APPLIED THEORY

SUMMARY

- Asserts that many of the guidelines proposed for the Web have a long history in print
- Argues that it may be more helpful for writers to use communication purpose and form as the basis of comparison between examples of writing, regardless of medium

Writing for the Web Versus Writing for Print: Are They Really So Different?

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INTRODUCTION

Technical communicators are often expected to adapt their writing for different audiences, purposes, and media. For example, the technical communication role may involve writing a variety of resources—including manuals, instructions, help resources, internal policies, style guides, sales specifications, and promotional material. In addition, technical communicators are called on to write for a variety of media—such as printed books and manuals, online support and help, Web sites, brochures, information kits, and so on. Many technical communicators can adapt their writing styles with ease to suit print, screen, online environments, video, audio, or whatever medium the job requires.

The demands of these different writing tasks raise questions about how an author's communication purpose and chosen communication medium might influence the requirements of writing. In particular, it raises questions about whether the core writing strategies used by technical communicators are transferred between different writing tasks. For example, are similar approaches to writing used when writing for different media—particularly when we compare writing for the Web with writing for print?

According to Kilian (2001):

> *When you write for a Web site, you're not just slapping a poster up on a new kind of wall. The Web is a very different medium from print on paper, and it requires a different kind of writing. (p. 8)*

Kilian's comment reflects much of the literature about writing for the Web. Several authors describe writing for the Web as being *fundamentally different from print.* They use print—all print—as a comparison point, and frame their discussions about writing for the Web in terms that suggest its complete opposition to writing for print. Although these authors may offer excellent guidelines for practicing Web writers, they do so in a context that is deliberately separated from print writing.

In this article, I revisit these guidelines for writing for the Web. Specifically, I examine seven of the key dimensions along which Web writing is often differentiated from print writing. I propose that many of the guidelines being advocated for Web writing have a long history in commentary on writing for print. Through a brief review of the literature relating to Web writing and a review of the literature from the print tradition, I suggest that many of the underlying principles of writing apply to both media, and that comparisons made solely on the basis of communication medium may not be very helpful to technical writers.

Because this broad approach to advice about the Web is not always helpful, I offer an alternative—genre—and conclude this article by arguing that genre-based comparisons and guidelines may be more helpful for practicing writers than comparisons based only on medium. These comparisons can encourage writers to be guided by their audience's needs and their communicative purpose, rather than being guided by the medium for which they write.

Note that my focus in this article is on writing, and readers' reactions to written text. I am particularly interested in the guidelines developed about writing for the Web. I do not address guidelines for document design and navigation (some useful resources addressing design and navigation include Nord and Tanner 1993; Farkas and Farkas 2000; Rosenfeld and Morville 1998; Rubens and Krull 1985).

GUIDELINES THAT DEFINE WRITING FOR THE WEB

Most authors who write about the Web argue that writing for the Web is different from writing for print (see, for

Manuscript received 30 July 2002; revised 10 October 2003; accepted 13 October 2003.

example, Farkas and Farkas 2002; Garrand 2001; Holtz 2001; Kilian 2001; Nielsen 1999; Price and Price 2002). In fact, when this literature on writing for the Web is considered broadly, there seems to be a general determination that the newer medium, the Web, *must* be different from the traditional medium of print. Seven guidelines emerge that are consistently used to define Web writing and to set it apart from print writing. But is writing for the Web really distinct? The research on communicating in print suggests otherwise.

1. Structure and design are concerns for Web writers

Guideline for the Web Holtz (2001) argues that one of the key issues that sets Web writing apart from print is Web writing's focus on structure and design. Holtz suggests that print writers are concerned only with content; other people, such as editors, designers, and printers, worry about format, artwork, and design. In contrast, Holtz argues that, for Web writers, all of these issues are the writer's concern (p. 5). Web writers must consider non-text elements because of the enormous impact these elements have on the effectiveness of a Web site.

Holtz isn't alone in recognizing the importance of non-text elements in Web sites. Garrand (2001) notes that Web writers need to be more than great wordsmiths; they also need to understand and address site architecture and the capabilities of interactive media. Nielsen (1999) includes an extensive discussion of the ways that site navigation and design issues can influence the usability of a site. Both Farkas and Farkas (2002) and Rosenfeld and Morville (1998) give significant attention to Web structuring and navigation.

