A Frontloaded Literacy: Reading in a Time of New Media

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Abstract

This speculative article considers whether an increasing loss of prose complexity in written texts in the present age might point to readers' increased dependence upon extratextual or prior ideation, generated in part by vivid new media, to determine meaning. In considering what sort of literacy these new media might birth, ancillary questions are posed as well; namely, whether standing mental objects as compelling and involved as any before can allow for real fidelity of thought to actual objects or situations; and whether unequal distribution of means for fabricating and disseminating such mental objects—songs, images, logos, de facto paradigms or templates of all kinds—might afford already powerful parties an undue influence over the interior lives of their fellow human beings.

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requirement for Dr. Richard Speaker's Psychology of Reading class at the University

of New Orleans.

"CAT!"—"HAT!"—"FOOD!"—"SWEETIE!"

—Wyndham Lewis, "The Dumb Ox: A Study of Ernest Hemingway" (1934)

As he smoked…he noticed a grasshopper….He realised that the fire must

have come the year before but the grasshoppers were all black now. He

wondered how long they would stay that way.

—Ernest Hemingway, *"Big Two-Hearted river" (1925)*

Lotta 'Splainin'

The present Information Age could as revealingly be called the Frontloaded Age, with

backstory or "shared knowledge" playing an ever larger part in informational commerce to

compensate for perceived want of bandwidth. (The term "bandwidth," borrowed from signal

processing and its meaning broadened for use in computer science and networking, might be

further extended to the areas of interpersonal speech and written expression to denote the

practicality—given time-constraints, forbearance of one's audience, etc.—of including in a given

message the information the sender would *like* to impart.) We might think of the many

digressions a schoolboy includes in explaining to his mother a disparaging note from his teacher.

There is a limit to how much backstory she is liable to allow before cutting him off and moving

the matter to its (probably punitive) conclusion. Ideally for our schoolboy, any mitigating

information (Ms. Crabtree's nearsightedness, evidences of her imminent senescence, Susie's

uninvited disruption of his rule-abiding quietude, etc.) would all have been sewn in his mother's

mind ahead of time; so that by the time Mrs. Jones reads the note, its import has already been

more or less determined for her—that is, *pre*determined—and in a manner favorable to our

young hero. Johnnie and his mother's interaction might then be quite concise, and his otherwise

quite involved account substantially less intricate.

Just so does the political messenger of our day prop his bicycle against sudden whole

buildings of supposition.

Nicholas Negroponte illustrates the point more starkly yet by an anecdote in his *Being*

Digital (1995), relating how he might telegraph to his wife a considerable freight of meaning

with a single wink. Suppose that the two, sitting with other guests at a dinner party, are privy to a

rather involved backstory concerning a man who happens to be under discussion by the other

guests. The "data-bit" of the husband's wink thus causes this background knowledge, unknown

to the others, to unfold anew in his wife's head, and Mrs. Negroponte smiles knowingly. "…I

fire a certain bit through the ether," he writes, "and it expands in her head, triggering much more

information."

This one-bit-for-100,000 interaction is analogous, observes Negroponte, to data

compression techniques quite commonplace in this digital age. "We are likely to see more and

more such techniques," he adds, "when we trade bandwidth against shared knowledge."

The See Saw of Literacy

Writes Frank Smith in *Understanding Reading* (1994), "…[T]here is a reciprocal

relationship between [visual and nonvisual information]….The more nonvisual information a

reader has, the less visual information the reader needs. The less nonvisual information that is

available from behind the eyes, the more visual information is required." Writes Frank Smith in

Understanding Reading (1994), "…[T]here is a reciprocal relationship between [visual and

nonvisual information]. Within certain limits, one can be traded off for the other. The more

nonvisual information a reader has, the less visual information the reader needs. The less

nonvisual information that is available from behind the eyes, the more visual information is

required." Perhaps it would not be unreasonable to talk about this relationship as it characterizes

the literacies of whole peoples or societies; so that we could imagine their occupying a place on a

spectrum according to what proportion of meaning is derived during acts of reading from prior

information. If we can (taking some license) consider the spectrum of writing systems, from

logographic through hieroglyphic to alphabetic, as a progression from nonvisual to visual

predominance—that is, a movement toward more and more determination of meaning by the

information on the page and, accordingly, less by the reader from his own stock of sensory

impressions or experiences—then perhaps the last hundred years may be considered a sort of

reversal of that trend, albeit (it may turn out) perhaps a relatively small and brief one, with less

information being supplied by the page, and more and more of it by the reader's prior

experience.

A reader of a logographic text might require little more than an understanding that the

images in the written text refer to the things of which they are likenesses. Even knowledge of

the writer's tongue would be no prerequisite to such "reading": "One doesn't have to know the

spoken language in order to decipher it," write Keith Rayner et al (2011). "As long as one knows

what the symbols mean, one can decode the written language." A circle with some lines

radiating from it would be sufficient to conjure for the reader his own word for "sun," as well as

his or her remembered experiences of the sun.

