

# From Television to Student Writing

Barbra Morris

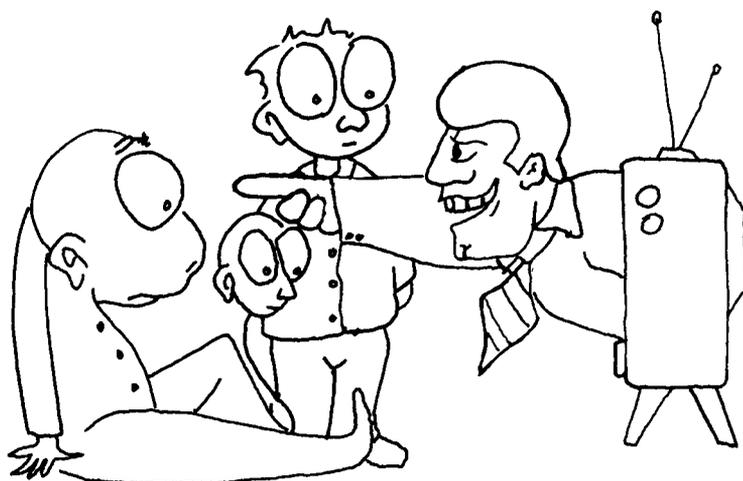
Both in-school training and out-of-school experience influence the writing of our students; an especially powerful influence upon them is watching television. Unlike some other out-of-school experiences, however, television is often characterized as the enemy of literacy. The differences between how people learn from television and how they learn in school account for much of this prejudice. Television creates a learning environment different from that of the classroom where individual attention to the learner and discussion of subject matter can be fostered. The environment television creates is impersonal, one in which viewers are sent abbreviated, fragmented messages to be learned privately and integrated rapidly into whole patterns of meaning. As individuals learn the explicit content of their television viewing, they also learn an implicit form of communication that does not allow them time for response or reflection.

## Implication of Television Viewing for Teachers of Writing

As teachers of written communication, we want to encourage thinking and learning processes different from those that television promotes. Studies now available on the subject of relationships between television viewing and literacy suggest that we can make use of students' past conditioning as we help them to become capable writers. If television can serve as a point of departure for teaching composition, we need to build upon and extend the small body of research that informs us about the relationships between television and writing.

One of the few research projects directly linking television to writing in an academic situation was conducted at **The University of Michigan** during 1978 and 1979. The ECB experimented with the addition of televised information to students' written instructions during entrance essay procedures for undergraduates. Written directions for the assessment essay always specify topic, audience, purpose, and situation for students. Television information, added for several consecutive days to the written instructions for randomly selected students, was a visual reinforcement of points-of-view suggested in the description of the topic.

Essays written by the experimental group were collected and mixed together with essays by writers who had received only the written instructions. Assessment readers did not know which essays were composed by those students who had the televised information; after essays from both groups of students had been read and placements of students into the writing program had been determined, the test booklets were reviewed by assessment readers in order to determine whether any discernible differences existed in the texts.



Readers reported that there were some differences: Entering students who had seen televised information used visual examples more often to support their opinions. Students who were questioned about their responses to the televised segment indicated that the television stimulus had both put them at ease and promoted their recall of illustrative images. One student described the television stimulus as "a bridge between the page and my store of examples."

This experiment suggests that a specific connection can be made between assignments and recall of visual information during the composing process; it may be that when writing assignments contain visual illustrations, students are enabled to draw upon their own collections of visual data. This notion is an important one to consider because student writers are often puzzlingly unpredictable in their abilities to perform in different composing situations. A student who would be classified as a "poor" writer in one situation produces a very rich text in another. If one of our aims as teachers of writing is to encourage writers to produce richer texts, texts with, for example, more vivid illustrative details, then the assignments we give to writers should invite the production of such details. Television, when appropriately introduced within an assignment, may be one method of priming writers to make use of their own stores of images during composing.

Another link between television and composition occurs when teachers develop direction for writing assignments in specially sequenced form. Television promotes learning of rapid-pattern response; teachers can make use of this knowledge by incorporating uses for this behavior into composition assignments.

The phenomenon of pattern response to television is well recognized. Two decades ago Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* observed that frequent television

watching would lead to a viewer habit of limited, shallow-pattern responses because television prohibits extended contemplation of any single image or unit of information. The habits of limited response that McLuhan foresaw in the 1960's have actually evolved into a highly complex cluster of rapid-response behaviors. These behaviors can be differentiated into several categories: **Pattern recognition**, **pattern discrimination**, and **pattern selection**.

Very recently, in his analysis of research into television entitled *Interaction of Media, Cognition, and Learning*, Gaviel Salomon noted that rapid-pattern response has created an audience of rapid channel switchers: These channel switchers — our students — are able to take in sufficient visual information to determine in seconds their preferences for content. Because television producers must take this behavior into account, they regularly design sensational program openings to attract and hold viewer attention beyond the first few critical seconds of viewing.

How can we as teachers of writing put this same information to use? Sequencing assignments is one way for us to do so. We can prepare students for a composing task by making use of pattern analysis and discrimination upon texts which are similar to those they will need to produce on their own. In Junior/Senior level writing courses which I teach at Michigan, I have students move through several stages of pattern analysis before composing. This activity enables my students to make a transition from their familiarity with processing television information to the less familiar task of writing sustained, complex texts. This systematic approach to composing, which sequential assignments encourages, resembles the learning behavior of "organized persistence" Jerome Bruner has described in *On Knowing*.

The best way for me to illustrate how I foster this transition process is to describe a sequence of assignments from my writing class entitled "Fiction, Fantasy and Fairy Tale." I begin to teach students how to write their own stories by introducing them to several types of story frames — predictable narrative structures typically found in a genre — as working examples. The first structures we analyze are from television. This initial analysis often becomes a lively exchange of observations because students are astute at rec-

ognizing, discriminating, and selecting among the program patterns of television shows.

In their next stage of development, I focus students' attention on folk tale frames; I draw upon information from Chapter III of Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale* and compress Propp's extensive tale categories into four major headings which describe stages of dramatic action: Opening, Complications, Hero/Heroine Actions, Resolution.

Although such story elements are never created by writers for teaching purposes, when beginning writers examine each element of text in isolation, and in relation to other features, they begin to see how parts of any specific discourse function in combination with others.

I order in-class and out-of-class assignments in this sequence:

- (1) *Analysis of television story frames*
- (2) *Analysis of folk tale frames*
- (3) *Composition of first drafts of original folk tales by small groups of students*
- (4) *Exchange of first drafts of original tales among groups for comments*
- (5) *Revision and completion of original tales in small groups*
- (6) *Presentation of original folk tales by the small groups to the class with story boards used to illustrate key events (A story board provides a series of illustrations, somewhat like a comic strip. It depicts events as they occur chronologically in a story. Text intended to be heard simultaneously with specific pictures is printed below each illustration).*

In my class, learning about television story frames and folk tale frames is a natural prelude to the writing of an original story. Not only does the careful study of texts extend analytic skills my students already possess as viewers, but it encourages students to contrast conventions common to television presentation with the conventions of written texts.

Television is a powerful, readily accessible point of departure for teachers who want to help their students write more effectively; in our small group sessions this June, we will discuss television as one of many factors to be taken into account in facilitating the development of student writers.