the reader is likely to have any relevant expectations about it and the less understandable it is likely to be. But if the reader finds the text unconventional yet understandable, then the reader will have learned. The unconventional can be informative for a reader.

The conventions of the text reflect both the intentions that the writer expresses and the meanings that the reader anticipates. It is upon the conventions that the perspectives of writer and reader converge and intersect. The reader relies upon the writer to employ them and the writer relies upon the reader to expect them. Conventions are the contract on which writers and readers must agree if the text is to be comprehended in the manner the author desires. By understanding the conventions, writers and readers have less need to understand each other.

HOW WRITERS CONTROL READERS

I have used an identical diagram on pages 89 and 94, with just a single labeling change, to indicate the manner in which the intentions of writers and the expectations of readers are manifested in text. I do not see how there could ever be such a thing as a total or perfect comprehension of a text, certainly not from an author's point of view, but if there were I can now say what it would be. Perfect comprehension would occur when the writer's intentions and the

reader's expectations coincided completely, when every intention of the author was correctly anticipated by the reader, and when every expectation of the reader was fulfilled.

Perfect comprehension in such terms could probably never occur because of two requirements which could never be fulfilled: an author who writes without possibility of ambiguity and a reader willing and able to read a text entirely from the author's point of view.

The philosopher Karl Popper gives one reason that the first requirement for perfect comprehension could never be met when he asserts that writers (and speakers) can never insure themselves against being misunderstood.[6] The meaning of any utterance depends upon the context in which it is understood, and this context will always change, if only as a consequence of the passage of time. A text is out of an author's hands the moment a reader sets eyes on it. In that independent existence the text can only talk for itself, and its interpretation is determined by the reader. Readers do not usually try to interpret the author's intentions—the second requirement; instead, they try to interpret the text, and the interpretation always depends upon the context in which they try to make their interpretation, on their current state of knowledge, and on what they themselves want and expect to find in the text.

Readers do not try to interpret a text from the author's point of view unless their aim is to understand the author rather than the book—for example, in the literary exploration of the sources of a book. Readers approach texts from their own point of view, with intentions of their own rather than those of the author. And readers comprehend when their own intentions are satisfied, when the questions they ask of the text are answered because their expectations are fulfilled.

Take, as a very simple example, the matter of looking up a number in a telephone directory. The reader does not have to understand the author's intentions in compiling the directory, except in the very global sense of providing an accessible list of telephone numbers in an area. The reader does not consult the text the way the author wrote it; quite the reverse. What the reader must understand and anticipate in order to find the directory comprehensible is the conventions the author followed in listing the numbers, primarily that of alphabetizing. If the reader succeeds in finding an answer to the question that led to the directory in the first place, if the desired number is located, then the reader has comprehended. But this comprehension will be achieved only if the reader's expectations about the focal intentions of the author (where specific telephone numbers should be located) are fulfilled.

But the important other side of the contract is that it is through such conventions as alphabetizing that the compiler of the directory manipulates the behavior of the reader. If a reader wants to know a particular telephone number (and it is not necessary for the author of course to know the specific

number a particular reader might want to find) the conventions of alphabetizing enable the author to bring the distant reader's eye rapidly to the very page and line where the number will be found. This is a remarkable achievement (which we do not recognize because we take it for granted), made possible only because a convention exists that both author and reader of the directory understand and respect.

There is nothing *necessary* about the alphabetizing convention, of course; there could be others. Telephone numbers could be arranged (as they sometimes are) on a street location basis, by occupation (the yellow pages), even by the date of birth of telephone subscribers, provided both author and reader have the relevant information. As long as there is a convention that is shared, not only can readers generate expectations that will enable them to find answers to their own questions in text, but the writer can direct the reader's behavior—and the reader's focal expectations—and thereby influence the reader's comprehension.

In a textbook it seems to me to be the author's responsibility to bring a reader inexorably from beginning to end by contriving that the reader is never bereft of expectations and that expectations are always appropriate. This is again an ideal situation; it is most unlikely that an author would ever succeed completely. But, fortunately, readers are often flexible and forgiving about the frustration, uncertainty, and surprise they experience in trying to make sense of a textbook.

Readers usually come to a textbook with very little of the author's prior understanding of its content, so it would clearly be unrealistic to assume that a reader's expectations will match the author's intentions at all levels. It might be reasonable to assume that a prospective reader will have very global expectations about the subject matter (as given by the title of the book, for example), about the conventions usually employed in the organization of textbooks, and about the language intentions of the author (that the book is supposed to be in English, say, even though there might be a specialized vocabulary and terminology to be acquired on the way). But in general the reader will not start out with the possibility of generating many of the intermediate- and focal-level expectations required to understand the book and its subject matter; it is the author's responsibility to initiate the development of these expectations as the reader progresses through the book.

