

## Chapter 3

### From Context to Text

#### Reading as sorting information

In chapters one and two I talked about responsible reading as a process initially of differentiating between the contexts that texts have and the reader's own horizon of expectation. To stress the interactive nature of reading, I illustrated how a reader's point of view modified how texts were read by changing what people read to find out. Finally, to keep that interaction responsible rather than arbitrary or subjective, I stressed that reading must have a communicative component, not only in negotiating meaning between text and readers but also between different readers of the same text.

In this chapter, I illustrate strategies for sorting understanding and articulating a text's messages vis-à-vis a given reader's point of view. These strategies for uncovering what is meaningful in the text cannot claim to exhaust the meaning potential of any given story, essay, or book, whether literary or scientific, secular or spiritual. On the contrary, they implicitly acknowledge the reality of multiple literacies, multiple ways of reading that have, when articulated on the basis of textual patterns, validity for readers with alternative points of view. The literacy of absolute meanings exists only in dictionaries. The literacy of meaningful communication and viable options emerges exclusively with readers who can articulate a text vis-à-vis their contexts.

Finding and articulating meaningful textual messages depends, then, on a reader's ability to determine the topic of a text and identify his or her own context or perspective on that text—what one is reading to find out. Perhaps the answer to that “why am I reading this (book, video, article, web site) may change in the course of reading but, as indicated in chapter 2, readers can only be accountable to their own cognitive processing if they can articulate their reader objectives. What I will do in this chapter is talk about the next level of reading for meaning: identifying a pattern of textual information that

represents one way to understand how that text organizes and weights significant facts and ideas—how the text expresses its message.

More than a reading for rhetorical features alone, this process involves reading textual information in terms of a metalogical framework—categories of meaning identified by Immanuel Kant as the way the human mind arranges data to draw conclusions, to decide what that data means, to know. In other words, the reader must decide whether the text presents its information in contrasts, as cause and effect, through problems and solutions, or in sequences?<sup>1</sup>

As categories on which human understanding rest, these logical patterns are neither radical nor unique to reading. All learning involves sorting or classifying. We quite naturally classify story lines and character types we have seen before. Most readers who sit down in a movie or in front of a TV set could tell a visitor from Mars what they were about to see based on familiarity with previous programs. That is, most of us can predict to some degree the relations between people and events that will characterize a Western or a horror film, a Seinfeld episode or the newest 60 Minutes lineup.

Cognitive psychologists have demonstrated that what we understand and learn from a text depends to a large extent on our ability to predict what is likely to happen in a particular schema or, in the sense of predictable patterns, its genre—the romance, the adventure story, the mystery. These three genres have, in turn, their related variants in many sub-genres. The Western, the fantasy novel, or detective fiction can, for example, be constructed (and reconstructed or read) with logic patterns from all three of these major genre types.

All adventure stories have contrasts between good and bad guys. The heroes are self-reliant, but experience a series of problems for which they must find solutions, getting into scrapes by helping others or failing to adhere to the local norms for behavior. They possess special skills that often lead them to act in ways that can cause other

people to be distrustful or disdainful of and even endangered by them, in a direct cause and effect relation. Western heroes may be too good with guns, fantasy heroes too intuitive, detectives too cerebral or simply too noseey—all character traits that may result in a sequence of subsequent risk taking for others in the story and, occasionally, even themselves.

Depending on the sub-genre, such story features can be infinitely varied in their particulars but remain fundamentally the same slots for different fillers. To exemplify, in the classic Western / fantasy novel / mystery, the hero or heroine demonstrates that responsible use of weapons / magical capabilities / deductive reasoning aligns itself with good character and the defense of a better society (even heroes who fail can still represent the preferable alternative).

Knowing how scenarios work, the larger context of a genre, readers can predict logical patterns of behavior or events that will apply for any story genre, whether fiction or biography. Those patterns will emerge if the reader finds repeated references to characteristics of people in the story or conflicts those characters face. Depending on the reader's horizon, these elements can be mixed in a variety of ways. The reader of the romance (whether in science fiction, a Western, a mystery, an historical novel, or any other contextual guises) might want to compare what representative characters believe with what they say or do. The reader who chooses to look at the same text as an adventure story might find a match between individual conflicts and resolutions of those conflicts more interesting.

The logic of expository or non-fictional writing may focus less often on representative people than on objects, representative events, institutions, or ideas. But whether an editorial, investigative reporting, or a book-length analysis, the thread of the text's argument will need to be arranged in terms of a topic and a comment that compares or looks at cause and effect, problems and solutions, before the reader can present it

effectively. To do otherwise is to present a random collection of facts, too often the characteristic of textbook treatments that strive for objectivity at the expense of message. But as most students know, the most memorable texts are books or segments of books that present distinct points of view .

