

OF ATTENTION-GETTING OPENERS AND CONTRACTS: A REASSESSMENT OF AN INTRODUCTORY DILEMMA

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In "The Myth Of the Attention-Getting Opener," published in *Written Communication* in 1986, Irvin Hashimoto scrutinizes the reigning belief in composition pedagogy that introductions should feature catchy devices designed to snag the audience of the piece of writing and keep them reading. He asserts that such approaches are neither particularly teachable nor useful. His argument is that concerned readers, who approach their role actively rather than passively, commit to reading a piece of written discourse not because they are hooked or snagged by the cleverness of the author's opening lines, but because they have a genuine interest in the topic or the argument that is to be presented. (Hashimoto restates this position in his witty text, *Thirteen Weeks: A Guide to Teaching College Writing*, 133–36.)

Hashimoto's critique of the attention-getting opener remains germane. Indeed, hooks and grabbers are not worthy subjects for college composition courses, and it would be better to leave the teaching of such devices to the entertainment and advertising industries. Even a thoughtful, analytically rigorous study such as Robin Scarcella's "How Writers Orient Their Readers in Expository Essays," although it ably catalogs "attention-securing devices," is unable to offer a convincing method of teaching them.

What, though, should writing teachers emphasize in lieu of these attention-getting devices? How can we demonstrate the genuine importance of introductions without resorting to tired clichés and aggressive metaphors about snagging readers? One solution to the problem can be found in the concept of "contract," introduced rather tersely into composition

pedagogy by William J. Brandt and his colleagues from the University of California about twenty-five years ago. In *The Craft Of Writing*, Brandt et al. mention "the reader-writer contract, the implicit agreement between them" (6). In *The Rhetoric of Argumentation*, as well, Brandt, when speaking of the initial relationship between the author and the reader, alludes to the notion of contract (52). These rather sketchy comments, unfortunately, are about as far as Brandt takes the matter. He does not really elaborate upon his concept of contract, nor does he argue for its efficacy in a sustained manner. Since Brandt's work, other composition specialists have hinted about the contractual quality of introductions. For example, Maxine Hairston and John Ruszkiewicz present a "commitment and response" pattern in *The Scott, Foresman Handbook* that encourages writers to establish a kind of authorial duty to the reader (66-67, 136-39). Yet no one to date has fully developed the contractual metaphor or demonstrated its deep relevance to writing pedagogy.

This essay presents the metaphor of the contract as a useful tool for teaching students how to craft introductions, particularly in the context of persuasion. Approaching introductions as contracts, we do more than show students how to create catchy opening paragraphs. We demonstrate how an introduction functions within the entire framework of a text—as well as the greater context in which it is necessarily situated. Always more than a mere formalism, the metaphor of the contract encourages writing and reading that is interpersonally and communally relevant and responsible.

A contract, according to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, is "a binding agreement between two or more persons or parties," especially "one legally enforceable." Basic to the notion of contract, then, is its legal dimension. When we speak of written introductions as contracts, therefore, these legal connotations directly apply to the relationship between author and reader. The author *agrees* or *guarantees* to *provide* discourse on a given topic; and the reader, if he or she is interested, *commits* to read on. In most cases, as well, the author *establishes* certain *expectations* about the shape and slant of the text; and correspondingly the reader *consents* to accept—if only for the sake of the effect or argument presented—these further

conditions. In this sense, the writer and reader are *bound* together as the text unfolds. Texts that conform to the *parameters* set forth in the initial stages of writing can be said to *honor* their *contracts*. The author, therefore, has met his or her obligations to the reader. Deviations from the *expectations* that have been *established* in the contract can be seen as *violations* of the written *agreement*. The author has not *provided* what he or she *promised* or *owed*. The *debt*, in effect, has not been paid the reader, who has graciously *invested* his or her time in the *partnership*.

Professor Hashimoto's opening to "The Myth of the Attention-Getting Opener" illustrates how this legal nomenclature can be applied to actual introductions:

Many writing teachers and most textbooks on writing emphasize the value of attention-getting devices to help students to write introductions to their papers. "You must hook the reader immediately" write Gregory and Elizabeth Cowan (1980, p. 173), "the point is clear: the reader should be strongly drawn into the writing at once." H. Ramsey Fowler, (1983, p. 95) tells students, "An opening should focus readers' attention on the topic and arouse readers' curiosity." Donald M. Murray (1984, p. 91) suggests that the beginning of an article "has to capture and hold the reader." A. M. and Charlene Tibbetts (1983, p. 154) tell students that an introduction "catches the readers' interest and makes them want to read on." Yet, even though so many well-respected writing teachers advocate attention-getting introductions, their advice is difficult to follow and misleading to students. (123)