The import of a message, however, may be determined for the reader by the text to a far

greater degree of specificity when the terms employed have been selected from a vocabulary of

hundreds of thousands of words. A logography of the past, necessarily bounded by such practical

considerations as ease and speed of depiction, differentiability among symbols, and so on

(Rayner, 2012), could hardly compare with an alphabetic system of writing for the number of

human utterances it can convey. In fact an alphabetic system's expressive potential must almost

infinitely exceed the existing vocabulary of any language that it might serve as a vehicle.

There is surely a general principle to be deduced from this (I am sure that it has been,

likely in several disciplines), that the smaller and more limited in scope the informational load of

symbols, the greater the number, clarity, and complexity of messages they can be used to

convey. (Think here of movable type as against whole-page woodblock prints.[1]) In other words,

the more "fidelity" the system is capable of. We could think of bits of paper used in a mosaic as

offering a visuotactile analogy. Out of tiny pieces of construction paper one could, given the

requisite artistic talent, compose a mosaic that partook of impressive shadow, depth and, all in

all, realism. The bigger and more variegated the scraps of paper one used, however, the more the

project would lose in fidelity to whatever it was supposed to be a picture of: the *shaggier* it

would become. I would suggest that such bits of paper could serve as analogs for informational

chunks of all kinds.

Reading Deep and Shallow

By all accounts, the reading of some texts is faster and less taxing for the reader than that

of others. Light fiction and newspaper articles "can be read relatively quickly, in poor light,

despite small type and poor quality printing….because of what we know already; we have a

minimal need for visual information" (Smith). Of course, we do have to know things in order to

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[1] The word "stereotype," it is interesting to note, now used to label fixed and often "low-fidelity" thinking, has its derivation in the name for a kind of metal-plate likeness of composed type. Unlike the movable-type elements of the model it was taken from, the stereotype necessarily admitted of few meaningful combinations with other print elements and did not allow for mistakes to be corrected.

read any kind of text. Even when reading a difficult text completely outside our purview, we

draw parallels to the (for us) strange, new ideas from among things that we do happen to know

about, and so proceed through analogy. We might say that in doing reading of this kind we are

pulling together many small bits of paper, many discrete bits of information; whereas in reading

light fiction, the bits are already aggregated in fair-sized chunks for us. We know that the

character's house will likely contain more than one room, and that one of them is liable to be a

kitchen, and that the kitchen will probably have a tiled floor rather than a carpeted one. Likewise,

we know roughly how *we* would respond to certain events, whether with anger or delight or

embarrassment.

American writer Robert Olen Butler, winner of the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, spells

out the difference between popular and literary fiction with reference to the kinds of on-the-page

and reader-brought information discussed above. To the extent that it can be called successful,

he says, literary fiction determines for its audience the character of the reading experience,

offering truly vicarious experience (which may or may not be reminiscent of previous

experiences of the reader). Popular fiction, on the other hand, relies upon what Butler

characterizes as "abstract, summarizing, generalizing, and analytic language [that] induce[s] the

reader to fill in the blanks and thereby distances her from the work and the characters"; the

literary equivalent of a pair of square braces that invites the reader to insert his or her own prior

experience.

In other words, literary fiction, understood in this fashion, aggregates for the reader

"fine" bits of information in fresh and unexpected ways that resonate convincingly with his own

experience, or that approximate what he imagines would be his experience in a given set of

unfamiliar circumstances; while boilerplate fiction—generally in long-familiar linguistic

formulations—gives the reader only his own already extant aggregates of empirical data.[2] If it does even that much: to say that a character "felt terrible," after all, is hardly to do more than suggest that the reader call up for himself his own gross impressions of malaise. So higher forms of writing, according to this model, draw from much deeper, as it were, pulling together smaller bits of information and rendering a more faithful picture of whatever they choose to represent; and the reader for his part experiences this as a more challenging reading task that, if he is successful, rewards him with a deeper satisfaction, comparable perhaps to that which we take in being confronted by the new and unexpected.

The Prose of Benjamin Button

Probably most literate people feel intuitively that writing in the present era is shrinking. Not that there is less of it: the number of new books published each year in the U.S. grew by something like 325% between 2002 and 2009 (Bowker Report, April 14, 2010), and this was in addition to the new worldwide venues of blogs, websites, and email (126 million blogs, 234 million websites, and 90 trillion messages respectively, by 2009) (Pingdom). Yet is it not our general sense that prose has grown less complex, less nuanced, than that of our forebears? If we can consider the spectrum of writing systems as a progression from nonvisual to visual predominance—that is, a movement toward ever greater determination of meaning by on-the-