Similar guideline for print These authors are all pointing to the valid need for Web writers to consider the architecture of their sites and to think about navigation and design as they write content. They are recognizing the fundamental inseparability of text, design, and format, and acknowledging that readers approach documents not just through the given content, but also through the form in which it is presented. These ideas are important and valid. However, they are ideas that print writers must also consider, and there is a long history within print literature about the inseparability of content, design, and format.

Although the roles of writer, project manager, editor, and designer may be kept separate in print projects, several authors note that this is not ideal practice (Carr 1995; Duchastel 1982; Parker 1989; Schriver 1997; Waller 1982; Wickliff and Bosley 1996). Practicing writers and designers acknowledge that separating their roles often brings unsatisfactory results, but role separation continues, particularly in a consultancy setting (Gregory 1997). Good information design in any medium is usually the result of collaboration between a variety of individuals (Sless 1994), and moving away from the idea that the roles should be separate acknowledges the interdependence of the various elements of a document.

Even if writers work within a linear structure where the words are written first and decisions about format and design happen after the copy is finalized, this is not the way that readers approach texts. Readers do not separate content and design—they experience them simultaneously. Content, format, and design work together to create a complete package for readers. For example, the chosen format communicates something to readers about what the text will be like and provides a constraint on the options available to both writers and designers. It would be difficult to write a format-driven document like a brochure or manual without considering both format and design as part of the writing process.

2. Write no more than 50% of what you would write for print

Guideline for the Web Nielsen (1999) argues that writers should write approximately 50% less when writing for the Web than when writing for print, even when the same material is being covered (p. 101). This guideline is echoed by a number of authors (Holtz 2001; Price and Price 2002).

This advice is based on research that suggests that reading from the screen is slower than reading from paper. Because reading from screen is slow and unpleasant, and because people don't want to read a lot of text from screen, Web authors should produce 50% less content to help with reading speed and to help readers feel good about the site (Nielsen, pp. 101–102).

One problem with this guideline is the assumption that it is possible to define an ideal relationship between the quantities of text suitable for print and for the Web. This advice is general and context free. It ignores the individual situations that apply to each writer and presents a guideline that is, at best, overly simplistic. Several authors, including Nielsen (1999), Holtz (2001), and Price and Price (2002), provide examples of concise writing to illustrate their point. Their examples tend to be excellent examples of concise writing for any medium, and they illustrate the advantages for readers imparted by a good, tough edit.

Similar guideline for print The lesson about text quantity is an important part of literature from the Plain Language movement. Although fewer words and shorter sentences are a basic guideline for Plain Language, the end result is not always a shorter document. In developing the "clear, straightforward expression" (Eagleson 1990) that characterizes Plain Language, many writers find that they end up with a document that is longer than the original

version. Writing in a simple, reader-oriented way can sometimes mean writing more words (Penman 1993).

The relevance of overall document length is also discussed in print-oriented information design literature. As Tufte (1997) points out, it is the visual organization of information rather than the quantity of information being conveyed that is a major determinant of successful information design. He argues that "clutter and confusion are failures of design, not attributes of information" (p. 51).

In some cases, it may make sense to write 50% less for the Web. But, in other cases, it may make sense to write more. The readers' information needs should drive these decisions, not arbitrary rules about document length. Comparisons between printed materials and their related Web sites often show that Web sites offer more information – giving more detail, more concrete examples, greater opportunities to delve deeply into the subject, and covering more timely issues –than the print counterpart. In addition, a Web site is often designed and structured to appeal to multiple audiences, whereas a printed resource will be more closely targeted.

3. Write for scannability

Guideline for the Web When people read from a screen, they are likely to skip and skim over the text. Instead of reading the content in full, readers will pick out keywords, headings, lists, and points of interest. Authors such as Garrand (2001, p. 18), Horton (1994, pp. 262–274), Nielsen (1999, pp. 105–106, 111), and Price and Price (2002, pp. 113–130) offer several writing guidelines for improving scannability and supporting these typical reading strategies, including:

- Use two or three levels of headings
- Use meaningful, information-giving headings
- Use bulleted lists
- Use highlighting and emphasis
- Put the most important material first
- Put the topic sentence at the beginning of every paragraph

Similar guideline for print All this is good advice. But the idea that readers skip and skim and that we should therefore write for scannability isn't new. It appears in discussions of technical writing (for example, Nord and Tanner 1993, and Redish 1993), in comments about Plain Language writing (such as Eagleson 1990), and in discussions of professional writing (for instance, Petelin and Durham 1992). It also appears in discussions about motivated readers who ask questions of texts (such as Steehouder and Jansen 1987; and Wright 1999). And this advice is reflected in much of the document design literature (for example, Felker and colleagues 1981, Kempson and Moore 1994; and Lewis and Waller 1993). The need to write for scannability applies to the Web and to many types of print, and the guidelines offered to Web writers are equally valid when writing for print.