In a concise manner, Hashimoto *promises* to discuss the pedagogy of introductions. He *agrees* to provide a critique of "attention-getting devices," the leading approach to teaching introductions, and he *raises the expectation* that his critique will focus on the difficult, misleading nature of these devices. The reader, if he or she *consents* to read past this first paragraph, *anticipates* that Hashimoto will *stand* by his *agreement*. If he moves to a discussion of the syllogism, for example, or the tenure situation at Whitman College, then the written

agreement would have been *violated*, and the reader would feel somewhat *betrayed*. No doubt the reading process would be *terminated*, and perhaps *Written Communication* would be contacted for *breach of contract* of sorts. That Hashimoto honors his *contract* is essential to the success of his discourse.

But what is the relationship between the contract and the traditional problem-solution approach to composition pedagogy? Have I simply replaced—or confused—an old term with a new one? Essentially, the problem-solution structure is simply one of many ways to construct a contract. A writer could contract to solve a problem, but he or she could also promise to discuss a procedure, argue in favor of a proposition, tell a story, or present two sides of a controversy. In effect, the problem-solution structure is a subset of the overall contract concept. A global term, *contract* integrates much of the vocabulary we have developed to discuss the ways essays begin.

Because legal contracts are precise, weighty documents that set in motion legal relationships and commitments, they have great importance in our society. Individuals and corporations write them when they desire protection, and they think twice before signing them. Likewise, the notion of contract in writing pedagogy helps students remember to emphasize that what they are doing is significant, that their reader should feel the need to agree to read this particular piece of prose. The word *urgency* is rather dramatic, but nonetheless I like to invoke it when discussing contracts, challenging students to establish a clear sense of rhetorical "exigency." Again, it is not a matter of hooking or snaring readers; "significant" and "urgent" are very different from "catchy." The point is to convince one's potential readership that the topic or question at hand is worthy of their further attention.

In his own contract, for example, Hashimoto lets his reader (a teacher/scholar of writing) know that previous approaches to teaching introductions are ineffective because they are "difficult to follow and misleading to students." These are serious charges indeed. Since I am a member of his implied audience, Hashimoto's challenge may relate directly to the way I approach introductions in the classroom. For these good reasons, I'd best read on. If student writers are trained to think

in terms of such contracts, then they are more likely to make a serious effort to engage the reader in something of consequence, something that is in some sense urgent or vital. If we continue to speak of routine, attention-getting introductions, though, we encourage student writers to retreat into formulae that merely entice—but do not truly commit—readers to continue.

The pedagogical efficacy of the concept of contract extends beyond the opening paragraphs of an essay. When fashioning conclusions, students should revisit their contracts carefully. Have their compositions covered the agreed-upon territory? Did they truly focus upon the problems, issues, or topics that they promised to address? Is the connection between the opening agreement and the concluding message or position comprehensible? Viable? Appropriate? Convincing? If they seem to have moved in a direction somewhat different from that indicated in the contract, is the change justified, and are there adequate clues to help the audience follow the shift? By comparing acts of closure with initial contractual obligations, students can test the coherence of their discourse.

Hashimoto's conclusion demonstrates how one compares closure with contract:

I am, of course, not saying that all teachers of composition consciously try to lead students to view all writing as attention-getting. Nor am I saying that teachers do not try to help their students to cope with information, facts, and ideas. Yet if the writers of the most popular textbooks in the field espouse such strange wisdom, I suspect that across the country, large numbers of students—vast herds of them—are learning to treat their readers like passive pigeons who act predictably, think alike, and respond uncontrollably given the proper behavioral cues. They are learning to apply stimulus to content, to judge writing on zap, zing, and zest. And although they are learning all this, they are also learning to view writing as a somewhat anti-intellectual endeavor that clever practitioners use to make ideas taste better than they should. (130)

By directly readdressing the deficient approach of "the writers of the most popular textbooks in the field," Hashimoto honors the explicit subject of his contract. Although he has become more precise here about the problems inherent in teaching the attention-getting opener, his contract set forth the groundwork for this increased level of specificity. Our author delves more into *prolepsis* (anticipatory refutation of the opposition's argument) and humor in his closing statement than in his contract, but these differences—for those who have actually read the article and experienced its persona—should not surprise or confuse. Clearly, the link between Hashimoto's contract and conclusion is strong, and the strength of the connection bodes well for the coherence of the essay.