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[2] In rather the same vein, American novelist John Gardner counsels would-be writers to avoid absorbing and reusing the "molds and formulas of TV," which are essentially "false to life" (*On becoming a novelist*, 1999). Such derivative work, says Gardner, "lacks something we expect of good writing: the writer seeing with his own eyes." This is presumably as opposed to what Stephen Nachmanovitch calls "the most common form of improvisation…ordinary speech. As we talk and listen, we are drawing on a set of building blocks (vocabulary) and rules for combining them (grammar)….But the sentences we make with them may never have been said before and may never be said again" (*Free play*, 1991, pg 17). Here, surely, is an instance of the principle proposed above, of smaller-load symbols allowing for more highly-nuanced, faithful renderings of reality than larger; or, in this case, of new arrangements of words making possible a nicer sensitivity and responsiveness to the infinite variability of things than could most any prior configuration of words. "It is by *combining* words in multiple ways," writes David Chandler in his popular *Semiotics for Beginners*, "that we can seek to render the particularity of experience."

page information and, accordingly, less by the reader from his own stock of impressions or

experiences—then perhaps the last hundred years may be considered a sort of small reversal of

that trend, with relatively less information being supplied by the page, and more and more of it

by the reader's prior experience.

Hemingway, perhaps the most widely emulated American stylist of the past century,

made signature use of short words in simple sentences:

> He stepped into the stream. It was a shock. His trousers clung tight to his legs. His shoes
>
> felt the gravel. The water was a rising cold shock….Rushing, the current sucked against
>
> his legs. Where he stepped in the water was over his knees. He waded with the current.
>
> The gravel slid under his shoes. He looked down at the swirl of water below each leg
>
> and tipped up the bottle to get a grasshopper (1925).

A far cry, certainly, from the periodic sentences and Latinate vocabulary favored by the likes of

Poe, Melville, and Henry James in the previous century. Writing in 1934,Wyndham Lewis

suggested that Hemingway's prodigious influence had been due not only to his inarguable

literary talent but, in at least equal measure, to his works' being in especial accord with the spirit

of their time. Indeed, "…the modified *Beach-la-mar* in which he writes," wrote Lewis, "…is a

Volapuk which probably will be ours tomorrow." (Interestingly, he seemed to relate the

probability of this outcome, at least in part, to the wide popularity of American movies. Lewis

saw the cinema as a channel through which the speech of the lower classes was busily overtaking

and supplanting that of the upper. Certainly it might with equal cogency be maintained that the

relative simplicity of language in movies has mostly been due to the fact that visual and other

non-lingual aspects of the medium assume so much of the burden of explication.) In

Hemingway's prose, then, Lewis saw a prefigurement of the future of English:

> … [T]his…marionette [Hemingway's fictive *I*]—peering dully out into the surrounding
>
> universe...—pointing at this and pointing at that—uttering simply "CAT!"—"HAT!"—
>
> "FOOD!"—"SWEETIE!"—is, as a companion, infectious.

If Lewis's intuition was right, we should see signs elsewhere in the culture of whatever need or

proclivity was answered by the characteristic features of Hemingway's work.

Assuming that it is among youth we see in germ what, as to our culture, most probably

lies in the offing, we might consider the case of Nancy Drew. Beth Walker, in a doctoral thesis

on the American teen detective series, describes the late 1950s revision of the bestselling Nancy

Drew mystery novels as resulting not only in the elimination of outdated language and

stereotypes, but in "choppy…prose," with "entire passage[s]…built from stock phrases" and

marked overall by a "simplistic style…built upon brief scenes, short sentences, and clichéd

action and description." In shortening the books from twenty-five chapters to twenty, "[k]ey

action scenes became shorter. Long descriptive passages and dialogue exchanges were shortened

or cut altogether."

As an index of prose complexity, I analyzed the first seventy-five sentences of the 1930

and 1960 editions of *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories: The Bungalow Mystery* for average number of

words per sentence (WPS) and average number of syllables per word (SPW). Congruent with

Walker's observations, WPS dropped by 15.9% and SPW by 11.8% from the original novel to

the revised version.

The Bungalow Mystery, 1930 edition   *The Bungalow Mystery*, 1960 edition

Sentence	Words	Syllables	Dialogue/No Dialogue	Sentence	Words	Syllables	Dialogue/No Dialogue
1.	8	8	D	1.	28	33	D
2.	20	23	D	2.	14	17	N
3.	28	35	N	3.	16	22	N
4.	28	43	N	4.	25	34	N
5.	32	55	N	5.	10	13	N
6.	20	26	N	6.	21	24	D
7.	11	14	D	7.	15	20	N
8.	8	9	D	8.	8	11	D
9.	5	10	D	9.	4	7	D
10.	4	6	D	10.	5	6	N
11.	9	12	D	11.	15	25	N
12.	11	12	D	12.	15	22	N
13.	15	18	D	13.	14	22	D
14.	15	21	N	14.	22	29	N
15.	15	19	N	15.	12	16	D
16.	11	16	N	16.	4	6	D
17.	23	31	N	17.	11	12	D
18.	5	8	N	18.	6	9	N
19.	9	12	D	19.	10	14	N
20.	14	15	D	20.	17	26	N
21.	7	9	N	21.	16	21	N
22.	26	29	N	22.	5	7	D
23.	16	24	N	23.	8	11	N
24.	16	23	N	24.	18	20	N
25.	11	15	D	25.	17	33	N
26.	10	11	D	26.	6	9	N
27.	6	9	D	27.	27	33	N
28.	8	12	D	28.	15	19	D
29.	6	7	D	29.	6	6	D
30.	9	9	D	30.	8	11	D
31.	13	21	N	31.	8	13	N
32.	23	31	N	32.	9	13	N
33.	22	33	N	33.	15	20	N
34.	26	38	N	34.	10	14	N
35.	17	28	N	35.	13	17	N
36.	6	11	D	36.	9	12	N
37.	9	10	D	37.	13	22	D