How can an author generate expectations in a distant reader? The diagram and discussion on page 94 indicate the general possibilities. A reader's expectations at any particular point in a text are determined by a combination of superordinate global expectations about book and chapter organization as a whole and of immediately preceding events at the word, sentence, and perhaps paragraph level. At the global level the conventions the author observes regarding the general organization of the book must be anticipated by the reader; these will be the reader's general guide throughout. At the focal

level the author guides the reader's expectations by controlling where the reader has been.

Ideally (again), nothing should come as a surprise in a textbook. This does not mean that the reader should know everything in advance, but that everything should appear to unfold smoothly and inevitably, even if it leads to conclusions or raises possibilities contrary to what the reader believed at the beginning. Nothing should transpire contrary to focal expectations. Where a specialized terminology is required for understanding a book and its subject matter, the terminology itself has to be presented in a manner that conforms to the reader's expectations. The learning should in a sense be incidental (as I shall later argue, all of the important learning in our lives is incidental), a consequence of understanding. In one sense the reader should always be ahead of the author, but only because the author has indicated to the reader where the text is likely to go.

In the (nonexistent) perfect textbook, the path is determined by the author, proceeding usually from the first page to the last. But in reference books, encyclopedias, manuals, collections of recipes or prescriptions, dictionaries, television guides and various kinds of directories, authors must concede to readers the right to choose their own path and their own destinations. But the author must also facilitate the reader's choice; the reader should never be left wondering where to go next.

It may seem obvious that an author must guide a reader through a book, or enable a reader to reach an appropriate place depending upon the reader's particular need or interest. But I must stress that this obviously desirable state of affairs can be achieved only if there are conventions that are shared, if the reader can anticipate what the author is likely to do and the author can anticipate and control what the reader will expect. Signposts must be provided and utilized.

Protection from surprise and uncertainty is presumably the author's aim in plotting the course the reader will take from start to finish of a textbook or reference book. But the same considerations do not apply in other texts, such as novels. The *means* by which the author directs reader expectations remain the same, but the *manner* in which the manipulation is done can be entirely different.

The novelist must maintain a degree of uncertainty that would be intolerable in a textbook. Something has to be left that the reader cannot predict if there is to be any tension to sustain the reader's interest. How in fact tension is maintained—and the varying ways in which it is achieved in different novels and by different authors—is a complex question of textual analysis that I do not aspire to undertake here. I would speculate that usually authors strive to confound their readers' expectations at intermediate levels; they want readers to remain engaged in the book globally, to have some idea of what everything is about and where it might be leading, and they do not want to lose readers focally, to have readers bemused by the very words and sentences that

are being used. But some authors seem deliberately to allow their readers little purchase at global levels. Sentences and even paragraphs seem to make sense, but it is quite unclear what the book as a whole is about. Others leave little doubt about general intentions but create considerable mystification at word and sentence levels. (And what a few do intentionally, by art, many others do accidentally, by incompetence.)

Novelists can play with readers' expectations. If the intention is a thriller, the unexpected must from time to time occur and there must be periods when the reader has no global expectations at all. Some signposts will be absent. If a mystery is the aim, red herrings will be set and readers' expectations led into blind alleys or false trails. Some signposts will be misleading. Authors transgress convention in some respects so that the reader cannot anticipate precisely where a book will lead. Globally, it is a convention that some conventions will be observed and others transgressed; all this is part of the contract between writer and reader that makes their interaction possible.

Interest

There are other ways in which authors control readers—and other ways of looking at my cascading diagrams on pages 89 and 94. For example, the diagrams could be relabeled from the point of view of *interest*. Some writers primarily hold their readers' attention globally—the general topic or theme is interesting but not necessarily all the detail that the author provides. Alternatively, novels and even abstruse technical works may be interesting on a focal sentence-by-sentence level, even though the broader concern is—by virtue of the subject matter or the organization of its exposition—boring or even incomprehensible. And of course, it would be unusual for a book (or a letter, or a term paper) to be equally interesting all the way through. Sometimes long sections hold the attention, sometimes nothing longer than a phrase, sometimes nothing at all. All this could perhaps be seen in terms of overlapping and intersecting waves—long swells that reach across the entire book (sometimes a roaring surf carrying writer and reader to a pounding conclusion), shorter waves that range over chapters, ripples of individual paragraphs or sentences, and occasional doldrums. Similar complex patterns can be found in many other facets of writing and reading—such as informativeness, comprehensibility, pleasure, frustration, anger, and even sympathy for the writer or for particular characters.