In describing reading this way, I am stressing a pragmatic, nuts and bolts approach to assessing textual information. To be interesting, texts have to have their own point of view. To read responsibly, readers need to consider how they see that point of view expressed. I stress again how important it is for the reader to distinguish between their claims about the text and the points of view that they can recover. Claims are opinion. Points of view result from analysis. To distinguish between the two: the claim that the Clinton legacy is a mixed bag, while often made, does not, in itself, constitute an argued position for a speaker or writer; only when that claim is supported by a comparison (of strengths and weaknesses or possibly the Clinton legacy with that of another president) or a cause and effect (possibly the problems he faced and how they affected his presidency) can the claim be expanded to argue a point of view, one that addresses the question “why?” by providing some answers. To have a point of view, the speaker or writer must illuminate that view using a consistent pattern of evidence.

Responsibly interactive readers look for ways to recreate such a pattern as a system of logical reasoning—to decide how the text arranges information in ways that speak to that reader. Since reader contexts can rearrange textbased positions on topics, one reader’s logic may be responsible to the text, yet vary from the ones chosen by other readers. To be responsible, the reader’s arrangement of textual information need only be verifiable in major segments of the text and suggest what the reader is trying to find out from that text. My own experience in the classroom and in workshops with teachers has impressed on me that this step represents the most challenging aspect of responsible reading. It involves what specialists call metalinguistic reading strategies. These experts

explain that metalinguistic reasoning takes place when readers step back from textual details and reflect about what global features of a text they will read for and the strategies they as readers will employ to establish what those global features add up to. •

It has been my experience that metalinguistic reasoning poses conundrums for students and colleagues when they are unfamiliar with employing it in the ways suggested in this chapter. Often it proves easier to arrange details and decide on larger structures of a text after having done so. On the other hand, if I have a class of students familiar with the notion that neither the genres nor our expectations about them are infinite, sorting out global features of a text in a known genre becomes relatively easy. After all, human behavior provides a relatively small but stable set of conflict options and behavior types for the stories people invent about themselves. As Freud, Jung, and Campbell pointed out, all the great myths are really just prototypes of the way we are or what we want to believe about ourselves and our world. •

Whether in the guise of innocents, seekers, warriors, or mischief makers, whether heroes or villains, the thousand faces actually have a relatively small number of templates. The potential stories that are told on the lines of those templates are similarly limited. Whether we count fifteen or fifty great plots as the metastructures from which all literature evolves, that number remains infinitesimal compared to the stories generated from them. The nuanced differences lie in a work's contexts and details. To appreciate that work's cultural messages, those contexts and details must be accounted for systematically.

#### Systematic sorting as fundamental cognitive ability

Classifying is a skill learned at an early age. The first and most compelling classification for most learners seems to be that of heroes and villains (sometimes cast as victims and victimizers, saints and sinners). To illustrate with examples familiar to every

American parent or grandparent of small children in the mid 1990s: many grade school boys enthusiastically have embraced and are quite capable of noting and articulating extensive information about the Pokéman creatures precisely because their special abilities and all the features of each ability category are unambiguous, yet relatively complex. Ask most Americans from three to thirteen years of age about the capabilities of these cartoon creatures and a wealth of information often follows.

Unlike antecedents like the Power Rangers, whose capabilities were costume- and color-coded and whose transformations from human to superhuman forms predicated on awareness of evil forces, the Pokémon creatures have elaborate codings according to fifteen separate elements and transformation capabilities based on their “trainer’s” correct assessment of the terrain in which they must fight and the capabilities of the enemy they are suited to vanquish.<sup>2</sup> In Pokéman games, whether on Nintendo, or Game Boy, or in actual contests with other children, players assume the role of the trainer, the knowledgeable and adept “reader” of the Pokéman system. Their success in the ensuing contest depends on the trainer’s choice of the right Pokémon combatant for the particular opponent and battling conditions. Since creatures may possess more than one element and trainers have over 250 species to choose from, the challenge to memory and classification for anyone who plays to win is not insignificant.<sup>3</sup>

As children develop cognitively, they expand their range for collecting and sorting information in positive and negative (most and least desirable) categories to more complex systems. Eight to twelve-year-old boys still collect baseball (as well as Pokéman) cards, all of which contain enormous amounts of statistical information about batting averages, home runs, steals, and the folklore of the game. Amazingly, they remember most of it. Like the adult population that classifies this formidable body of sports trivia, these children are predominantly male. For young girls, although the categories are more likely to be movie stars or dress codes, the features they sort are equally complex, and cross-

gender opportunities are increasing as game manufacturers discover physical and personal characteristics that appeal to girls as well as boys. Thus the Pokémon creatures need not be trained exclusively for battle. In addition to their talents for combat, they want most of all to be someone's friend—a surrogate pet.<sup>4</sup>