4. The Web encourages restless reading

Guideline for the Web According to Farkas and Farkas (2002), one of the major differences between reading from the Web and from print is that the Web encourages casual, restless reading behavior. People skim Web sites, and will leave if they experience boredom or disappointment (pp. 220–221). Farkas and Farkas contrast this situation with reading from print, which they describe as a medium where people will settle down for a while. A similar point is made by Price and Price (2002), who suggest that Web audiences are more active than print audiences. Instead of passively reading printed documents, Web audiences actively guide conversations with the producers of Web pages. Instead of being authors, writers become participants in conversations (p. xiii).

Farkas and Farkas (2002) suggest that the Web encourages restless reading for two reasons:

- Because of the difficulties that people have with reading off screen
- Because most sites are free and easily accessed (readers make little investment to start reading, so they have little reluctance about getting out)

Similar guideline for print One difficulty with these comparisons is that the type of printed document being discussed is not clear. Readers might settle down with a novel or even a weekend newspaper, but few people settle down with a technical manual, an instruction booklet, or an information brochure. These printed documents are characterized by extremely restless reading: readers usually want to find an answer to a specific question, quickly. And while some readers may passively accept the content of all types of documents, many readers will not; both reading theory and public relations/marketing theory have long recognized the active characteristics of readers and the influences that readers have on whether authors are successful with their writing.

For example, research examining the reading of brochures shows that readers take very little time to decide whether something is worth the effort of reading (Gregory 2001). Readers expect documents like brochures to be boring and irrelevant, so they skim the information quickly to decide whether there is anything worth pursuing. Like Web sites, brochures are free and easily accessed. They are throw away items in which people usually have very little investment.

The restless reading described by Farkas and Farkas is also evident in brochure reading, and in the reading of many other types of technical and professional writing. As

Redish (1993) notes, both workplace readers and consumers decide how much attention to give to a document—including whether a document is worth any attention at all. Readers continually decide whether a document is worth their time and effort.

5. Split information into coherent chunks

Guideline for the Web The importance of chunking is a general guideline discussed in many books about writing for the Web. For example, Nielsen (1999) strongly advocates careful chunking, suggesting that chunks should be used to separate ideas and allow a Web site to carry different levels of information by offering short summarizing chunks with links to more detailed information (p. 112). The ability to write in chunks is identified by Duffy, Mehlenacher, and Palmer (1992) as the key training requirement for writers of online information. Each chunk should focus on one topic, allowing readers to access only the information that interests them.

Similar guideline for print For people with a background in writing, this guideline is not new. The idea of chunking information can be traced back to Miller's research in 1956, which showed that people's short-term memories are taxed when they must retain more than 7 ± 2 items, and that memory load is reduced when the items are chunked (discussed in Spyridakis 2000). Although the term *chunk* does not appear widely in the print literature, the idea that information should be divided into coherent sections is frequently discussed (for example, Felker and colleagues 1981; and Redish 1993). Some authors suggest that professional writers should allow the various sections to stand alone, so that readers can begin and end at any chunk within the document and still make sense of what they read (such as Bernhardt 1986).

Although the concept of chunking is used in all types of writing, it is possible that Web content should be chunked differently from print content. The media are different: the Web offers navigational capabilities not available in print and a document size not limited by printing and distribution costs. In addition, Web writers must deal with an awkward screen size and an array of navigational furniture. Rosenfeld and Morville (1998) warn that writers should not map printed documents directly onto Web pages because the most suitable chunking processes for the media are likely to be different (pp. 165–166). But the advice to write in coherent chunks applies across a variety of media.

