FLOW AND THE PRINCIPLE OF RELEVANCE: BRINGING OUR DYNAMIC SPEAKING KNOWLEDGE TO WRITING

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Flow–the natural forward movement that carries the reader through the text. Readers have a strong intuitive sense of paragraph flow, and perhaps an even stronger intuitive reaction to flow interrupted. Unfortunately, our current teaching strategies around flow fall short of our intuitions because they are too static, vague, or incomplete. With the intent of complementing–not replacing–current strategies to improve paragraph flow, I offer an instructional method that is grounded in a central principle of cooperative conversation, the principle of relevance (Grice; Sperber and Wilson). The principle of relevance, most simply put, states that an utterance should be and is expected to be relevant to the surrounding conversation and to the conversants. On the surface, this principle seems obvious and unremarkable, but when operationalized and applied by students to their own and their peers' writing, it becomes an effective revision tool that draws on students' implicit knowledge of language. Grounded in how communication works in everyday conversation, the principle of relevance, once operationalized in writing, makes the dynamic process between the text and the reader visible to the writer. With their choices and the effects of their choices made visible, students can begin to shape their paragraphs in ways that are responsive both to their communicative intentions and the readers' expectations.

In addition to enhancing flow, applying the principle of relevance demonstrates for students how peers who may not be

strong writers may be exceptionally helpful readers. An equalizing force in the classroom, this approach extends the notion of expertise beyond those who are considered the strongest writers to include all those who use language successfully in their daily conversation. As I hope to make clear in this paper, if students can manage everyday conversations, then they already know a great deal about language to help themselves and their peers improve text flow.

Current approaches for addressing problematic flow grow out of an attempt to match text to readers' expectations, but these approaches typically lack either sensitivity to the nuance of making meaning in writing or, borrowing a phrase from Harris, "useful specificity." Based on the idea that flow results from maintaining expected patterns, one approach encourages students to revise a paragraph or essay according to a particular rhetorical mode, such as problem-solution, cause-effect, etc. (Flower 248-49). Another common approach focuses on transition words and phrases (always a key section in handbooks) as a solution to sentence-to-sentence disfluencies. While these suggestions correspond to visible patterns we see in well-crafted writing, they are static solutions that may result in imposing a structure on a set of ideas rather than developing a structure that is integral to the writer's intended meaning. A more dynamic solution, which would no doubt draw on rhetorical patterns and transition phrases, would foreground ideas and the rewriting of ideas (Harris) in a way that responds to writing as an *act* of communication (Austin; Grice; Harris; Searle, *Speech Acts*, *Expresssion and Meaning*).

A less static and less structural solution to improving paragraph flow involves performing the text, that is, encouraging the writer to listen to herself or others read the text aloud and revise by ear, with or without direct input from peers (Elbow and Belanoff). The challenge here is two-fold. For the student without a "good ear," this approach lacks sufficient direction, the "useful specificity" Harris aims for in *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts.* The second challenge for all novice writers is learning how to manage the paradox, "The reader is always right; the writer is

always right" (Elbow and Belanoff 62), particularly when there is a mismatch between the writer's and the reader's interpretation of a text. While intonation patterns are critical to making meaning in language, work in functional and rhetorical grammar is only beginning to address the sound-meaning relationship in ways that help the writing instructor and student (Hancock). Again, for teaching writing and learning to write, the immediate issue is still one of "useful specificity."

Another approach to improving paragraph flow, one which offers tremendous specificity, involves using linguistic knowledge about cohesion in spoken discourse. Based on work in linguistics (Clark and Haviland; Prince) and functional and rhetorical grammar (Gopen and Swan; Halliday, *An Introduction*; Hancock; Kolln; Noguchi; Vande Kopple; Williams), this approach includes such strategies as locating known information before new information, and placing the most important information at the end. These strategies provide powerful solutions to problematic flow, solutions that are based on easily understood and easily applied structural knowledge of reader expectations. Although these structural methods address one component of flow, the sentence-to-sentence relationship that is central to cohesion, they do not, as Williams observes, address another important component of flow, the relationships among sentences that create the sense of unity referred to as coherence. To address paragraph coherence, Williams briefly considers Grice's principle of relevance: he notes that the sentences in a paragraph must be relevant to a central point and identifies several ways in which sentences may be relevant, such as by providing "background or context," "reasons supporting a point," "evidence, facts, or data supporting a reason," and "explanation" (206-207). Ultimately, however, Williams apologizes for not being able to offer "a simple way to judge relevance, because it's so abstract a quality" (206). In fact, as I hope to illustrate in this paper, there is a productive and fairly simple way to operationalize relevance theory as articulated by Sperber and Wilson in order to test and enhance sentence

connections in a way that strengthens a paragraph's idea relationships.