Do the formal characteristics of a specialist's scholarly article relate to the kind of essays we desire from our students? Clearly, we do not require first-year college students to set forth arguments with Hashimoto's sophistication, yet they, too, are required to advance theses and argue for positions. We expect them to write with a sensitivity toward audience, and thus they should be able to understand how contracts serve writers by establishing groundwork and setting readers' expectations in motion. Hashimoto's contract, therefore, exemplifies principles of writing that effectively translate to the work of the student writer. The mistake is not in encouraging students to stretch toward professional standards of writing, but in assuming that student prose is categorically different from expert varieties, thus viewing it as a separate—hence inferior—genre. Such treatment encourages complacent, unimaginative writing and quickly relegates the student essay to the scrap heap of academic exercises.

Will introducing legal imagery into composition pedagogy actually alienate—rather than enlighten—our student writers? If students have trouble trusting lawyers or understanding legal prose—which they may view as overly litigious, obtuse, and self-serving—then why should they be encouraged to think like lawyers and conceive of writing as they do? These are valid concerns, yet specific abuses of the legal system must not negate its power as a body of theories and principles. If we focus on the positive, clarifying concepts of legal obligation, expectation, demonstration, and proof, then they can make the

language of the law work for, rather than against, us. Whether we study Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Cicero's *De oratore*, Thomas Wilson's *Arte of Rhetorique*, or Chaim Perelman's *The New Rhetoric*, the relationship between legal argumentation and other genres of public discourse (both oral and written) is rich and fruitful. As writing instructors, we should take full advantage of this ancient connection. And if we are able to help rejuvenate law's tarnished reputation in the process, so much the better.

Approaching introductory gestures as contracts, authors and readers become parties in a lawful activity involving tangible others; they have mutual and complementary obligations, expectations, and rights. Student writers are encouraged to think about what they owe the reader, and about what kind of initial agreement must be established in order for the discourse to continue. As student readers critique their peers' work, they come to expect that certain obligations will be met in exchange for agreeing to engage a given text. The test of an effective introduction or contract becomes not "Was I cleverly hooked?" but "Was I properly prepared or set up for what follows?" We move from the image of trickery or gamesmanship to the image of interpersonal responsibility, an image that more closely approximates effective communication.

From the realm of interpersonal responsibility and connection, it is but a small step to a larger and even more important context, the "interpretative community" (see Fish) or "discourse community" (see Bizzell, "Foundationalism"; Harris; Elbow, and Clark). Legal contracts, although often drawn in terms of the rights and privileges of a few specifically named individuals, are always understood within a larger social context that includes laws, values, standards, customs, traditions, and norms. In the United States, for example, a typical marriage contract is executed between two individuals, yet fits into a complex network of social, religious, local, state, and national laws and standards.

Hashimoto's contract, for example, reflects a large social context. The scholarly community in which articles for *Written Communication* are produced demands that certain kinds of evidence and documentation be present from the outset. Some premises about scholarship and human nature are accepted

as givens, yet others must be explicitly demonstrated. Thus, Hashimoto carefully quotes from the textbooks with which he disagrees, and he documents his sources with approved stylistic guidelines of the American Psychological Association. Members of *Written Communication's* discourse community require this approach to evidence, and thus this expectation is dutifully met. Although he does not approve of the teaching techniques of the writers he quotes, he maintains a level of decorum and politeness that is appropriate for this genre of argumentation. The article contains some engaging academic humor, yet Hashimoto is careful to contract for serious academic discourse before indulging himself in occasional levity. He does not hook his readers, but he does provide instant indication that he belongs in their community.

Similarly, writing students should know that while composing a paper for members of their class—or, perhaps, more cynically, simply for their instructor—they are also writing within the context of larger discourse communities: an academic department or discipline (most likely English) situated within an institution of higher education that fits into a network of such institutions. Their readers, therefore, expect that certain standards of personalization, intellectual integrity, originality, evidence and proof, documentation, decorum, spelling, punctuation, sentence structure, clarity, and prose style will be met from the outset. Such expectations indeed change from community to community, but they are always present in some form or another. Plainly put, if a writer's contract does not present the reader—who is always a member of a larger discourse community—with acceptable expectations of prose, then the reader's engagement with the text may cease. Thus, the principle of contract complements the construct of an interpretative or a discourse community and presents an extremely clear, pragmatic, and concrete way for an instructor to justify teaching what Peter Elbow calls "the stylistic conventions or voices of academic discourse" (153) without appearing autocratic, absolutist, mean-spirited, arbitrary, elitist, or out of touch with other "conventions" and "voices." To use Patricia Bizzell's terms, the notion of contract—because it is based on shared expectations and communal norms and beliefs, not someone's notion of eternal standards—allows the

instructor to adopt a "rhetorical," rather than a "foundational," approach to teaching various versions of "academic literacy" ("Literacy").

