

# WRITER-BASED VS. READER-BASED PROSE

## JUST SAY WHAT YOU MEAN—IS THIS ENOUGH?

When you write, just say what you mean. No doubt you have heard this advice many times. But is this good advice? Is writing really this easy? According to Linda Flower's article, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," producing good writing is much more complicated than simply saying what you mean. Flower shows that when writers follow this advice, writing is still an extremely difficult process, and readers can still misinterpret the writer's meaning. Clearly, there is something more to good writing than simply "saying what you mean."

## WRITER-BASED PROSE

Flower's article states that *ineffective writers* often produce "writer-based prose." Writer-based prose has several important characteristics:

1. It is a written expression of the writer's thoughts about a topic. It is written by the writer, for the writer.
2. It is not concerned with the reader's understanding, but rather provides the writer a way of reaching his or her own understanding.
3. It shows the writer's process for thinking and writing about a topic, but does not identify or develop the writer's purpose for writing.
4. It is unclear how a writer's points and ideas relate to one another.
5. It contains language that is "private" to the writer. That is, this language may mean different things to different people ("cool" can mean both cold and good), or may consist of terms that are specific to a small group of people (scientific terminology, terms related to a specific job or club, etc.).

## **READER-BASED PROSE**

Flower's article states that *effective writers* produce "reader-based prose." Here are the characteristics of this kind of prose:

1. The writer has identified and is aware of the reader.
2. The writer always keeps the reader's purpose for reading in mind, and tries to cater to that purpose. (What does the reader hope to get from this paper? What is he or she looking for?)
3. The writer's purpose for writing provides the focus for the paper, and is clearly developed.
4. The writer's ideas/points clearly relate to one another.
5. The writer and the reader share a "common" language. There are no terms that might be misinterpreted, or that the reader cannot understand.

## **IS WRITER-BASED PROSE ALL BAD?**

The answer to this question is a resounding NO. Flower suggests that writer-based prose is natural. All of us—students, teachers, Pulitzer Prize winners—produce writer-based prose at one time or another. The goal is not to get rid of it, but to figure out how to use it to help write reader-based prose. It is important for a writer to work through his or her ideas before writing. Writer-based prose can help a writer discover his or her thoughts and ideas about a topic before attempting to produce a finished product. Writer-based prose can serve as a useful brainstorming activity or rough draft of a paper. Once a writer has written a piece of writer-based prose, he or she can then revise it with the characteristics of reader-based prose in mind.