6. Web writers can't predict where their readers will start

Guideline for the Web Web sites exist as many separate, linked pages that can be viewed independently, and Web writers can never be completely confident about where their readers will start reading (see Holtz 2001, p. 6; and Farkas and Farkas 2002, p. 224). As a result, Holtz suggests that writers need to structure their information into independent parts that make sense in their own context. Writers can rarely assume that readers have read other sections first.

In giving this advice, Holtz is referring to the way that readers arrive at different pages of Web sites. He's arguing that each page should work as an independent segment because writers cannot assume that readers have seen pages higher in the structural hierarchy. Holtz is describing the nonlinearity of the Web, and contrasting this characteristic with print, which he sees as a linear medium.

Similar guideline for print Although novels and feature articles may be designed to be read in a linear fashion, much print is not. Most readers use texts in a nonlinear fashion—by dipping into them, skipping around, and backtracking (Nord and Tanner 1993). As Spyridakis (2000) notes, readers jump around in print, looking at tables of contents, indexes, figures, tables, appendixes, footnotes, and glossaries. She suggests that print can actually be *less linear* than a Web site, because the reading routes within print are less limited than the reading routes in hyperlinked Web pages.

Dillon (1996) also challenges the idea that print is linear and therefore constraining for readers. He notes that this is a common belief among advocates of hyperlinks and argues that comparing online text and print on the basis of linearity does not provide a fair representation of either medium (pp. 29–30). Dillon finds little evidence to suggest that readers are constrained by the linearity of print or that they read printed documents in a straightforward start-to-finish manner.

Of course, one important difference between print and the Web is that print usually provides a navigational context through its form. When holding a printed document, readers can immediately see how big the document is, and where they are in relation to its whole. This is much less likely to be true in a Web environment, so Web writers must provide these details for readers in another way. However, while acknowledging these navigational differences, it is still important to note that print is not a fully linear medium and that writers cannot confidently predict where readers will start reading.

Authors such as Bernhardt (1986) and others working in information design have long challenged the idea that print is linear. Readers will start reading at the point that grabs their interest or appears to answer their question. In print, as on the Web, writers find it difficult to predict where their readers will start. Readers' reading patterns are constrained by two issues that apply across all media: their

interest (or involvement) in a particular topic or document, and the personal reading patterns that they bring to each reading situation.

7. Readers "pull" the information they need from the Web

Guideline for the Web The Web is often described as a user-driven, "pull" medium. Readers actively pull from Web sites only the information that interests them, and other material is ignored. Holtz (2001) sees this Web characteristic as another point of difference with print; in print, readers are given what writers want to give them (p. 6). Rouet and Levonen (1996) define readers' progression through hyperlinked online documents as being "user controlled," whereas in print, the reading sequence is directed by the author and can be passively accepted by readers. Progression through hyperlinks requires active decision-making by the reader (p. 12).

Similar guideline for print But the contrast between the Web and print is really not so clear. In both media, writers offer information to readers and readers take what interests them. Both media simultaneously "push" information, while readers "pull" what they want. These two perspectives are recognized in many models of the reading process (see Hatt 1976; and Wright 1999).

Readers are no more captive in print than they are on the Web. The decision to read is always a conscious one, and readers can decide to terminate their reading at any point—due to disinterest, inability to comprehend, boredom, lack of time, change of circumstance, or simply because they reach the end (Goodman 1985, p. 835). Authors such as Dervin (1983) recognize that information can't be pushed onto captive audiences. Instead, readers will access what information interests them (or answers their questions) at the time that is most convenient to them and use the medium that they choose.

As Redish (1993) notes, technical documents are used as tools; readers scan documents to find important information, grab that information off the page, and then act on it. This tendency to "pull" information applies in both print and online media.

SOME LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FROM WHICH WEB GUIDELINES EMERGE

The guidelines discussed in the previous section may be useful for technical writers writing for a variety of media. But, in the Web literature, these guidelines seem to be based on limited research. For example, Jakob Nielsen (1999), one of the most widely quoted authors discussing Web usability, argues that Web writing should be approached differently from print writing. He identifies five reasons for the difference:

1. *Reading online is around 25 percent slower than reading print*
2. *The Web is a user-driven medium where users feel they have to move around*
3. *Each page competes with many others for attention*
4. *Users are never sure whether they are looking at the best page for their topic*
5. *Users don't have time to work hard for their information. (p. 106)*

Although Nielsen offers many useful guidelines in *Designing Web usability: The practice of simplicity* and at his Web site (http://www.useit.com), he offers little detail about the research that informs these five points of difference (this point is also noted in a useful review of Nielsen's book by Racine 2002). Yet Nielsen's five reasons are quoted by several authors and seem to offer a key basis for differentiating between print and the Web.

