

Free Introduction to Gopen's Reader Expectation Approach Video Transcript

Hello, I'm George Gopen. I have discovered, over a period of forty-something years now, a whole new way of looking at the English language—a whole new way of understanding how readers read. Readers have to have the correct answers to each of four major questions at the end of reading any one of your sentences if they are to make of that sentence what you intend them to make. Those four questions are:

What's going on here?

Whose story is it?

How does this sentence connect, fore and aft, to its neighbors?

And most importantly:

Which word (or words) in this sentence should I be reading with extra emphasis — because they are the stars of the show?

If, as a reader, you get any one of those wrong, you may well think you've understood the sentence because nothing is "in your way," but you will have come out with something that is not precisely what the writer intended. And that's the ball game in adult writing—not in school writing—in adult writing: Did the reader get delivery of what the writer was trying to send? If the answer to that question is "yes," then the writing was good enough. If it's "no," the writing wasn't good enough, and it does not much matter, along the way, how dazzling or impressive the writing did, or did not, seem to be.

So, how do we control this clarity of communication? It's by coming to understand, as it's taken me so long to do, that this whole reading process depends on expectation.

I've discovered that readers know where, in an English sentence, to expect the arrival of each of those four questions. We all know these things intuitively, as readers. All I want to do is make it conscious in you as writers.

Things happen in a different way than many of your textbooks, or most of your teachers, will have taught you. This will go against much of what you already believe about the language, but it's worth discovering because it's got a forty-year track record of working all around this country, and all around the world.

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Do not expect that this is a long compendium of tips and hints about how to write better: “always avoid this,” “always do this,” “make sure that...” This is to explain to you how the minds of readers work when they confront your prose.

Now, in high school, you were writing only to please your teacher and to avoid getting points taken off for error. That is no longer the purpose of your writing. If you are an adult, you are trying to convey stuff from your head to other people's heads. We call that “communication.”

If you hear what I'm saying, and you make the effort—and it will take effort to incorporate this new way of looking at language into your own writing process—I can just about guarantee that you will succeed in any kind of competition which is based on writing for the rest of your career. It will translate into dollars, success, and recognition. I wish you all the best in this escapade.