In developing and using an *explicit knowledge* of relevance, students can gain a working sense of how readers make meaning out of their texts and how writers can use this knowledge to enhance communication of their intended meaning(s). With both writing teachers and students in mind, I introduce relevance theory (Grice; Sperber and Wilson) as a productive means to teach meaningful and dynamic paragraph revision while offering critical insight into how communication works. To illustrate the worth of relevance theory to writing instruction, I include examples and exercises that help instructors and students draw on their implicit knowledge as speakers to test and enhance paragraph flow. The sequence of examples and exercises begins by introducing students to the idea that miscommunication is a *natural* part of communication. For students, this is a new and fundamental concept that they must understand if they are to use the relevance-based exercises effectively.

Communication and Miscommunication: Two Natural Results of Any Utterance

Students typically come to my college writing classes viewing miscommunication as a mistake, as communication gone wrong. Only a brief look at how people make sense of an utterance dispels this myth. Consider the following statement:

(1) The dog is up.

What might *The dog is up* mean? Without too much interpretive effort, the hearer might think it means that the dog has just stood up or has woken up. If the conversation is taking place in the living room and the speaker and hearer see the dog going toward the front door, the hearer might take (1) to mean that someone is at the door or that the dog wants to go out. Now consider another context: the speaker and hearer are still in the living room, but this time the speaker's son Billy enters the room with his fifth

Teddy-Bear hamster on his shoulder, the other four having been eaten by the dog. In these circumstances, the hearer might rightly take *The dog is up* as a warning to Billy, or even as a directive that urges him to get the hamster out of the room. For one final example, consider that the speaker and hearer are once more in the speaker's living room and that the hearer is very familiar with the speaker's husband, who has a habit of going out drinking and fighting each night. Imagine that we hear from the kitchen the click of a beer can being opened, after which the speaker says, "The dog is up." It would be hard to miss the communicated insult. The important point here is that language has tremendous meaning potential (Halliday, *Explorations*), and that spoken and written utterances have the potential to mean many things (Grice; Sperber and Wilson)—including meanings that speakers and writers do not anticipate. Accordingly, the hearer/reader will always have the possibility of selecting an interpretation not intended by the speaker/writer, and the speaker/writer will always have the possibility of discovering new meanings through the effects of her writing on hearers/readers.

The interpretive possibilities of an utterance may not be in students' minds when they write. As a result, students may react to miscommunications as if they were the fault of the reader, who must have made the mistake of missing the intended meaning. This reaction relates to the mistaken belief that in communication *saying* and *meaning* are the same thing. In fact, human communication is not a coding system: it does not simply involve a speaker who codes a thought into an utterance and a hearer who decodes that utterance back into the equivalent initiating thought. Rather, human communication is a complex interpretive system (Grice; Sperber and Wilson).

The interpretative nature of communication may be quite counter intuitive to students—to all people—as speakers and hearers depend on their ability to use language quickly and habitually. If speakers stopped to reflect on how each utterance might be received, they might never get further than wondering how to best order a cup of coffee, and if hearers stopped to work out all

possible meanings, it would be an awfully long wait for that coffee. As naturally non-reflective language users, students need several examples to develop a working understanding of how utterances can mean many things. After working through an example similar to *The dog is up,* I typically ask students to work through two additional examples. The first addresses the *say = mean* myth: I write the word *green* on the board and ask each student to privately write down the name of an object in the world that corresponds to this color. Typical responses include grass, pea soup, seawater, etc. Students and I then discuss how differently we each imagine this one simple color and how difficult it is to create in another's mind the precise thought in our own minds.

The second exercise that teaches how communication works asks students to generate possible interpretations of an utterance similar to *The dog is up.* I stipulate a kind of generic room as the context and offer the utterance *It's cold in here*, but any utterance with an obvious explicit interpretation will do. I then ask each student to make a private note of what this text might mean. By now, they understand the concept and begin to have fun. In addition to offering up such possibilities as the literal meaning and requests to turn up the heat or close windows or doors, they imagine that it might be a spurned woman's response to a man or an indirect request for intimacy. Most importantly, they look to each other for the novel interpretations because they have now internalized the idea that what they say will have not only expected, but also unexpected interpretations. My goal, ultimately, is to help students see that communicating effectively is truly an exciting and interesting problem.

Understanding that every utterance has the potential to mean many things shapes one's understanding of miscommunication: miscommunication is a *natural* and *expected* part of communication—*not* a mistake that can be done away with (Dascal). Consequently, the job of the communicator is not to simply do away with mistakes, not simply to correct a text, but something more complicated, more interesting. The

communicator's job is to maximize the possibility of successful interpretation and minimize the possibility of misinterpretation. With respect to *The dog is up*, this means that the speaker must do her best to control the communication so that her intended interpretation matches the hearer's first interpretation. She and the hearer must, as much as possible, *expect* the same interpretation. To this end, the writer would work to control the likelihood of the hearer picking out–among the many possible interpretations–the most *relevant* interpretation(s), what we may think of as the "primary intention" of the speaker (Grice 221).

Relevance

In daily conversations, communicators regularly produce and identify the *relevant* interpretation necessary to productive conversations, and without any apparent effort they sense problems with relevance. In fact, people are enormously sensitive to relevance in speaking, and work hard to maintain it. Consider this next example, which also forms the basis of a classroom exercise.