That these multiply-coded Pokémon creatures are memorable is not surprising. Classifying is the way we retain information. The brain stores like and unlike information, apparently accessing it according to superordinate cues like best, worst, colors, shapes, and elements—familiar associations of ideas, images, sounds, or smells. In fact, the more associations we can combine, the more likely we are to access that information, to "remember" something—particularly when all those features are subordinate to one overriding, emotionally charged category—good guys, bad guys, winners, losers. When those classification systems are shared with others in actual meeting or through media (both contributing to phenomenal success of Pokémon), then even highly complex systems become learnable and accessible in memory.<sup>5</sup>

Along with the systems of sortable information, media plays a role here as well. The common (but as yet largely unsubstantiated) view is that the use of multimedia will teach us more because it can provide the full range of sensory and cognitive input simultaneously. A Game Boy lets a child know immediately whether they have chosen the right Pokémon to combat a foe. If not simultaneously, then in rapid sequence, multimedia can offer sound, screen image, and print information to apply to a cognitive problem. Presumably that combination produces more successful learning and retention of what is learned than, say, reading a book or listening to a lecture.

Such multimedia feedback in learning tools has become an accepted part of North American education. What is not so evident, however, is what kind of learning these tools will foster. To read a multimedia text meaningfully still involves responsible literacy. Just because students may more readily recognize and recall the information in a multi-

mediated text, doesn't mean they have learned how to reflect about what it is trying to tell them or to monitor their reactions to that message. It is fairly irrelevant if they remember the color of a cartoon character or distinctive transformation capability. In both cases character is memorable, but only for individual features, not for the values or messages implied by those features. If multimedia texts provide only better retention of information, then cognitive efficiency is the main difference between a computer text and one found on a movie screen or in a book.

Only by interactively unlocking at least one of its sorting systems can a reader begin to uncover more than information *per se*. In other words, we may be developing more efficient tools that teach children to register and classify information. But we are not developing tools that teach children how to think about the classifications themselves and what they imply. Without that ability, learning information is imprinting. Children who think of themselves as trainers of Pokémon do so in terms of the Nintendo commercial system, not in terms of the limitations or manipulations designed by that system.<sup>6</sup> They participate in the text rather than reflecting about it. They are recreating it rather than opening it up.

While one way to read, that style of reading empowers only participation, not the independent perspective of people who also understand why they are participating and whose ends besides their own are being served. The first step in undertaking such a reasoning process is to decide what the text is talking about—a seemingly obvious but amazingly little practiced skill. Only after the text speaks on its own terms can the reader speak to it.

#### Establishing text topics and reader point of view about them

Like the templates for characteristics of heroes and the potential number of story plots, the templates for the subject matter of texts are relatively limited. Expert analyses

begin with four possibilities as the main focuses of narratives: people, events, ideas (sometimes epitomized as representative people and places), and institutions.<sup>7</sup> Further, if read in terms of one of these possibilities—as a text about people OR events OR ideas OR institutions—extant research on learning indicates that text will be understood and recalled from that perspective [Anderson, 1978 #278]. These four focuses orient a responsible reader and prepare them to take the next step of identifying their own context or personal perspective on that focus.

The focus the reader selects may well reflect reader context as much or more than the actual topic of the work. Pokémon can be read as a hero narrative (a representative idea) or a marketing strategy (an institutional phenomenon) on the part of WB and the Cartoon Network to differentiate themselves from established programmers like Nickelodeon, ABC, and CBS in the the early 1990s. Once turned into a text, the topic the reader chooses need not be the one the author(s) intended. The choice that emerges for readers will reflect the reader's position and the direction the reader will take in viewing and arranging information from the text. Unless readers take a point of view, they have no conscious focus of attention. Without focus of attention, what registers from a text will be haphazard. The reader is just along for the random ride.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with the random ride *per se*. Escapist literature is built on this principle. We all need to just turn off, relax a bit, and get into a good book just to read or a movie just to watch for pleasure, to get away from it all. Carefully-wrought texts may well direct our wandering attention with punchy introductions and endings (that's what we remember best) or a striking sequence of images and events (we recall episodic structures pretty well). Indications from psycholinguists suggest, however, that we recognize and recall more from a text when we actively attend to its information in a systematic way [e.g., \Kintsch, 1998 #25][Roller, 1985 #280][Rumelhart, 1977 #281][•Schneider, ? #282]. Moreover, reading without focus leaves us at the mercy of our

gut reactions rather than our reflective capabilities. Random reading is not the way we read to develop the ability to sort information and draw reasonable conclusions that other people can follow, even if they don't agree with them.