38.	6	7	D		38.	4	5	N
39.	13	19	N		39.	12	20	N
40.	16	18	N		40.	16	21	N
41.	12	17	N		41.	12	13	N
42.	19	39	N		42.	8	10	N
43.	6	8	D		43.	11	16	N
44.	5	5	D		44.	6	6	D
45.	15	23	N		45.	4	4	D
46.	9	11	N		46.	11	12	D
47.	16	21	N		47.	5	8	N
48.	18	23	D		48.	10	13	N
49.	7	7	D		49.	17	20	N
50.	22	32	N		50.	5	9	N
51.	26	32	N		51.	5	7	D
52.	39	50	N		52.	9	9	D
53.	16	25	N		53.	13	16	N
54.	9	14	D		54.	10	13	N
55.	7	7	D		55.	10	17	N
56.	8	9	D		56.	21	25	D
57.	15	18	N		57.	11	15	N
58.	33	43	N		58.	15	19	N
59.	10	13	D		59.	10	12	D
60.	33	43	N		60.	7	7	D
61.	9	17	N		61.	7	8	D
62.	13	18	N		62.	11	13	N
63.	7	8	N		63.	19	26	N
64.	6	10	N		64.	14	19	N
65.	4	8	D		65.	13	24	N
66.	24	29	N		66.	6	6	N
67.	5	5	N		67.	5	6	N
68.	4	7	D		68.	5	7	N
69.	7	8	N		69.	5	5	N
70.	7	11	N		70.	7	10	D
71.	8	10	N		71.	5	6	D
72.	8	10	N		72.	13	18	N
73.	10	13	N		73.	12	14	N
74.	9	12	N		74.	4	5	N
75.	11	12	N		75.	6	7	N
TOTALS	998	1375	30/45		TOTALS	839	1020	24/51

Average words per sentence: 13.306   Average words per sentence: 11.187
Average syllables per word: 1.378   Average syllables per word: 1.216

Flesch Reading Ease: 76.65061   Flesch Reading Ease: 92.606595

While the two books open with substantially the same events, the 1960 edition would

indeed seem to represent a net loss in specificity. The thunderclap in the original version makes

the girls "cower involuntarily" (p. 3), while the same thunder in the revamp makes them "jump"

(p. 2). Whereas in the 1930 version Helen "triumphantly [brings] out a mass of sticky yellow

garments" (of which Nancy's happens, memorably, to be "several sizes too large for her"), in the

new, Helen simply "[finds] two plastic coats" which the girls then get into. For that matter, the

"unseasonably torrid day [in] early summer" upon which the first book opens—the girls have

just been "cruis[ing] aimlessly about for several hours, enjoying the lake scenery and,

particularly, a cool, refreshing breeze"—becomes an afternoon on any day, with no sketched-in

recent past, in virtually any season. That Nancy's quaint and eye-catching southwester [rain

bonnet] in the 1930 version has disappeared entirely from the new telling we might be tempted to

ascribe simply to the relative unfamiliarity of the term—if not for the fact of the girls' half-tank

of *gasoline* (specific *and* familiar) having been changed to a half-tank of *fuel* (less specific,

slightly less familiar).

The single respect in which the new *Bungalow Mystery* might be said to surpass the old

for specificity of detail is in its description of the heroine (an eighteen-year-old girl, "blue-eyed,

with reddish-gold glints in her blond hair") and her sidekick ("dark-haired and petite"), which is

given on the very first page. (The original does mention—three pages in, and then only in

passing—that it is "over her curly, golden bob" that Nancy dons the aforementioned

southwester.) It is as though, special care having been taken to establish for the reader a figure

through whom to interface with the story—what we might these days call an avatar—the book

now in large part leaves it to the reader to supply from her own imaginative resources the fictive world's reifying sensory details.

Walker reasonably speculates that the revisions, undertaken without fanfare, were meant not only to cut the publishers' overhead but also to add elementary-aged readers to the series' existing middle school audience. Of course, it then follows that the publisher believed it could hold a sizable share of its teenaged readership with books markedly reduced in stylistic complexity.