(2) Student: I'd love a cup of coffee.
Teacher: It's raining outside.

To introduce the idea of relevance, I ask a student to say to me, *I'd love a cup of coffee*, after which I reply, *It's raining outside.* I then ask the students what my response means. They offer such interpretations as *It'll be hard to get a cup of coffee because getting the coffee requires going outside and it's raining outside*. It is not trivial that the students can come up with an interpretation, that they have in fact worked out a way to make my response to *I'd love a cup of coffee* relevant. This ability raises several questions: Why do communicators work to identify the relevant interpretation? How does one define relevance, and how do hearers come to the relevant interpretation? Most important to the writing classroom, how does one tap into this conversational ability to help students enhance relatedness (and therefore connectedness) between

sentences? Grice's and Sperber and Wilson's discussions of relevance offer some productive answers to each of these questions.

Why do communicators work so hard to identify the relevant information?

Relevance is a fundamental expectation in communication between two rational people (Grice; Sperber and Wilson). Communicators work hard to identify relevant information because they expect to find relevance. Although speakers and hearers generally interact without any conscious awareness of the principle of relevance, they quickly feel its power when they struggle to understand something that at first seems puzzling. Imagine, for example, encountering a friend who is apparently babbling. Unless you decide that your friend is irrational, you work hard to figure out what she has to say because you *presume* that she is trying to convey some relevant message. The presumption of relevance also underlies the ability to work out jokes, such as the following: "How do we know that the Earth won't come to an end? Because it's round! ("Clean Jokes") In fact, jokes not only offer a genre-based demonstration of how hearers work hard to find relevance, but also show that making it difficult for hearers to work out relevance can meet communicative goals and result in enjoyable and productive interactions.

To help students understand the expectation of relevance in written communication, I recommend the following exercise: Secretly ask half of the students to each write a short meaningless poem and then present these poems to the other half for interpretation. Typically, students find meaning. In fact, it's quite difficult to avoid finding meaning, an observation that leads the class to consider why one can work out a meaningful message even when none is intended. Through such exercises, as well as examples of jokes and metaphors, students discover that hearers can't help but search for relevance, that in communication, people presume relevance (Sperber and Wilson). The presumption of

relevance results from the nature of communication itself. In communication, the speaker intends to produce some effect in the hearer by uttering something, such as when *Please close the window* is used to get someone to close a window. In communication, the speaker also intends for the hearer to recognize the intent to communicate, that is, to recognize that the utterance is not, for example, mere noise, but rather something meant to be attended to by the hearer. In addition, the speaker intends for the utterance to contribute to creating the desired effect in the hearer (Sperber and Wilson, 23, 156). As a result of these communicative intentions, the hearer, who has experience as a speaker and a hearer and so understands these communicative intentions, infers that when a speaker says something, it is purposeful. Sperber and Wilson further suggest that the hearer would believe that the communication is not only purposeful, but potentially useful to the speaker, hearer, or both (155). Thus, hearers infer that an act of communication directed at them will be somehow relevant to them. More generally, this presumption of relevance may perhaps be explained as a reflection of the social nature of human beings, and by extension, the social function of language for humans (Halliday, *Explorations*) and the idea that communication is motivated and directed by interactants' goals, whether these be shared goals (Grice) or distinct individual goals (Rossen-Knill; Sperber and Wilson 161-62).

What is relevance?

Sperber and Wilson formalize relevance as a balance between the cognitive gain and the processing effort involved in interpreting an utterance. They offer the following comparative definition:

> *Relevance to an individual*
> *Extant condition 1*: An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the positive cognitive effects achieved when it is optimally processed are large.

Extant condition 2:   An assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to achieve these positive cognitive effects is small. (265)

Essentially, the *greater* the worth of the interpretation to the hearer, the *stronger* the relevance; the *smaller* the processing effort, the *stronger* the relevance. As this comparative definition indicates, all utterances have *degrees* of relevance in communication, degrees that depend on the cognitive effect on the hearer, as well as on the amount of effort required to understand the communication. For a communication to be relevant, it must produce "cognitive gains" in the reader, that is, changes in the reader's beliefs that "contribut[e] positively to the fulfillment of [his/her] cognitive functions or goals" (Sperber and Wilson 265). As Pilkington explains, these changes occur when new information in the text interacts with the reader's current beliefs "by causing a relatively weakly held existing assumption to be strengthened, by contradicting and eliminating an existing assumption, or by combining with an existing assumption to yield a contextual implication" (158). The concept of cognitive gain has particular significance for writers and writing instructors, as it suggests that the effectiveness of writing that is meant to function as an act of communication must be measured at least in part by the extent to which it changes the reader's beliefs.

The comparative definition of relevance also helps one understand why flow matters: a high degree of flow minimizes processing effort, whereas a low degree of flow increases processing effort. Consider these next examples, in which processing effort varies. For each example, the accessible contexts for interpretation and the intended message are as equal as possible.

(3)   John: Dinner will be ready at 6.