Focus or point of view is the first step readers have to make to channel information along coherent and hence analyzable segments that key its point of view—to make pieces that fit together or make sense because they seem to have features in common. To take a familiar example from popular culture, one that offers some added literary dimensions over Pokéman, consider the Harry Potter phenomenon. Whether the characters in Joanne Rowling's series are read as psychological *people* (Harry, Ron, and Hermione as lovable, loyal kids with very human foibles), *events* (the evil wizard Voldemort sends in his surrogates to invade the wizarding school, and Harry and friends must find the culprit and unmask him), *representative ideas* (goodness as basic instincts, willingness to break school rules when in hot pursuit, the use of special skills coupled with raw courage), or *institutions* (Hogwarts as educational practice) an overriding principle emerges: stories about wizards coalesce western traditions and contemporary social problems in very consistent ways. Consequently, to write them off as marketing phenomena or escapist adolescent entertainment misses both their popular-cultural significance and their high-culture antecedents—they are built on the same templates as much great literature.<sup>8</sup>

Sorting the young wizard-heroes and -heroines from a “people” (Muggle or non-wizarding) point of view. In reading of the trio of young wizards as “people,” the unique characteristics of the three main figures in the Harry Potter series enable a reader to predict what each is going to do.<sup>9</sup> Harry, who is all heart and courage, is bound to dash off into life-threatening situations. Hermione will first rush to consult books in the library and Ron will follow Harry, even against his better judgment. A visit to Nurse Pomfrey's

magical hospital followed by a Hogwarts' feast, will revive these heroes even after the most life-threatening, stressful adventures. If their features are put on a grid, the psychological focus might yield the following matrix:

<b>Harry, Ron, Hermione / people features</b>	<b>Predictable outcomes</b>
Impetuous, loyal, not easily distracted, courageous (also sentimental, generous, nurturing, possess sense of humor etc.), admire wisdom	Quest for source of villainy gets trio into scrapes and leads to breaking of school rules, fear of drastic punishment
While they enjoy magical aids (wands, an invisibility cloak), ultimately survival depends on arduous practice coupled with quick thinking	Not all students and grown wizards completely trust the trio; their actions are sometimes misconstrued, and their popularity frequently slips
Each member has particular strengths and weaknesses; Harry is an exceptional broomstick flier, but is small of stature, and unable to see well without his glasses – his forehead scar, a remnant of repelling the attack of an evil wizard while an infant, remains a problematic emblem	As long as Harry, Ron, and Hermione work together and with others (notably the Headmaster, Dumbledore), their own weaknesses prove to be no absolute impediment

If the grid is read horizontally, it yields a formula for appealing, humanoid heroes: more individualized, personalized Pokéman figures, as it were, figures one identifies with. As such, Harry Potter and his friends neatly assume a complex of traits that emerge in

Westerns, horror films, and fantasy literature—the misunderstood hero, the mutated alien, the "other" who embodies positive human traits. Whereas the Pokémon figure are tagged largely by externals (colors and mutating attack capabilities), the Harry and his friends also have character and behavior markings that set up their individual stories as well as group scenarios. Along with the main theme (good kids), the young wizards introduce harmonic variations of that theme. They are personalized good guys who are also aliens in the spirit of self-sufficient, homegrown E.T.s. Ron comes from a pureblood, wizarding family; Harry's father was from a wizard family but his mother was not, Hermione has no wizard blood (her parents are dentists), but is the star pupil in their class.

Read in terms of their hereditary claims to wizard status, potential cultural agendas emerge. Who are the real-world people whose backgrounds are most like these inseparable aspiring wizards? Viewed broadly, those of us living in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies. Arguably we, like most of the students at Hogwarts, are attempting to pool our different backgrounds and predilections to make a better world for all participants.<sup>10</sup> As for the real world, the idealism and feckless urge to undertake life-threatening adventures so characteristic of the Hogwarts trio is familiar to most mothers of toddler to teenage children. In general, for heroes young or old, male or female, a sense of self-preservation is counter indicated. Precisely for that reason, in today's self-preserving environment, heroes need to be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism and humor. Wizards fill that bill, as well—as absurdly magical heroes whose magic often goes awry.