Lewis called the voice of Hemingway—and, by extension, his epigones—an "infantile, dull-witted, dreamy stutter." The more critical of those qualifiers I will pass over; it is that word "dreamy" I find interesting. *What* dreams leave those "big lustreless ruminatory orbs" of theirs unfocused? What phantoms *are* they that arrest the modern *I*?

Reading Across the Five Senses

What I am proposing is that the current direction of literacy is toward a greater determination of readers' understanding of texts by prior mental states. If we seem to be seeing a profusion of less complex, less nuanced, less sophisticated texts; perhaps we might consider the possibility that our natural drive to find and share meaning has not really been diminished, but that the changes we are seeing in the texts of our day may merely reflect a notable movement of modern literacy's center of gravity toward the non-visual, "not-on-the-page" side of Smith's complementary relationship.

Perhaps these developments have their provenance in a general recognition of the power of alternate media in our culture, and a partial shifting of the burden of meaning-carrying to these media. (Historical parallel might perhaps be looked for in the wide abandonment of realism in

the visual arts alongside the rise of photography.) According to this model, the payload of

meaning, insofar as it remains present through, and is transferred via, the interaction of

interpreter and artifact, is delivered at levels of information-processing *besides* or *in addition to*

the loading of words from page to brain. The reader may apprehend such meaning partly through

reference to graphic images, videos, sound-memes, or other objects of recollection. Sadoski et al

(1990) write that, exposed to fictive narratives, their reader-subjects not only "formed…visual

and affective images that…elaborated and synthesized portions of [the text], but also constructed

images involving importations from other experiences" which "may be powerful enough to

override [in memory] verbal, literal elements of [the text]" (Sadoski et al, 1990).

I think it worth noting that all of the modern changes in literacy I am addressing date

from times since the rise of cinema. For that matter, the retooling of Nancy Drew closely

followed the decade of television's proliferation in the West. One may imagine that we are living

even still through a sort of cultural interregnum; that the exaggerated genre-consciousness of

post-modernism is but one sign of a still dawning awareness of expressive possibilities, and a

casting-about for new and apter means.[3]

Signs of a general change in our discourse to include extratextual images are all around

us. Who anymore does *not* have screaming, short violin notes brought to mind by encounters

with the terrifying? Who does not find himself making frequent reference to recent memes—

verbal expressions (e.g., "YOLO," "True story," "You mad, bro?" "It's over 9,000!"), sight gags

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[3] A protoexemplar of this intermodal shift may have been "Humpty Dumpty." The rhyme makes no explicit reference to its titular character's status as an egg, so that the reader depends for this datum upon whatever illustration accompanies the text. Worthy of note, perhaps, is that it has been published in at least one place with an illustration of Humpty as a little boy! Could not the common assumption that the rhyme began as a riddle have arisen simply *because* the ovoid nature of the hero is left unspecified in the text, and must be apprehended through reference to something else? (If "Humpty" was indeed originally a riddle, then it intentionally left it to the audience's wits [which is to say its prior knowledge and facility with same] to fill in the blank—which makes it scarcely less interesting.)

(Dramatic Chipmunk, planking, equinox brooms), or voguish topics (flash polls, flash mobs,

Kony 2012)?

Clear evidence of just such a broad shift in literacy can be found in the advent of what

Sekeres (2009) calls the Market Child in branded fiction—a figure in youth literature that may at

the same time appear under such diverse guises as television character, website image, magazine

mascot, and toy action figure. We might expect even less informational content—less detail, less

explication of scene and character—in a book about familiar television character Hannah

Montana, than Nancy Drew's publishers insisted upon in cutting their books by some twenty

percent. And indeed, while a Nancy Drew novel of even the latest generation typically gives

some description of Nancy's character and hair color, a Hannah Montana chapter book makes no

further effort in this direction than quickly to sketch the double-life situation of the heroine that

is at the crux of the series. After all, the look and sound of a character, her expression and tone of

voice when angry or amused, have already been settled for the reader/viewer far more clearly on

television than the novelist could hope to do through words alone. Why slow the narrative down

with needless exposition?

My quick-check of the opening of *Hannah Montana: Truth or Dare* (2007) for average

sentence- and word-length indicates an average SPW roughly comparable to that of 1991's

Nancy Drew Mysteries: Mystery of the Jade Tiger (a 3% increase over the latter), and 15% fewer

words per sentence.