Sue: Sally won't make it to dinner because she's at soccer practice, and soccer practice continues through our dinnertime, and she will stay until the end of soccer practice.

(4)   John: Dinner will be ready at 6.
        Sue: Sally is at soccer.

In (3), to communicate that Sally will not be at dinner, Sue offers a lengthy response that is highly informative in an explicit way. In (4), to communicate the same message, Sue offers a relatively brief utterance. Which utterance has the higher degree of relevance depends on how much information John needs to easily receive the message that Sally will not be home for dinner. If John can quickly and easily infer the intended message from (4), then the lengthy response in (3) will require excessive effort and thus have the lower degree of relevance. If, however, John doesn't easily understand what Sally's being at soccer before dinner has to do with her being home during dinner, then (4) will require more effort for him to work out than (3), in which case (4) would have the lower degree of relevance. Ultimately, a speaker's (and writer's) structural and informational choices influence how hard the hearer (and reader) must work to figure out the relevance of an utterance. Working out the degree of relevance requires working through the text's actual effect on the receiver–hence the need for readers during the writing process.

As (3) and (4) illustrate, one cannot measure an isolated text's relevance, nor can one assign an abstract or absolute relevance value to a text. By definition, a text's relevance depends on how it is received in communication, on the balance between processing effort and cognitive gain for the hearer/reader. This accounts for the possibility of strong relevance for texts whose interpretations require quite different degrees of effort to understand. On the one hand, a newspaper article might be judged highly relevant because it required minimal processing effort from a reader and led to significant cognitive gains by providing substantial new

information about an event of concern to the reader. On the other hand, a text such as a poem, a joke, or, for an extreme example, Joyce's *Ulysses* might require a relatively high degree of effort but still be judged highly relevant because the cognitive gain is exceptionally high. Even though a reader might, for example, find it frustratingly difficult to work out the meaning of a poem on death, he or she may ultimately work out multiple possible meanings that together offer a particularly rich interpretation. In such cases the high degree of cognitive gain may significantly offset the processing effort. Thus, despite the high degree of effort, the poem may be judged to have a high degree of relevance. To offer another example of the way in which the balance between effort and gain determines the degree of relevance, consider an easily understood text that is laden with repetition that does not lead to cognitive gain. Even though the text requires little effort to understand, it would be judged irrelevant because it provided no cognitive gain. As these examples suggest, maximizing relevance is not simply a matter of making the text as explicit and transparent as possible; nor is it simply a matter of incorporating content that is highly worthwhile to the reader. The principle of relevance reinforces the idea that form and meaning work together to bring about a relevant message. Furthermore, it is not the case that any degree of relevance is sufficient. Rather, the hearer or reader expects that the received message will be worth the processing effort, that the speaker or writer has done her best to reach the highest level of relevance (270-271). When students realize that readers expect optimally relevant texts, and that "optimally relevant" will vary with audience, then they will have a reader-based reason to revise.

How do we come to a relevant interpretation?

The process of identifying the relevant interpretation depends on the assumption that people have intuitions about the worth of one interpretation or another. In accordance with minimizing processing effort, hearers select the first relevant interpretation

that comes to mind. An example and discussion from Sperber and Wilson illustrate this point (163-70):

(5) George has a big cat. (168)

The utterance in (5) prompts the hearer to make a hypothesis about the likely interpretation based on information in the utterance itself and related inferences, as well as encyclopedic knowledge and related inferences. For (5), a first interpretation might be something like, "'George owns a large house cat.'" If the interpretive hypothesis seems to be the "optimally relevant" message from the speaker, then the hearer assumes that this is the intended relevant interpretation and does not pursue other interpretations. If a first interpretation does not seem appropriate or sufficient, then the hearer repeats the process, expending more effort, and formulates the next available interpretation. A second order interpretation might be something like, "George has a tiger, a lion, a jaguar, etc." (168).[1] The critical point for the student is that a hearer or reader does not immediately and indiscriminately generate many interpretations. Imagine how impossible communication would be under such circumstances! Rather, she selects and limits interpretations according to the principle of relevance.

In fact, the hearer begins to formulate interpretations and expectations for subsequent utterances *while she is receiving* an utterance, as the following exercise demonstrates (based on example from Sperber and Wilson (190)). For this exercise, give half of the class statement 1 and half statement 2. Do not let each group know the other group's statement or that more than one statement was distributed.

Statement 1. Your team is disqualified from the baseball game.
Statement 2. We have chosen John's mouse for the breeding experiment.

Next, ask each group to write down what object "bat" refers to in the statement, "Peter's bat is too grey." Also ask students to briefly describe or draw the "bat" (what does it feel like? look like?). Alternatively, students can draw a picture of the bat. Finally, let each group present its answers to the other group. Students are typically surprised to discover that there are two kinds of bats: one furry and grey, the other made of wood or aluminum. The important point for discussion is that the moment a speaker produces an utterance, the hearer begins forming assumptions about the meaning of that utterance and what will come next. Transferring this observation to writing can help our students view a paragraph as dialogue involving sentences. As such, each sentence is in dialogue with the subsequent sentence and with the reader. Each sentence causes the reader to develop expectations about relevant information in the subsequent sentence.