The evidence for online reading being slower than print reading is discussed in Dillon's (1992) review of the literature relating to reading from paper versus reading from the screen. Dillon reviews several studies that collectively show that reading from screen is 20–30% slower than reading print. Rubens and Krull (1985) also discuss studies that show that reading from the screen is slower than reading print, in part because of the lack of character legibility on screen. Nielsen (1999) argues that this reading speed problem will be solved over time as high-resolution monitors come into common use (p. 103). However, it is a difference between print and screen reading that has current widespread acceptability.

There is little specific research to support the other four points of difference discussed by Nielsen. However, these points make intuitive sense for Web users and are widely accepted in the field. The question of interest for this article is not whether these points relate to the Web; instead, we need to ask whether these points also apply to print. In other words, rather than being key points of difference, are they points that describe typical reading practice across both media?

If we look at specific categories of print—such as government information, technical writing, business writing, promotional materials, and community education—Nielsen's points may well apply. A solid body of literature supports the argument that readers of print are choosy about what they read, are faced with many documents competing for their attention, may question whether the information they read applies to them, and adopt the principle of "least effort" as they read (Goodman 1985; Schriver 1997; Steehouder and Jansen 1987; Wright 1989, 1999).

Perhaps it's possible that Nielsen's points have particular relevance on the Web because of the Web's physical characteristics— such as lack of context, lack of a physical

form that readers can annotate, freedom of navigation, and hyperlinking. However, the research on communicating in print suggests that successful writers will consider these issues no matter what medium they are writing for.

Although many authors argue that Web writing is fundamentally different from print writing, it is important to note that this approach is not universal. For example, Spyridakis (2000) draws on the history of print and reading models to develop heuristics for writing and evaluating Web pages. She notes that although there is widespread discussion about the differences between the Web and print, "the two mediums may be more similar than one might think." In addition, Farkas and Farkas (2000, 2002), while discussing differences based on navigation and page structure, recognize that writing for the two media has many similarities. Horton (1994) argues that the principles of good writing are the same across different media, but that applying these principles may be more difficult in an online context (p. 261).

USING GENRE TO COMPARE THE WEB AND PRINT

Comparisons between print and the Web are often given at a very general level. In particular, authors rarely specify what types of print documents and what types of Web sites are under discussion. Instead, they suggest that the Web, as a medium or genre, can be contrasted with print, which is seen as a different medium or genre. It often seems that these general comparisons are drawn from discussions of print that are based on novels and newspaper feature articles, and discussions of the Web that are based on sites promoting businesses and government policies.

Instead of comparing the Web and print at this general level, it may be more helpful for practicing writers if authors focused on the recognizable communicative purposes of documents —that is, on *genre* (Swales 1990). Using genre as the basis for comparison would allow writers to focus on their rhetorical intent and on the contexts within which their documents are used. This may provide both more practical and more rich points of comparison than current approaches which describe differences based only on communication medium.

A genre is a relatively stable form of communication that develops through the repeated communication practices of a discourse community and is recognized by the members of that community (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson 1999, p. 8). It is primarily characterized by the communicative purposes that it intends to fulfill (Bhatia 1993; Swales 1990) and is recognized because it has become standardized—with conventionalized language and patterns of organization (Bhatia 1999).

Members of a discourse community use genres that they recognize to achieve particular purposes (Orlikowski and Yates 1994). This means that genres become templates for social action— when readers encounter a text and identify it as belonging to a recognizable genre, they know how to deal with that text and what to expect from it. For example, individual experience within a work context tells us how to deal with e-mail newsletters, wizards, or instructions.

Most definitions of genre incorporate elements of communicative purpose and common form (Orlikowski and Yates 1994). For example, we recognize a pop-up error message both for the purpose that it fulfills and for the accepted form that it takes.