Sorting young wizards from an "event" point of view. A second focus on this trio of heroes, the "event" reading, sets up a similarly coherent pattern, but one that differs from a focus on their personal foibles. When readers look for the plot logic focused around the books events, a system of cause and effect emerges. If a threat to society as a

whole (humans and wizards) had not been undertaken by the powerful evil wizard, Voldemort, Harry would not be significant as the only being with the power to resist and injure that wizard. In all the books of the series, it is Voldemort's need to regain his human form and desire to destroy Harry that leads to confrontations with Harry and in friends. While the adventures vary in their component parts, that fundamental event structure remains: situations impinge on Harry and show us desirable ways of coping.

Typical events in Harry Potter books	Characteristic outcomes
Harry inadvertently or under extreme provocation does things that irritate, even enrage his "Muggle" aunt, uncle, and cousin, the Dursleys, his legal guardians with whom he must live when not at Hogwarts	Harry can only emerge from his Cinderella status with the Dursley's through participation in the magical world. Once the basis for the obstacle (its "secret") is understood, it can be overcome.
Harry encounters a life-threatening situation	Adult helpers, sometimes in magical forms related to valued role models (a unicorn <i>qua</i> father, Dumbledore's phoenix, the shadow images of his dead parents and friends), provide assistance and support.
Seemingly insurmountable obstacles are placed in Harry's path and decisions made that often are counter to Harry's instinctual desires or appearances	Once the basis for the obstacle (its "secret") is understood, it can be overcome; choices based on concern for fair play and decency towards others work well.

This glimpse into the series' event structure, while it can be varied and enriched with numerous further examples, casts light on the mass appeal of these adventure stories for adult as well as children's audiences: they are quite literally novels of education or *Bildungsromane* in the German sense.<sup>11</sup> They illustrate how all of one group of people learn to deal with the discrepancies of status when they move from one environment to another and that high status in one situation does not always transfer to another. Readers learn that no obstacles are insurmountable when one keeps faith with one's friends and mentors; each of the books emphasizes that our decisions, not our inclinations or heredity, determine the course of our lives

These educating wizard events, whether in the original or the movie sequels, must follow familiar "story grammars," the plot sequences of folk tales identified by Vladimir Propp and the Russian Formalists as templates for such adversity stories: the hero is challenged by the villain; s/he sets out on a quest; s/he encounters obstacles which s/he surmounts with the aid of one or more helpers; s/he confronts the villain; s/he emerges victorious. The equilibrium in his/her universe is restored (all novels close with Harry's return to the Dursleys). And the reader resolves the situation, paying less attention to character than to plot development.

Sorting wizards as "representative ideas." When read from the perspective of the third focus option, representative ideas, the reader reads yet another way: s/he looks for how values are manifested in the behaviors or events. The exact construction of such a matrix will draw more extensively on the context of the reader than when the reader looks for character features or typical events. In those other options for sorting text data into categories, main figures and events taken from the text apply. In choosing ideas, readers will be influenced by their perspectives. Like the various readers of *The Lion King* or the readers of Brody's *New York Times* column on genetic engineering of foodstuffs,

discussed in the previous chapter, point of view can dictate choice. Readers own ideas will govern selection and put their “spin” on the ideas representative of a text.

In general, however, and regardless of what examples are chosen to illustrate a particular reader horizon, the fact that ethical principles are operative for Harry Potter and his friends should be reflected in the resulting grid. One of the many possibilities, then, might be to consider the educational premises of Hogwarts as manifested by standards for assessing acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors.

Practices of typical figures re education	Values suggested by behaviors
When Dumbledore, the school director, finds Harry engaged in dubious activities, he asks the boy questions rather than providing answers or judgments, he can see through Harry’s invisibility cloak and forgives what some might view as infractions in a good cause	Good teachers guide their students by asking probing questions and helping them identify the significance of their answers; they recognize that overt behaviors may not cover all exigencies, nor do grown-ups ideas about acceptable and unacceptable behavior
Voldemort often discards, injures, and humiliates his followers; he insists on his superiority, is a master of deceit and a sower of dissention; those who follow him imitate these behaviors	Evil starts – and ends – with contempt for others.
The Hogwarts staff frequently catches and penalizes Harry and his friends, sometimes unjustly. Harry and his friends sometimes misjudge members of the staff as well.	Kids will be kids and adults often misread miscreant behavior. Similarly, children can be misled by dissembling adults

Other perspectives a reader might choose to focus on the text's value systems might include behaviors that illustrate what is pleasurable or painful for Harry and friends and whether those criteria change as the children mature. If taken as stories about an orphan, one might look at how the series defines family and ways in which family relationships affect the protagonist's growth and development. Authority structures and legitimization of authority are yet another closely related set of ideas addressed prominently in the series.