Although most students enter college with little understanding of the discourse communities in which they will write, they are well versed in several writing conventions, including the five-paragraph essay. (For horror stories of such formalism, see Fulkerson 412–13.) According to this well-known structural formula, the introductory paragraph serves to catch the audience's interest (à la Hashimoto) and to announce (usually rather bluntly) the central thesis of the essay. At the high-school level, the five-paragraph essay has pedagogical value (see Durst). Furthermore, the option of placing the thesis in the opening paragraph should remain in the college student's strategic repertoire, but it should not be seen as a structural imperative. In many writing contexts, such as when an audience is predisposed to disagree strongly with the thesis or when considerable historical narrative or exposition is required to clarify the background of an issue or problem, it may be best to delay deployment of the thesis until the argument has been developed and the conclusion has been earned. In such cases, the opening of the essay presents the basic topic or issue at hand, but may not volunteer the author's final thoughts on the matter. In some writing situations, even a clear statement of the precise topic or issue treated in the essay may be delayed for a time.

Teaching that the writer has the freedom—and the responsibility—to establish the kind of contract that best fits the unique rhetorical situation or exigency that motivates one to write in the first place helps students to experience a very sophisticated and powerful kind of flexibility. In fact, the key notion of *kairos* can only be understood when rigid formulae such as the five-paragraph essay and its attendant introductory paragraph are replaced by general concepts such as the contract, concepts that allow for a great variety of opening shapes and forms. The contractual perspective to introductions forsakes mere formula as it opens up a great range of possibilities for the beginning paragraphs of essays: "direct" or "indirect" contracts, "general" or "specific" contracts, "explicit" or "implicit" contracts, "thesis-oriented" or "issue/problem-

oriented" contracts, "question" or "answer" contracts, "simple" or "complex" contracts, "concise" or "expansive" contracts, and "true" or "ostensible" (yet intentionally violated) contracts.

Intentionally violated contracts? Although a broken agreement between the author and the reader is often a fatal compositional flaw, in certain rhetorical situations such violations may be strategically appropriate. The notion of contractual violation helps students comprehend the enduring rhetorical power of a text such as *A Modest Proposal*, in which Jonathan Swift deliberately undermines his contract for the purpose of exposing destructive modes of Enlightenment thought. Swift establishes a persona and an approach to problem solving in the early goings of the piece that are soon obliterated with irony. Prepared – obligated – to head in a given direction, to follow Swift's modest proposer as he sets forth a reasonable solution to Ireland's dilemma, readers are wrenched in another. To reroute themselves properly, in fact, they must return to the first line and begin the entire reading process anew. In the case of this text, the dishonored contract is not merely a way of easing through a sensitive social and political situation, but of forcing readers to reevaluate their beliefs about the act of reading, as well as their positions on the Irish question. The notion of contract is well suited for such pedagogical discussions of violations, of internal inconsistencies in prose, whether they be intentional or unintentional.

One is tempted to throw out the tired term *introduction* altogether. To me, it conjures up little but the empty words uttered *before* the main event begins, the formulaic, prefatory sentences that audiences inevitably whisper or daydream through—or skip over altogether—as they anticipate the real discourse that lies ahead. Even the word "opening," which seems less formulaic than introduction, undervalues the importance of the activity itself. One opens a box to get to its contents, but the process one uses to do so is not essential. Opening suggests, as does introduction, a preliminary activity. Contract, on the other hand, connotes connection, commitment, and importance, even urgency. When we present contracts, people pay attention, because something more than warming up or crowd pleasing is at stake. Contracts are no doubt forms,

but they have a life, a spirit, a strategic power that goes beyond formalism.

As mentioned above, Hashimoto concludes his critique of the attention-getting opener by urging fellow teachers not to train their students to "treat their readers like passive pigeons who act predictably, think alike, and respond uncontrollably given the proper behavioral cues." By emphasizing the legal notion of contract, this response to his argument has suggested one way out of the quagmire he aptly describes. One must remember, as Scarcella suggests, that the ways writers orient readers "probably vary from language to language" (683). Contract, no doubt, carries connotations that are not universally useful or clear across cultures. For English-speaking students, though, the concept of contract can clarify how a writer establishes a relationship with a specific audience located within a larger discourse community. The importance or urgency of the topic is clarified, reliance on formulae is reduced, and the special needs of the rhetorical situation are emphasized. The subsidiary concept of contractual violation illuminates unintentional and intentional textual inconsistencies. Thus, the term could help students become both better writers and readers. If we adopt the notion of contract as a principal strategy for teaching introductions, we can encourage students to stop looking beyond the first few paragraphs of texts for their true beginnings.

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