Nancy Drew: The Mystery of the Jade Tiger, 1991

Hannah Montana: Truth or Dare, 2007

Sentence	Words	Syllables	Dialogue/ No Dialogue	Sentence	Words	Syllables	Dialogue/ No Dialogue
1.	9	11	D	1.	21	29	N
2.	15	18	N	2.	16	24	N
3.	14	19	N	3.	6	6	D
4.	16	21	D	4.	9	13	D
5.	4	4	D	5.	13	17	N
6.	3	7	D	6.	12	17	N
7.	14	16	N	7.	7	10	N
8.	5	5	N	8.	15	26	N
9.	8	10	N	9.	5	5	N
10.	12	18	D	10.	10	12	D
11.	7	9	D	11.	3	3	D
12.	7	9	D	12.	2	2	N
13.	2	2	N	13.	4	5	D
14.	19	23	D	14.	4	5	D
15.	10	14	D	15.	1	1	N
16.	6	6	D	16.	9	10	D

17.	20	22	N		17.	3	3	D
18.	10	14	N		18.	1	1	N
19.	8	11	N		19.	2	2	N
20.	12	16	N		20.	3	3	N
21.	16	24	N		21.	3	3	N
22.	7	8	N		22.	11	12	N
23.	10	16	N		23.	1	1	N
24.	10	10	D		24.	14	19	N
25.	8	15	D		25.	10	13	N
26.	9	11	D		26.	12	14	D
27.	8	8	D		27.	2	2	N
28.	11	16	N		28.	11	14	D
29.	13	18	N		29.	6	6	D
30.	17	21	N		30.	17	26	N
31.	9	15	N		31.	6	10	N
32.	12	16	N		32.	14	17	D
33.	6	7	N		33.	7	7	D
34.	10	12	N		34.	5	5	D
35.	14	15	N		35.	16	21	N
36.	2	2	D		36.	6	8	N
37.	5	7	D		37.	14	17	N
38.	3	3	D		38.	5	7	N

39.	21	27	N		39.	7	8	D
40.	7	8	D		40.	15	18	D
41.	4	5	D		41.	9	13	N
42.	7	11	D		42.	10	16	D
43.	5	6	D		43.	10	12	D
44.	15	16	N		44.	4	4	D
45.	8	16	D		45.	6	7	D
46.	13	15	N		46.	1	1	N
47.	15	18	D		47.	10	11	N
48.	13	16	D		48.	8	11	N
49.	8	8	D		49.	5	8	N
50.	8	13	D		50.	12	13	D
51.	3	4	D		51.	3	3	N
52.	7	7	D		52.	5	6	N
53.	7	8	D		53.	8	19	N
54.	17	20	D		54.	6	7	N
55.	11	13	D		55.	22	37	N
56.	8	11	D		56.	16	26	N
57.	10	13	D		57.	12	17	N
58.	20	21	D		58.	7	8	N
59.	7	12	D		59.	12	16	N
60.	12	15	D		60.	4	5	N

61.	7	8	D		61.	8	10	N
62.	10	13	D		62.	4	4	N
63.	11	13	D		63.	3	4	N
64.	9	15	D		64.	14	17	N
65.	10	12	N		65.	5	6	N
66.	13	20	N		66.	4	4	N
67.	12	15	N		67.	3	3	N
68.	12	14	N		68.	5	6	N
69.	13	20	N		69.	25	36	N
70.	14	15	N		70.	19	20	D
71.	8	8	D		71.	4	5	D
72.	9	11	D		72.	3	5	N
73.	2	2	N		73.	6	7	D
74.	5	5	D		74.	19	23	N
75.	8	16	D		75.	7	8	N
TOTALS	740	948	44/31		TOTALS	627	824	24/51

Average words per sentence: 9.867   Average words per sentence: 8.36

Average syllables per word: 1.281   Average syllables per word: 1.314

Flesch Readability Ease: 88.447395   Flesch Readability Ease: 87.1852

The prose style is characterized at once by a breezy vagueness ("From the looks of it [sic], Miley

appeared to be your average eighth-grader"; with no suggestion being made as to what "your

average eighth-grader" might be like) and by a comfortable referentiality toward nontextual

media ("But Miley, mild-mannered junior high school student by day, had a secret"). The word

"awesome" is used three times and the word "awed" once in those first seventy-five sentences.

The words are meant not so much to limn any particularity which the reader is then to apprehend,

as they are to activate prior data or other mental items of the reader. In other words, a greater

than ever share of the task of reading is being accomplished by activation of the reader's prior

experience. Given the power and wide prevalence in today's culture of nontextual referents,

perhaps a continued overall loss of text complexity is to be expected.

Cynthia Lewis et al (Instant messaging, literacies, and social identities, 2005) describe

young people engaged every day in hours of elective communication with multiple partners

through multimodal messages—predominately text, but making use also of photos, videos, and

emoticons. In a manner consistent with the trend I have sought to trace in literature, "the

linguistic elements of texts are becoming less complex," write the authors, citing Kress (2003),

"…while the visual elements are becoming more so, shifting the focus from linguistic features to

elements of design." Lewis's youth have begun to avail themselves of the *non-discursive*

symbolism that Susanne Langer called more complex and subtle than speech, saying it performed

"an office that no language-born thought can replace...[namely] that of conceptualizing the flux

of sensations, and giving us concrete *things"* rather than their mere accidents (Langer, 1954). As

I meant to suggest above through the example of Nancy Drew, might it not be here, in the

practices and predilections of our youth, that we have the clearest auspice of future trends?