Regardless of the perspective used in reading the series for its ideas, returning to the idea of templates argues in another way for the book series' sophistication. Most particularly, a few similarities of the Potter books to other genres are striking.<sup>12</sup> Like the classic detective, these young wizards represent good (the moral principle) but act independently and are often misunderstood or not seen by others for what they do and what they represent. They save people, but consistently in secret (goodness for its own sake), deeds which are known first-hand to only the director of Hogwarts, the powerful good wizard, Dumbledore, or to a handful of friends. Sometimes it is Dumbledore's credibility alone that enables the true facts to surface and truth to triumph.

Indeed, the public domain—the arena of public belief—becomes increasingly problematic by books three and four in the series because, increasingly, different interests inherent in the story material allow different spins on information—a characteristic of many adventure stories or thrillers. In book three, we learn that an arch-traitor is really an upstanding citizen and that the guards (the unreliable dementors) in the wizard prison are predatory and “feed” on allowing prisoners only their most negative thoughts. Instead of the death penalty, dementors may arbitrarily administer a fatal kiss that sucks the soul out of the prisoner's mouth (HP 2000, p. 703). In book four, when the wizard newspaper journalist, Rita Skeeter, reports events, she distorts them by misrepresenting their motives and revealing personal information she obtains in underhanded ways. She styles

Hermione, a pal to her male buddies, as a heartbreaker. Similarly, Harry, whom the reader knows as a courageous, fair-minded kid who helps those in need, emerges under Rita's pen as a neurotic and a potential danger to others and himself. In other words, some styles of journalism serve the dark forces.

Ideas about incarceration and punishment, or responsible journalism may not be the main focus of the series but can nonetheless shed light on the book's cultural values if they prove consistent within a particular volume or across volumes (three more books are in the works after all).<sup>13</sup> Such issues emerge not only from examination of behaviors, however. They also become evident when the institutions represented in a text are analyzed.

Reading wizards with an infrastructure system. In the optional fourth point of view, reader focus is on how good and evil sort out within an institutional context. That is, they look at how infrastructures operate within the world of the text. Instead of *why* things are done (the key ethical principles), reader attention shifts to what organizational practices and goals authorize group interaction. Sorting goals and practices of each group reveals to the reader *how* they get things done—or fail to. The wizards and their enemies, the four school houses, represent not only contrasting behavior and values but also contrasting operational philosophies and implementation approaches.

Its four schools categorize Hogwarts's institutional goals. These goals are identified when new students don the shabby, talking Sorting Hat to hear where they belong. According to the Sorting Hat, Gryffindor, Harry's house, have the brave at heart, while their rival house, Slytherin, attracts those with cunning (a close neighbor of deceit). The hat, which sings in rhymed doggerel as well as talks, sees what is hidden in the candidate's head and announces his or her school house accordingly. Regardless of the house they chose (or is chosen for them), students are only be chastised by losing points

for their house or having to do onerous chores. They are never supposed to be punished physically, nor to be blamed for being a certain type. Due to other oddities of institutional practice, however, Dumbledore’s running of the school is considered unorthodox. He maintains his own course, while striving to interact successfully with less enlightened members of the wizarding world.

In contrast, Voldemort’s leadership exhibits, not unexpectedly, the mirror opposites of Dumbledore’s. He rules by threat and punishment. He excludes all who refuse blind loyalty. His call to action is in service of the group at the expense of others. Human beings or other life forms who do not belong to his group have no intrinsic value. He harangues and intimidates his followers, reacts to questions and comments with hostility, and presents injury to others as valid in a world in which only might makes right. He leads as tyrant and despot. His authority lies in superior wizarding strength, in keeping his followers in ignorance of his larger plans, and in a willingness to take advantage of weakness in any form.

A matrix of institutional features and the values they support might include some of the following:

Practices and values of Hogwarts/Dumbledore	Practices and values of Voldemort
No brutal punishments, no absolute injunctions	Ruthless to his followers, rules by intimidation and punishment
Independent action and decision-making	Demands strict obedience
Respect for others regardless of their weaknesses (i.e. looks for their strengths)	Contemptuous of weakness (i.e. wizards who lack his skills)

What makes these contrasts interesting for adolescents (and their parents) is the way in which institutional management plays out. The humanist structure of Dumbledore's institution is revealed, at least to this point in the series, as superior to that of the tyrant Voldemort, because it prepares its citizens to meet adversity by discovering their strengths and building their communities. In book one, when Harry encounters puzzles he cannot solve, for example, Hermione and Ron prove equal to those particular tasks. Voldemort's secret allies, his "moles" in the wizarding world, are the Death Eaters. Many of Death Eaters who betrayed one another after their leader's initial banishment a decade before the start of book one, give little evidence of subsequently improved solidarity. Whereas Harry and his friends call for help and yell encouragement to one another, the Death Eaters are told to wait for Voldemort's commands and become confused without his leadership. These differences in institutional response pay off for Harry in his confrontations with Voldemort or his henchmen at the close of each book. An institution that doesn't value individual initiative and invest its members with individual decision making powers just can't win.