How can we tap into our conversational ability to identify relevance in order to help students improve the flow of their writing?

Students' conversational sense of relevance may be activated in written contexts if a written text is presented to them as a kind of conversation. In written text, the sentence may be viewed as the counterpart to the utterance. Accordingly, each sentence in a paragraph is in dialogue with the subsequent sentence, by virtue of their structural proximity. In addition, each sentence is in dialogue with the reader. As is true with two utterances constituting a dialogue, each sentence creates in the reader expectations for relevance, which the subsequent sentence is expected to fulfill. This model may be operationalized with the help of two observations: "A statement often raises a relevant question," and "[A] relevant question is a question the answer to which is certain or likely to be relevant" (Sperber and Wilson 207). I explain it this way to students: according to the principle of relevance, a writer (producing a sentence with the intention to communicate) aims to convey a message that the reader considers

worthwhile, given the effort the reader must expend in order to understand it as intended by the writer. The reader, based on her comprehension of the sentence, is primed for a highly relevant subsequent sentence and can anticipate what will likely fulfill this relevance expectation. The moment a reader receives the writer's text, he begins formulating relevance expectations—assumptions, often question-based assumptions, about what will come next. The better the writer's text meets the reader's relevance expectations, the better the text's flow.

Relevance Exercises for the Classroom

Ultimately, students must experience the effect of relevance in writing in order to understand it and use it in their own revision process. The next sequence of exercises is designed to show students the role of relevance in a well-written text, in a problematic text, and finally, in their own texts and revision process.

1. Read aloud the first sentence of a well-written body paragraph. Ask students to jot down the first questions that come to mind, or if it's easier for them, a statement about what they expect the next sentence will be about.
2. Read aloud the second sentence (what might be called the *responding sentence)* of the well-written paragraph. It should answer or come close to answering the students' jotted-down questions, or come close to matching students' statements about what will come next.
3. Repeat the process in steps 1 and 2, beginning this time with the last sentence discussed, that is, using the responding sentence as the initiating sentence.

For comparison's sake, repeat this exercise with a text that does not have a sense of flow or connectedness. In this case, some of the responding sentences will probably fail to meet the expectations generated in readers by the initiating sentences.

Importantly, students should not look for an exact match between the reader's expectation and the writer's text, and they should discuss why an exact match is not predicted: communication is an inference-based system, making it probable that readers will work out different meanings. Success in communication is a relative measure, with our primary goal being to control as well as we can the match between the intended message and the received message. With this probabilistic view of communication, students can feel successful when the writer's second sentence is a close match to the reader's expectations for relevance.

Once students have grasped how to bring their speaking knowledge of relevance to their writing, they can work through the last in this sequence of exercises on relevance. This exercise enables them to see how their writing matches the relevance expectations of their readers, thus supporting the central classroom-based peer response goal of making the audience a real and purposeful presence for writers (Gere).

Using Implicit Knowledge of Relevance in Peer Review Groups

This exercise works best with groups of three or four. With a group of four, the writer can learn how often and how easily her text meets the readers' expectations for relevance.

1. The writer reads or shows only the first sentence of a body paragraph to group members (don't let group members see sentences other than sentence 1). The writer asks group members to jot down a question that quickly comes to mind (or a statement about what will come next).

2. The writer shares sentence 2, and the group considers if this second sentence meets the readers' expectations: does it answer the question (measure of worth)? Can the reader easily find the answer to

her question (measure of effort)? The goal is not to look for an exact match, but to consider if the writer's second sentence generally matches the readers' sense of what the sentence is likely to be about.

a.   If the answer to the questions in step 2 are "yes," move on by repeating step 1, now with the writer reading sentence 2 aloud and the readers/listeners jotting down their first expectations for sentence 3 (and so on).

b.   If the answer to the questions in 2 are "no," circle the unexpected, and underline the expected (if present). Then revise. Sometimes I simply let my students try to fix this on their own, suggesting only that they begin by considering three very general structural changes: revise or delete sentence 1;   revise or delete sentence 2;   or insert sentence(s) between sentence 1 and 2. Alternatively, one might provide additional suggestions of the kind in the Appendix, but the danger here is that students will use the suggestions too prescriptively, inadvertently ignoring the writer's purpose and interest in her project.

