

Reflections

This section presents contemporary commentary
on articles previously published in *English Teaching Forum*.

The Author as Reader and Writer

BY TOM MILLER

Having been out of the field of English as a foreign language for several years, I was surprised and pleased when the editor of *English Teaching Forum* asked me to write some reflections about an article I coauthored with Dee Parker in 1997. My first task was to go through as many recent issues of *Forum* as I could to see if the original article was still relevant to *Forum* readers and potential authors. I pored through the pages of recent issues to see what was topical, which authors were being cited, and how *Forum* had changed since my last exposure more than five years ago. In reading Diane Millar's 2011 article on genre awareness, I was pleased to see that genre was still topical and that some of the references she cited were old friends of mine. In the same issue I saw that the subjects of textual authority and referencing—which we also addressed our 1997 article—were also current. I then started looking at the structure of *Forum* articles to see if our recommendations were still relevant to the current readership.

Forum allows a flexible format—ranging from generalizations followed by research references, as recommended in our article,

to introductions emphasizing the author's experience—which seems to be a growing trend. I even found an introduction moving straight to the purpose of the article without beating around the bush. But in general, the problem/solution structure dominates in most *Forum* articles, whether the introduction starts with personal experience or with research in the field.

I found though that as I was reading the *Forum* articles to reenter the *Forum* world, I was subconsciously asking myself the questions included in Figure 2 of our original article. (See page 24.) I first tried to define the audience to learn again who my potential readers were and how much they knew and needed to learn. I then tried to define the author to gauge why I might write an article and what special expertise and experience I could contribute. I then found myself evaluating the structure of articles to better understand *Forum* reader expectations about how the format serves the purpose of the text. And finally I tried to put myself in the position of the reader to see what, if anything, I would need to change from our original article to ensure that the readers had the necessary back-

ground to follow the evolving argument. In short I found that Figure 2 served as a useful heuristic not only for writing an article itself but for leading prospective authors through the thinking process that would bring them to write an article in the first place. These questions can take us from the much wider set of *Forum* readers to the more narrow and select group of *Forum* authors.

Reading something you have written even a few days after you have written it, not to mention *years* later, makes it much easier to act as both reader and writer. When the article is no longer fresh in one's mind, any mistakes or omissions jump out at the reader/writer, making one wonder how one could have missed something so obvious in the first place. As I read our original article, I appreciated how we authors had followed our own advice, guiding the reader on a gentle upward slope with gradually increasing information and a format that ensured that the reader was never lost because the signposts and familiar structure set expectations that were met later in the text.

The fact that I was actually using Figure 2 to help solve the problem of whether or not to revise finally tipped my decision in favor of keeping the original text. I found, to my satisfaction, that our original article stands the test of time and can still be used to help budding authors make decisions before and during the writing process. In fact, I would go so far as to say that we need to ask these “Questions for Writers and Readers” regardless of our writing situation or purpose. A sensitivity to the expectations of the readers in any institutional culture is necessary if one intends to create the desired effect on the reader. As I discovered once again in my *Forum* exercise, being a careful reader is a prerequisite for being a successful writer.

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“The format conventions and placement of ideas in a text help the reader identify what is important and what is new, and help relate parts of the text to the whole.”

— Tom Miller and Dee Parker