#### Consciously connecting popular and high culture.

As those four different sortings of text information suggest, just as *The Lion King* is not about lions, the *Harry Potter* series is not about wizards, despite some school board's concerns to the contrary.<sup>14</sup> Harry and Voldemort come through with flying colors, as popular representatives of how good and evil are stereotyped in contemporary society. In consequence, if approached as cultural documents (a particular take on "representative ideas" or institutional management, not as representatives of never-never land), the Hogwarts kids can be read as culturally literate exemplars of the same kinds of templates used in the simpler Pokémon figures.

The enduring popularity of the Potter phenomenon (in anticipated sequels, spin off games, paraphernalia, and a projected movie), however, reflects not only marketing but also a literacy that turns simple templates into complex ones. It also reflects western cultural traditions in ways that convey messages not available from the Pokémon creatures. The Harry Potter characters are not generic forces operating in a cartoon fantasy. They are personalities functioning in a social world that shares many puzzling, frustrating, frightening, and wonderful features of actual human experience as depicted in classical as well as popular texts.

Consider just a few examples of how good and evil templates convey character (Harry Potter aficionados will quickly find more): Voldemort and his fanatic follower, Barty Crouch, are men who kill their fathers, a fact that echoes the problematics of father-son relationships back to Beowulf and Oedipus. Another high-culture parallel emerges in the theme of leadership. Dumbledore, the Hogwarts' leader and father figure is the source of strength because of his mental as well as his physical (magical) prowess. Without his guidance and intervention at key points in the hero's life, Harry would probably not have survived his various trials nor been cognizant of why he was successful. His brave heart alone would lack direction and remain, without ethical leadership, underdeveloped and fallow, or even turn destructive. This is the traditional mentor's role.

With such components from both high and popular culture to characterize their personal specific styles, the Hogwarts youngsters exert charisma over older as well as younger audiences. Whereas the Pokémon figures are memorable only for their three or four characteristics that qualify them to defeat particular opponents in particular landscapes, Harry and friends can generate a more complex variant of these same themes in their emotional as well as their rational responses to situations—their own complex powers and individuality. Their dilemmas reflect a range of literary traditions as well as contemporary social problems. Just as those indicated in *The Lion King* discussion

(chapter two), *Harry Potter*'s analogues come from several high culture traditions that have been commingled with contemporary, popular messages.

Such texts are, however, still designed for easy reading, just as the Pokémon creatures are organized by colors and fighting capacities for young "readers." As such, they are memorable stories. Not surprisingly, then, the fifth through seventh books in the Harry Potter series seem justified in anticipating ever-larger audiences whereas the Pokémon's popularity has waned.

Memorability aside, when readers sort out meaning systems, as I suggest here, the four focuses—viewing texts as people, events, ideas, or institutions—do more than help the brain record what *Harry Potter* is all about. While researchers know that focus of attention is a useful study device (it increases recall significantly), establishing a focus makes a more important contribution: it gives the reader a textual basis from which to reflect.

Thus, in every focus presented above, the reader sorted out complex information to set up a horizon of expectation. This process, in turn, leads to discovering what kinds of information can be anticipated in the text. Just as critical for the idea of responsible reading, the text was the basis for examples that set up those expectations. Readers can disagree about the inferences drawn from the examples ("Voldemort's a meglomaniac, not just a criminal"), but, given redundant examples for each generalization, they pretty much have to agree about how people, events, ideas, and institutions operate in any one of the *Harry Potter* series.

#### Consistent reading as the precondition for responsible literacy

As I describe reading-as-sorting, two important things happen for the reader who uses these strategies. First, the examples s/he would find are based strictly on what the text says. That strategy prevents a reader from turning expectation into an alternate

reality. Harry Potter may be a wizard, but he and his fellow apprentices must learn to use their powers and different wizards have different degrees of magical power and concepts of how to use that power. In a responsible reading, a reading respecting undeniable facts, what the focused reader says and what the text says match up. Second, by controlling the frame within which the reader sorts the text and registers those examples (as character types, events, ideas, or institutions), s/he can negotiate his/her context with the one presented by any or all *Harry Potter* books. An analytic process, such a text / reader interaction yields a two-way comparison of the reader's and the text's worlds.