While I present this last relevance exercise as a peer-response activity, I often use it in conferences with my students. To demonstrate how the relevance exercise works in a real situation, I offer as an example Ian Stanley's experience.[2] Ian Stanley, a past student in my "Advanced Writing and Peer Tutoring" course, met with me to discuss an early draft of his essay, "On the Importance of Personal Pronouns," which relates how he overcame the harmful effect of pre-college writing assignments that prohibited the use of personal pronouns. During this conference, we went through the relevance exercise for the following excerpt (for

reference, I've labeled each sentence in bold: S1, S2, etc.; comments in italics are Ian's notes to himself that were inserted after our conference.):

S1 "Avoid and ignore absolutes," Valerie suggested as I had failed time and again at articulating direction in my essays. S2 Baffled by the philosophical nature of Valerie's statement, I initially ignored its potential value to myself as both a writer and orator. S3 Eventually, however, I came to terms that my writing is weak, and that, more importantly, there will always—even if I attain advanced degrees in composition or related fields—be room for improvement. *Does this link nicely???* S4 If ideas are not modifiable, the potential worth of ideas would be ignored, and inventions that stem from previous ideas may not have come into being. S5 If the light bulb were not able to be modified from its original usage, would we have LCD televisions? S6 If the invention of the typewriter prevented the introduction of any other word processing machine into society, would we have the computer as we now know it? S7 Written ideas are no different: Jung's theory on child development would be nonexistent if Freud's theory (from which Jung based a lot of his initial claims) was set in stone. *Explain the importance of this, as it relates to my experience…talk about family tree structure and personal pronouns*

   S8 A launching pad for completing my first college research paper was formed when I came to realize this "family tree" structure of academia. *Does this link???* S9 More importantly, however, modifiability of thoughts illuminated that what I have to say does indeed matter, whether or not I use a first, second, or third person perspective. Writing should not merely be about regurgitating answers within strict boundaries. Instead, writing is about modifying previous ideas and offering one's own interpretation or suggestion for improvement of an idea. This realization

became lucid as I was faced with the challenge of completing my first college research paper.

In keeping with the exercise instructions, Ian read one sentence at a time without seeing the subsequent sentence. After reading S1, Ian said that he might expect "more about a specific essay," "elaborat[ion] on the advice 'avoid and ignore absolutes,' or some discussion of 'how I integrated the advice into essays.'"[3] Ian and I then read S2 and observed that it did respond to the expectation about integrating advice into his essays. Specifically, S2 indicates that he did not use this advice because he was "baffled" by it. Ian then read S2 again and noted that it led him to expect a specific example of what his writing was like before and after receiving his stepmother's advice. S3 did not meet his exact expectation, but rather addressed it very generally. We then moved onto reading S3 to see what it led us to expect in S4. In this case, there was a serious mismatch—one that warranted a significant revision. After Ian read S3, he said, "Now that I've come to terms that my writing is weak, I wonder what will happen next with my writing." S4 did not fulfill Ian's (or my) expectations for continuing the conversation; instead, it shifted to a discussion about ideas being modifiable.

As we continued working through the paragraph to discover how relevant one sentence's response was to the preceding sentence, Ian discovered another serious coherence problem between S8 and S9. After reading S8, he wondered, "what's this family tree structure?" and indicated that he might want "more about the first college research paper." Instead, he encountered a sentence about the modifiability of ideas—clearly an important theme in the essay, but one that was not integrated coherently into this paragraph.

In addition to discovering sentence-to-sentence problems, as his italicized comments to himself indicate, Ian discovered a paragraph-to-paragraph problem. The first sentence of the second paragraph failed to meet the expectations set up by the end of paragraph one. As he explained after reading S7, he expected

something about "experience being set in stone and relating that to my experience," although he added that he wasn't sure about this. In this case, he not only felt that his expectations were not met, but also that they were not clearly established. Because his sentences and paragraphs did not relate sufficiently well to one another, they did not create a coherent dialogue.

At this point in the conference, I left these paragraphs for Ian to rewrite on his own. To revise for enhanced flow, Ian had several possible approaches, as explained generally in the Appendix and exemplified here with reference to S3 and S4. Specifically, he could revise S3 (and possibly preceding sentences) so that it led readers to expect S4; he could alter S4 (and perhaps subsequent sentences) if he felt that he wanted to fulfill the expectations originally established in S3; or he could see if deleting either of these sentences would address the problem (Is S5 a momentary tangent, or does it lead the paragraph into a new focus, a new conversation?). Alternatively, if Ian felt that there were an unstated connection between S3 and S4, he could develop and articulate this connection and insert new text between S3 and S4.

Ian tried a few different approaches. He first revised the paragraph by inserting a new sentence between S3 and S4, resulting in the following three-sentence sequence:

> S3 Eventually, however, I came to terms that my writing is weak, and that, more importantly, there will always—even if I attain advanced degrees in composition or related fields— be room for improvement. S3A Avoiding absolutes is important because absolutes reject the modifiability of ideas. S4 If ideas are not modifiable, the potential worth of ideas would be ignored, and inventions that stem from previous ideas may not come into being.

The new sentence's "Avoiding absolutes" did echo S1's "'Avoid and ignore absolutes'" and so build on the expectation to explain this phrase; however, S3 and S3A were not interacting with optimal relevance. S3A still failed to meet the question S3 raised

for Ian: what happened next with Ian's writing? Two themes (a discussion of Ian's writing, and a discussion of the nature of ideas) continued to compete for this paragraph's focus and so disrupted the paragraph's flow.