Those skeptical as to whether unaided written words, with all their potential for incisive, cogent,

and powerful expression, could be even partially supplanted as a means of expression by

nontextual images, might consider whether they judge by the values of a literacy form already

passing into obsolescence.

None of this is intended to suggest, of course, that the general lessening of prose

complexity I posit here should be expected to progress in a steady and unbroken fashion.

Speculative thinking about the future and direction of literacy should itself admit of sufficient

complexity to allow for the many movements and fashions that impinge upon a living literature.

Prose complexity *will* be reached for, and not uncommonly, as a stylistic choice; whether the

writer means his relatively involved expression as a foil to his themes (think here perhaps of

Dave Eggers as memoirist) or whether an erudite and periodic style is matched with equally

complex subject matter (Thomas Pynchon, David Foster Wallace). I would maintain that these

represent but rips and eddies, as it were, in the general stream of literacy; notwithstanding which

the downstream flow moves, in this age of multisensory media, in the direction of linguistic

simplicity.

At the furthest point yet along the trend I have tried to establish might be the youth

described by D.E. Kirkland et al in "'We real cool': Toward a theory of black masculine

literacies" (2009). To these young men, whose written artifacts are sparse indeed—a scrap of

narrative next to a hand-drawn cartoon, a line scrawled on a tennis shoe—the authors effectively

ascribe a literacy whose "center of gravity" has migrated further than ever toward a position

"behind the eyes." For with but scant reference to conventional written texts, they "operate

within multiple symbolic systems to define themselves and shape what they [see] as 'cool.'"

Their predominant means of purport is commercial brands: their "phat gear" is conferred its

authenticity and power to "say something" in large part by the corporate brands that it bears.

Here we have, in effect, Negroponte's wink institutionalized, with considerable prior information

or backstory activated by a logo or slogan.

Doubtless the most compelling referents today—logos, jingles, memes appealing to any

or all of the senses—tend to be ones purveyed by corporate and government concerns with the

design resources to make them so, combined with media access to disseminate them. Granted,

many private citizens now have unprecedented access to such means; they do not however

typically enjoy such almost unimaginable wealth as collective entities in business and

government have at their disposal.

The Children of Larry Tate

I am now led, in this discussion of likely directions of literacy today, to what seem to me

a couple of alarums. First, probably the preponderance of those informational components of our

discourse that lie "behind our eyeballs," and that are possibly less susceptible to the ministrations

of reason than artifacts would be that were made all of words (see footnote 2 re Sadoski), are

manufactured for us by already powerful concerns: ad agencies, television networks, film

studios, which are owned and controlled by increasingly centralized corporate entities. And if

parties particularly influential in communications of all kinds can ensure wide currency for

preassembled configurations of data favorable to their own interests, would they not? There is

little reason to suppose they would be less self-interested than our schoolboy; or to imagine that,

in a world where public relations and advertising are backed by high-dollar research, they would

not be up to the task. (If the memes I have instanced above—catch-phrases, visual jokes, etc.—

happen to have sprung from the inventiveness of individual citizens, it seems likely that they

occurred to me precisely *by virtue of* their standing apart from the corporate-woven landscape;

the latter having long since become so familiar as to have been taken utterly for granted.) We

cannot but suspect that it is referents deriving in particular from big-budget movies and

commercials, Top-40 lyrics, and slick-covered magazines that furnish our dumbstruck inner

spaces and set for us our (mostly unspoken) parameters of faith and belief.

Father of public relations Edward Bernays, in undertaking an explanation of propaganda,

manages to afford some insight into its inevitability: "There is no means of human

communication which may not also be a means of deliberate propaganda, because propaganda is

simply the establishing of reciprocal understanding [how mutual he makes it sound!] between an

individual and a group" (Bernays, *Propaganda*, Ch 11). Sekeres for her part quotes an interview

with M.T. Anderson, author of the compelling and most apropos novel *Feed* (2002), to great

effect: "No longer can we imagine ourselves exterior to…sales-oriented image complexes—

because these things formed us. Our hopes, our dreams were scripted at least partially by ad

campaigns" (Shoemaker, 2004, p. 101).

That is one concern we probably should have—that so many of the data-aggregates

serving us as mental hooks or scaffolding for further thought were likely forged and propagated

to serve one or another all-but-unheralded agenda. Another is that anything very centralized in

human affairs has pretty dependably been less sensitive and responsive to real-world

circumstance than its counterparts that are more localized in space and time. (One recalls

accounts from the Soviet Union of recurring zipper shortages, and of the secret dumping of

superfluous loads of government-ordered fertilizers into handy rivers.) While they may offer us

ease and convenience of thought, fixed constellations of data as such, particularly the larger they

are, tend in the long run to outlast any fidelity to reality they may have had at their inception, and

so are the very essence not just of poor fiction but of prejudice of all kinds. The sort of

frontloading of information I have discussed here doubtless makes cognition of a sort faster and

easier; but surely it is possible, as Gide had it, to understand too quickly. To meet the world as it

is likely requires as *fine* a data-set as we can manage with.