- The communicative purpose of a genre is based in a purpose that is recognized and reinforced within the community; it is not a purpose that can be based simply in an individual author's purpose in communicating. Authors cannot impose a genre's communicative purpose on readers because the genre is built through the readers' and author's common understandings of what the genre is intended to achieve. So a memo becomes a way of communicating work information when it is enacted by its author in such a way that its purpose is recognized by its readers.
- The accepted form of a genre can include the communication medium —for example, the work meeting genre typically invokes the idea of face-to-face interaction in a common location. But communication medium is only part of a genre's form; the form can include other features such as structure, acceptable interactions, or allowable language. In addition, in many genres, the communication medium is flexible —for example, a memo can be recognized as a memo whether it is presented on paper or via e-mail, and a workplace meeting can be recognized as a meeting whether it happens in a meeting room or in an online environment.

The value of genre is that it provides authors with heuristics for developing texts and it provides readers with a framework for reading and understanding. The rationale behind a genre establishes constraints on the contributions that can be made—in terms of both content and form. Authors cannot break away from the constraints of a genre without producing a text that is noticeably odd. And readers draw on their prior knowledge of a genre to interpret a text (Bhatia 1993; Swales 1990). This means that working within a recognizable genre makes communication more easily recognized by readers while also giving authors a framework for their task.

The distinction that is important in the context of print writing and Web writing is to note that genre is not simply defined by communication medium. Communication medium has a role to play and can influence which genres are accepted (Crowston and Williams 2000). And it is possible that some uniquely Web-based genres are emerging (such as personal home pages— see Dillon and Gushrowski

2000), while other genres will continue to operate across many different media and environments (such as newsletters, which exist in print and various online forms).

The research literature discussed in this article shows that there are many similarities between Web writing and print writing, and these similarities are based on genre. Writing technical manuals for the screen shares important similarities with writing technical manuals for print. For example, writing for either medium requires the writer to think about how readers will shuffle between the text and the activity being described, how readers will dip into the text to solve problems, and what background knowledge the readers bring to the task. In the same way, writing promotional materials for the Web shares important similarities with writing promotional materials for print.

One implication of defining genre by communication purpose is that within many Web sites, multiple genres must be evident. Although a company's Web site may have the overall purpose of communicating with its audiences, within that site a number of different audiences and a number of different needs must be served. Different parts of the site may be focused on promotion, sales, research, education, and internal purposes such as record keeping, administration, and training. By using genre as a guide in planning their writing, writers can be alert to the need for different approaches in writing different parts of the site.

I'd like to use the Web site developed by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) to illustrate this point. QUT's site is designed to communicate with several audiences—including existing students, prospective students (locally and internationally), staff, regulators, business partners, and funders. Sections of the site designed to communicate with these different audiences adopt different writing styles, particularly in terms of their language and tone.

For example, the pages designed to promote the university to potential students—such as "About QUT and Brisbane" (http://www.qut.edu.au/services/aboutqut/), "Location and campuses" (http://www.qut.edu.au/services/aboutqut/location/), and "History" (http://www.qut.edu.au/services/aboutqut/history.jsp)—use a colorful language and promotional tone to sell the university and its location. The location is described as "one of Australia's most beautiful," while the university is described as having a "rich past" and an "exciting future."

In these promotional pages, the headlines tend to be intriguing (for example, "Top artists, sit-ins and a boxing ring"), while emphasizing the strengths that the university mentions in all media promotion (a vocational education, particularly at undergraduate level, and Australia's largest provider of bachelor's degree graduates into the workforce—these strengths appear in television advertising, displays at promotional events, and both print and electronic promotional resources).

In contrast, pages designed to communicate with existing students about QUT's policies and procedures adopt a simple, instructional, authoritative tone—such as the library's "Borrowing: Students" page (http://www.library.qut.edu.au/students/) and the computing services' "Getting started" page (http://www.scg.qut.edu.au/GettingStarted/). These instructional pages assume some prior knowledge about QUT and are written in second person, while the promotional pages assume no prior knowledge and adopt the third person. The tone shifts again in the pages designed to explain QUT's rules and policies for staff and students. For example, the "Manual of policies and procedures" (http://www.qut.edu.au/admin/mopp/) adopts a tone that is precise, formal, authoritative, and distant, and uses a third person stance. The introduction to Chapter C, "Teaching and learning," begins,

> *This chapter contains information, policies and procedures relating to the design, development, delivery and monitoring of academic programs. . . . This chapter has most relevance for academic staff, academic managers and general staff who are involved in academic planning, course development and assessment. (http://www.qut.edu.au/admin/mopp/C/C_01.html)*

QUT goes to the extent of naming its site differently for its different audiences—for students and staff, the education URL http://www.qut.edu.au is promoted, while in the business community, the corporate URL of http://www.qut.com is promoted.