Ian recognized that a disconnect still remained and revised again, this time by deleting S3 and the associated S2, fleshing out the ideas in S3A and S4, and then relating the discussion of ideas to writing an essay:

> As I failed time and again at formulating direction in an essay during my freshman year of college, my stepmother, Valerie, offered me this ironic advice: "Avoid and ignore absolutes". Avoiding absolutes is important because absolutes reject the modifiability of ideas. If ideas are not modifiable, the potential worth of ideas would be ignored, and inventions that stem from previous ideas may not come into being. If the light bulb were not able to be modified from its original usage, would we have LCD televisions? If the invention of the typewriter prevented the introduction of any other word processing machine into society, would we have the computer as we now know it? Written ideas are no different: Jung's theory on child development would be nonexistent if Freud's theory (from which Jung based a lot of his initial claims) was set in stone. The fact that ideas branch off of one another, and that ideas are malleable, highlights how one can infuse one's own ideas into preexisting ideas. Essays, then, are generally not about regurgitating a previous answer; rather, they are about positing a new question, and attempting to answer that question. This realization became lucid as I was faced with the challenge of completing my first college research paper.
>
> I chose to research the implications of anonymity on the recovery movement. Initially, I had suspected I would conform to the mainstream view that anonymity is essential to the success of the recovery movement, and that, although public funding is necessary to advance health care for

recovering addicts, it must be achieved without putting a face on the recovery movement. Through a reassessment of my stance, and hence my thesis, emerged a paper that came to be titled: *The Necessities of Surmounting Anonymity in Drug and Alcohol Recovery Programs.* This reassessment is testament to the influence that Valerie's mantra to "avoid and ignore absolutes" had on my writing. Had I not come to understand the modifiability of ideas, I may not have come to challenge mainstream views.

As evidenced by the above excerpt, Ian also addressed the coherence problems between paragraphs and within paragraph two. Importantly, to complete the revision, Ian did not rely only on the relevance exercise. Once he revised so that sentences were relevant to one another, he revised again for cohesion using the given-new expectation (Clark and Haviland; Gopen and Swan; Halliday, *An Introduction*; Hancock; Kolln; Noguchi; Prince; Vande Kopple; Williams).

From this interactive relevance exercise, the writer ideally experiences the reader (who can be the writer him/herself) as a thinking individual who continuously processes information and formulates expectations about what will come next in a text. In the example with Ian, the relevance exercise enabled the writer himself to experience his own paper as a reader.

While the reader has an active role in the writer/reader communication, much of the onus for successful communication rests on the writer, who must maximize the possibility that the reader will receive her intended message as optimally relevant. Such control requires that the writer be aware of the unfolding potential meanings (intended and unintended) of her text and anticipate the readers' expectations for relevance. This "writer-responsible" model of written communication is, however, a cultural construct: across cultures, rhetorical patterns and expectations vary according to how much responsibility they locate with the writer and reader (Leki 90). Relevance theory has the potential to reveal such differences in how people construct

meaning in and from texts. In addition, because the relevance exercise is based on what all proficient speakers implicitly know, it has the potential to be an equalizing force in the classroom.

The large majority of students communicate successfully in their day-to-day lives. Drawing on their implicit knowledge as speakers and hearers, they can build on their strengths as speakers and hearers, on their established expertise as language users. While students may express concerns about their peers' ability to "correct their writing"–a teacher's job, some will say–they do not typically criticize their peers' ability to hold an everyday conversation. And it is precisely this ability to converse successfully–not the ability to write–that serves as the knowledge base for the successful peer review. However, even though speakers and hearers share an implicit understanding of the principle of relevance, their diverse language backgrounds, their particular language and cultural histories (Toolan 162), may lead to unanticipated differences in relevance expectations among readers or between the writer and reader. If these differences are welcomed and considered in the classroom, then all students are offered an opportunity to gain a culturally-sensitive understanding of how audience expectations interact with the writer's text to create meaning.

In discussing how different language backgrounds affect expectations for textual coherence, Leki explains,

> In reading any text, the reader is to some extent called upon to make inferential bridges among the propositions of the text based on the reader's own knowledge of the world. . . . To the extent that members of different cultures do not share the same collective knowledge and experience, the non-native writer may miscalculate the ability of the native reader to construct these inferential bridges.[4] (Leki 93)

Leki offers examples of how student writers experience these different cultural expectations around producing writing that asks