Implications for Teachers

Given the supposed trend I have thought to adumbrate above (toward greater information

frontloading and consequent diminishment of text complexity), several measures for teachers of

reading and writing would seem to recommend themselves. Some old-school ideas first:

Putting a moratorium on the familiar enjoinment that student writers think of their audience as a

friend or close acquaintance. Authorities on communication tell us that the further removed

ones audience, either geographically or temporally, the more standard and less colloquial must

ones usage be to ensure understanding.[4] Putting this dictum in terms of our trend, the less two

people or groups share in the way of familiar experiences, the more of the informational load in

reading must be carried by the page. The body of vivid experience that may be widely shared in

the computer age may seem to have obviated such effects. The lack of detail endemic in student

writing, however, should convince any teacher that a greater distance from the audience should

be assumed by the writer-in-training. It might be a helpful discipline for students to presume as

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[4] "The wider the spatial setting between sender and receiver is, the smaller the shared context and higher the formality of the text produced will be. The same happens when the time span between sending and receiving is longer…[L]ess will remain of the original context in which the discourse has been produced, while a more explicit, precise and context-independent textual production will be needed" (Elia, A., 2009; citing Heylighen and Dewaele). The writer implicitly makes the very point I have sought to make here, but as it were from the opposite direction: *less* shared knowledge necessitates *more* complex writing.

little commonality with their readers as they are able to imagine. Let each hold up his *own* bike;

or whatever, metaphorically, he rode in on.

Avoiding abstract, summarizing, or generalizing language in narrative. Instead of simply

characterizing emotional effects of story elements, perhaps by reference to familiar images from

TV, film or the Web ("It was really scary"; "He looked like Scream"), students should instead

practice trying to induce the actual emotions in the reader through recreation in text of the

sensual data that give rise to them ("Besides the flash of fangs, his mouth was black as the spaces

where his eyes would have been"). Classmates might be asked to see if they can name the

intended emotion. Students should also be encouraged to be on the lookout for instances of

abstract, summarizing, or generalizing language in other writers.

Making students aware of brands. If we wish our students to use *words* to greater effect, a

proscription against resorting to the allusive power of brands, as well as common verbal

formulations from commercial artifacts (e.g., "new and improved"; "value" or "quality" used as

an adjective) in writing might prove not only helpful, but essential. Students might be asked to be

aware of brand names and commercial clichés in others' writing, and to consider what role they

meant to play.

A couple of "newer-fangled" rules come to mind, too:

Looking for and sharing examples of multimedia "texts," and joining students in trying to

emulate them. It should not need to be said, perhaps, but the fact that a mode or practice is new

does not make it a harbinger of decline! Teachers should stay current with new media, even

recruiting students as mentors when helpful, and should spread and promote the "new literacy"

in its best forms wherever possible.

Encouraging students to be "smart consumers" in literature. Students should be taught to make

cost-benefit comparisons of series and market fiction with traditional one-volume fictional

works. What is gained in convenience and reading ease in the former? What devices are relied

upon to supply background information? What if anything that is featured in traditional fiction is

absent in series fiction, and how does the lack alter the reading experience? Teachers might

consider developing paper instruments to assist students in making such comparisons.

Now and Tomorrow

What lives, changes. Considering the great number and magnitude of changes brought to

bear on human information-sharing technology in the last hundred years, it should come as no

surprise that our literacy has shown itself to be as prone to mutation as any living thing. Even as

we help to work subtle changes by the ways we ourselves practice literacy, both as readers and as

writers; still we may be astonished, looking up, to notice the seemingly whole-cloth alteration to

which these have added up.

I find it striking that some of the West's most popular spiritual teachers of the last fifty

years, from Alan Watts to Ram Dass and Eckhart Tolle, have urged a specifically *non*-

frontloaded approach to life; extolling the virtues of the beginner's mind (*shoshin* in Zen) and

cautioning (to use such terms as I have been using here) against letting our larger data-clumps

stand in for *real* reality. As with Hemingway, it need take nothing away from their intrinsic value

to suggest that their popularity may point up a particular contemporary need or circumstance

which they seem to answer.

If ever we hoped that our linguistic approximations could eventually render us something

interchangeable with reality, now our words and wordy intellects seem duller, vaguer; they make

us dissatisfied. Perhaps these teachers lately arisen point to a state of things soon to come, when

the texts we make and share are truer to the world, more imbued with immediacy, than our words

alone could ever be. Who knows but that the new media may yet give new lease to our literacy

and new light to our understanding of the world around us—*if* we can live with whatever

discomfort is entailed in not understanding too quickly.

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