The QUT site varies internally according to the genre being created, and the styles used reflect the communicative purpose of that genre. The writing style used in QUT's Web-based promotional material has much in common with the writing style used in its print-based promotional material, but it varies significantly from the Web-based instructional material. In addition, there are strong similarities between the Web-based and print-based instructional materials that cannot be found when other Web pages or printed resources are compared.

A number of authors have already called for a genre-based approach to discussing Web writing. For example, Farkas and Farkas (2002) note that Web genres are starting to emerge (p. 9), and that writing for different genres requires different approaches. Price and Price (2002) devote a large section of their book to discussing different generic forms. A very useful element of Price and Price's book is that they consider how each of their writing guidelines should be adapted for different types of online writing (such as writing to inform or writing to entertain). They recognize that their writing guidelines will be differently useful for different types of Web documents. And authors such as Crowston and Williams

(2000), Dillon and Gushrowski (2000), Walker (2002), and Gonzalez de Cosio and Dyson (2002), reflect a growing level of interest in the application of genres to Web-based communication.

The existing literature about genre and the Web varies in the emphasis it gives to communication medium. Some authors encourage writers to define genre according to the medium used, with sub-genres being created by the communicative purpose of the text (this approach would define the Web as a recognizable genre, with promotional sites and online help as sub-genres). This approach moves away from the standard definitions of genre discussed in more general genre theory (by authors such as Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson 1999; Bhatia 1993; Orlikowski and Yates 1994; Swales 1990). In general genre theory, genre is defined according to both communicative purpose and form, while allowing sub-genres to be created by more specific issues such as medium or format (this approach would define manuals as a genre, with paper-based manuals and online manuals as recognizable sub-genres).

This distinction may seem to be splitting hairs. After all, most authors discussing genre recognize that it is a fuzzy concept, with overlapping boundaries and subsets, and that genre is more helpful to use than define (de Beaugrande and Dressler 1981; Orlikowski and Yates 1994). However, an approach based primarily on communicative purpose and form is likely to be more useful for practicing writers than an approach based primarily on communication medium. Considering both purpose and form encourages writers to look for similarities and differences that occur within and between genres. Considering genre as part of the writing process, with an emphasis on communicative purpose and form, will be helpful for practicing writers because it

- Encourages writers to consider the needs and expectations of their audience
- Encourages writers to consider the uses to which their texts will be put
- Provides writers with a framework for thinking about their texts; in many cases, this framework is already well established in the print environment and may only need adaptation rather than re-invention for the Web environment
- Provides writers with an avenue for drawing on the long history of research in print writing as they consider the most appropriate approaches to writing for the Web

The difference that I am proposing is one of focus. Instead of considering that writing genres are primarily characterized by media (such as print vs. Web), I suggest that writers will find genre theory more helpful in their work if they focus first on communication purpose (such as instructional writing vs. promotional writing).

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed seven key arguments that are used to distinguish between writing for the Web and writing for print. I have argued that instead of providing a clear distinction between Web writing and print writing, these points actually provide valuable guidelines for many styles of writing in both media. Many of the guidelines advocated for Web writing are regularly applied to print writing and have a long history in the print literature.

Instead of providing comparisons that are based primarily on communication medium, it may be more helpful for practicing writers to make comparisons that are based on genre, with a focus on communicative purpose and form. Using genre as the point of comparison will allow writers to explore both the constraints offered by the genre they are working within and any additional constraints imposed by the communication medium. Most importantly, a genre based approach to writing will allow writers to consider the needs and expectations of their audience first, well before they allow their writing to be controlled by the communication medium through which it will be published.

It is possible that, in our enthusiasm to embrace the new online medium, we have focused more on the differences between media than on their similarities. We are rushing to invent new independent theory, often without considering what has come before. Clearly there are differences between print and the Web, just as there are differences between print and television. There are also wide differences between different forms within each medium. These differences, which are recognized through genre, may be important to readers and need to be questioned by technical writers. But, many of the fundamental writing issues that communicators should consider appear to apply in both print and Web environments. TC

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Australia and New Zealand Communication Association Conference, Gold Coast Australia, 10–12 July 2002. Thanks to the three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

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