Interest in what they write may not necessarily help writers. We are all familiar with authors who get carried away by what ought to be brief digressions, allowing focal interests to lead them off course. I am not patronizing here. One of my constant frustrations as a writer is that I forget where I intended to go and become diverted down any sidestreet that attracts me. I say "forget"—but sometimes I think I willingly wander from where I am supposed to be going; I move down the meandering sidestreets much faster

than I would forge along the long straight highway ahead. It is down these sidestreets that I often encounter ideas that are most interesting (to me at least).

A noteworthy research finding is that interest on the part of readers can actually interfere with their comprehension and memory of what they are reading. Hidi, Baird, and Hildyard (1982) report that "interesting" detail in a story may capture readers' attention to the detriment of their understanding and memory of the story as a whole. Readers, like writers, can be led down garden paths, and divert themselves willingly. Perhaps companion studies might be done examining how writers become disorganized and forgetful (in their writing if not in the rest of their lives) through infatuation with particular textual rambles. Experienced writers do not necessarily write in more detail on a topic than inexperienced writers—their skill is that they write *just enough*, for the topic, for their purpose, and for the purposes of anticipated readers.

Interest also increases the imagery that tends to occur spontaneously during reading (Long, Winograd, and Bridge, 1989), and imagery improves memory, thinking—and enjoyment. Kintsch and van Dijk (1978 and elsewhere, summarized in Kintsch, 1982) make similar observations. Anything that we are interested in tends to go into long-term memory, rather than remaining (transiently) in short-term memory. And what applies to readers must surely apply to writers, as they become immersed in what they are themselves writing.

THE CONVENTIONS OF TEXTS

A few pages ago I noted that every kind of text, every *genre*, has its particular conventions, the distinguishing characteristics by which the generic classification of individual texts can be asserted or disputed. The description, analysis, and classification of genres and their conventions is the vocation of professors of English and literary critics, more concerned with the text itself than with writers and readers, with the manner in which a text is produced and comprehended.

That every genre has its own conventions—that indeed it is by these conventions that a genre is identified—becomes evident when we reflect upon the recognizably different styles of writing to be found in newspapers, magazines, scientific publications, essays, letters, and so forth. That no one set of conventions is necessary, or even particularly logical (since other conventions could serve the same purpose) becomes evident when we consider the different forms a particular genre can take—for example, newspapers in different cultures. We can even see how the differing conventions persist in different cultures, with writers in a particular genre producing what readers of that genre expect such writers to produce, and with editors insisting that

writers do so for no better reason than to honor the convention. Teachers do the same for students.

All conventions must conform to the basic requirement that they *work*, that they are capable of becoming a contract between particular writers and readers. Therefore they must be relatively easy to learn and produce (on the part of writers) and to learn and comprehend (on the part of readers). But provided the underlying necessity is fulfilled of providing a form that readers can expect and writers can expect readers to expect, any consistent practice might become a convention. No convention has ever been deliberately invented and imposed upon a genre by an author alone. Authors may devise changes and innovations, they may knowingly or accidentally contravene the conventions of a genre, but to establish a new convention they need the cooperation of readers who will anticipate it.

The conventions of some genres—such as those of newspapers, textbooks, and scientific publications—tend to be relatively consistent and stable over broad areas and long periods of time. The conventions of other genres are more loosely defined, and the category into which a particular text should be placed depends more on writer intentions and reader expectations than on the existence of a rigid set of conventions. What constitutes a poem, for example, the shadowy boundary between poetic prose and prosaic verse, has less to do with format than with author-reader agreement. Poems have rhyme and meter—unless they do not. Literary conventions have neither legal precision nor legal force; they are a matter of mutual consent.

Traditionally, the distinguishing characteristics of different genres of text have been considered in terms of such broad categories as expository, narrative, descriptive, and argumentative. These are classifications—or labels—that I have not found useful in trying to talk about writers (as opposed to talking about what writers write). I cannot see a difference between these various modes of writing in terms of what the writer does, only in terms of what the writer produces. One does not become a fluent expository or descriptive writer because one has particular powers of exposition or description, but because one knows the conventions and has something to say. These conventions are far more complex than a small set of descriptive labels.

In this chapter I have considered writer and reader as separate individuals, approaching texts from opposite though collaborative perspectives. But writers are always their own first readers, if only in the act of writing itself, and this is a major concern. I still want to discuss not only what goes on when writers write, but how writing affects the writer. These will be my topics in the next two chapters, as I try to consolidate and expand upon the writer, the text, and the dialectical processes that change them both.

(Notes to Chapter 7 begin on page 252.)