for the appropriate amount of inferencing from the reader. One graduate student from the People's Republic of China says, "'It seems that we need a conclusion in English, but we often leave it [off] to let people think when we write in Chinese. We must explain things more clearly and exactly for Americans'" (Matalene qtd. in Leki, 96). Such a writer, who may understand the abstract suggestion to be more explicit, might benefit from concrete feedback that reveals precisely what questions or expectations his/her text raises for a set of readers. Describing other cultural perspectives on writing, Leki observes that "Arabic rhetoric encourages the ability to find another way to say the same thing" (99-100), a tendency that would likely be viewed by those from some other cultures as "exaggerated and excessively assertive" (100). Revealing these differences can have a positive outcome, with two qualifications. First, writing instructors must be committed to inclusive classroom discussions.[5] Specifically, instructors and students might discuss mismatches in expectations and explicitly work out how a particular sentence might yield different responses from audiences with different backgrounds. Such a discussion might emphasize for writers the need to identify and then work out how to write to a specified audience. Without such discussions, the "different" expectations might be ignored, or worse, "corrected." Second, both the writer and reader must proceed with the following paradox in the foreground: "The reader is always right; the writer is always right" (Elbow and Belanoff 62). Within an inclusive classroom and guided by Elbow and Belanoff's paradox, students can use unexpected misalignments in writers' and readers' expectations as an opportunity to discuss how differences in language-background affect how we create meaning in and from texts,[6] and how these differences shape our decisions as writers. Such dialogue supports writing instructors' goals of helping students make informed decisions about how to revise their texts for particular audiences in our increasingly global and diverse communication contexts.

While this paper grows out of work in language philosophy (Grice) and cognitive science (Sperber and Wilson), the resulting

strategy—an operationalized principle of relevance—is easy to implement and is based in what students already know. Students know "[h]ow to do things with words" (Austin) quite intuitively from their daily experience as speakers, regularly making choices at all levels of language use to bring about desired ends, whether this be to borrow a car, convince a friend to go to the movies, or get help from a professor. This is not to suggest that all aspects of speaking and listening transfer productively to writing and reading, nor that the principle of relevance can account fully (or even in good part) for a well-crafted paragraph. However, students can make great progress in writing by using their implicit knowledge of relevance to test and enhance paragraph flow. Bringing their implicit knowledge of relevance to explicit awareness further helps them understand that writing is an interesting problem, one that changes with each text and each intended audience. Students can draw on the principle of relevance to make choices about their writing based not only on their intended meaning, but also on how well their particular choices meet readers' expectation for relevance. Ultimately, whichever structure or piece of information a writer chooses, however the writer orders constituents, the parts work together to communicate an idea that requires *more or less effort* to interpret and has *more or less* positive effect on the reader. While focused on the reader, however, the writer must never lose sight of her reason for writing or her intended message. Throughout the peer review process, the writer's intended purpose must figure centrally in the discussion about how to align the writer's intended message with reader expectations. Otherwise, the resulting paragraph will fail to communicate the writer's intentions, and thus fail as a communicative text. A conscious awareness of relevance provides students with a real working sense of how readers make meaning out of their words, and how writers can use this knowledge to enhance communication of their intended meaning. Thus, by managing and maintaining relevance, students begin to manage and maintain paragraph flow.

Notes

[1]Sperber and Wilson further explain that the indeterminacy of this statement (is it a tiger, lion, jaguar, some other big cat?) may, depending on the context, require excessive processing effort (168). If the hearer did not know the type of cat and the speaker did, a more relevant utterance might have specified the type of big cat (168).

[2]Special thanks to Ian Stanley for allowing me to use excerpts from his drafts and our conversations.

[3]Ian's comments are from a conference that sought to recreate our first conference, nearly a year ago, on this same draft. While Ian's drafts included notes based on our conferences, I did not have transcripts from these conferences and did not want to construct his responses based only on his notes and our memories. For this reason, Ian and I went through the relevance exercise again on an unmarked early draft so that I could present his account of what his sentences led him to expect. His responses resulted in his identifying the same flow problems that he had identified during our first conference.

[4]And vice versa: similarly, the native speaker may well miscalculate the non-native speaker's expectations around constructing inferences.

[5]For language-diversity pedagogies and related classroom practices, see the *Journal of Teaching Writing*, Volume 21.1 & 2.

[6]See, for example, Anne Johns's article, which draws on schema theory to explain how ESOL students come to the revision process with quite different expectations than those of their English-speaking counterparts.

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APPENDIX

TROUBLE-SHOOTING FOR RELEVANCE PROBLEMS

Some Possible Problems Suggested by Sperber and Wilson (143), along with Some Solutions

Problem: sentence 2 doesn't add anything for the reader, either in terms of information or attitude.
Solutions: delete sentence 1 or 2.

Problem: reader can work out the relevance to sentence 1, but has to work very hard.
Solutions:
a. decide that the effort is meaningful and purposeful and that there is not a better way to communicate the intended meaning.
b. revise sentence 1 and/or 2; add extra sentences before or after sentence 1. Consider changes in structure (e.g., location of given, new, and important information); reduce set of possible interpretations by using more precise words or enlarge possible set by using more general terms; delete misleading information in sentence 1 or unexpected information in sentence 2; locate primary information in main clauses rather than phrases.

Problem: reader can't work out relevance to sentence 1; but writer believes it exists.
Solutions: have writer explain the connection, and then consider the following possibilities:
a. make inference chain between sentence 1 and 2 explicit (this may involve, for example, including critical background information, articulating assumptions or definitions, explicitly stating an implied idea in sentence 1; Williams's list of ways in

which ideas may relate to one another may prove helpful in argumentative writing (206-207).

    b. relocate sentence 1 or 2 to another place in the paper; or

    c. delete sentence 1 or 2.