Consider any of the matrix examples constructed for the *Harry Potter* books in the foregoing discussion. No matter whether events could be added to them, enumerate events in greater detail or from beginning to end, different readers will be able to recognize or disagree with events cited in the matrix column. If important to the logic of the matrix, the sequence of events must reflect textual sequence. Stories, even stories told in flashback or montages, are linear and non-reversible in very fundamental ways against the general template of story telling. They have to be indicated in a particular sequence or they will not make a story in a particular genre. Only intelligibly linear, accurate sequences—whether of personal development, events, ideas, or institutional praxis—can generally be schematized as ways to understand text features. •NB: flashbacks become linear once their narrative function is understood.

All the books in the *Harry Potter* series follow the same linear development. The series start with Harry's life at the Dursleys' predictably oppressive home life on Privet Drive, then traces his transition experiences before going to Hogwarts, with the bulk of the story concerning his adventures at Hogwarts, which conclude with the magical train ride back to the Dursleys. This sequence becomes increasingly elaborate as the books progress and increase in length. Thus despite book four's 734 pages, its macro, its story

template is identical with book one's 309 pages. Only the details or how the macro structures are fleshed out differ.

Thus while the consistent big pieces of each Harry Potter installment remain the same, the sequence of text detail presented in the episodes within that sequence will be vital for the reader to follow the increasingly complex plot developments as evolving realizations of the text's value structures. In book one, for example, if Harry had not had his hair grow back overnight after his Aunt Petunia cut it, or had he not talked to a snake, he would not have believed that he had any wizarding powers when the gentle giant Hagrid came to prepare him for his first year at Hogwarts. If Harry had not been raised by relatives who were totally insensitive to his emotional needs and welfare, he would, in the words of Dumbledore, have had his head turned by being famous for doing something he couldn't even remember—defeating the evil wizard Voldemort by surviving his curses as an infant (13).

Insulated from his legendary fame in this way, Harry is also protected from vanity and narcissism, the character traits that motivate Voldemort's ambitions. Indeed, when readers learn in book four that Harry is best protected from Voldemort when living with the Dursleys, they just may reflect the implied wisdom of living humdrum existences and not always being privileged. The relative privation of being denied some of the superfluous toys an opulent society offers children such as Harry's cousin, Dudley Dursley is part of Harry's upbringing and character building.

Here, again, the question of story templates emerges as critical. Sorted into a different kind of chart and read horizontally, the sequence of events in the first book of the series, like subsequent installments, displays many parallels to episodes in any standard folk tale: a magical baby who must be rescued, a mysterious world existing outside the realm of normal experience, evil forces seeking to gain or regain control. While the Hogwarts' world has many innovative trappings (Peeves, the mischievous ghost;

mirrors that reflect our desires), the plot line for describing such a school, whether read from the standpoint of human characteristics, events, ideas, or institutional constructs, have all the usual features of any boarding school, with its various happy and unhappy situations.

If viewed in terms of possible reader focuses, one might construct a matrix for book one, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, along the following lines:

<b>Events</b>	<b>Behaviors</b>	<b>Institutions</b>	<b>Ideas represented</b>
The evil wizard Voldemort fails to kill Harry Potter and the effort breaks his power (12)	While the magical world celebrates, the Headmaster of a school for wizards (Hogwarts) and his colleague bring the child to his non-wizarding relatives (C 1)	The structure of this bourgeois family involves, for ex. honoring obligations (taking Harry in), abhorring change, pampering their own son, valuing appearances (C 2)	The family as an institution does not always provide optimal conditions for raising children – their own or other people's
Ten years later, Harry is taken to buy his wizard equipment and discovers he is wealthy and famous in the wizarding world (69-70)	As Dumbledore has predicted, Harry remains unspoiled by this attention, and recognizes he has done nothing to earn this status (86)	Hogwarts penalizes but also rewards the schools individuals belong to, not individuals (e.g. 178)	Miscreants deal with peer pressure and measurable demerits. Adults may make arbitrary decisions, but no single adult metes out penalties
Voldemort attempts to steal the sorcerer's stone, hidden at Hogwarts, to regain his physical form, eternal life, and his powers (C 17)	Harry and his friends prove willing to risk their lives to thwart Voldemort, first by penetrating the traps Hogwarts' teachers devised to protect the stone from theft and then by confronting Voldemort (C 16)	Dumbledore runs a school where risks and unsettling experiences are inevitable. While a powerful wizard, he and his school are sometimes subject to circumstances beyond their control (172-3, 297)	Role models are not necessarily all-powerful or right all the time. They cannot (and by implication should not) protect their charges from all the dangers in their realms

Such a matrix is necessarily provisional and incomplete, but even readers unfamiliar with the *Harry Potter* series will have no difficulty reading it horizontally to establish (within a range of plausibility) the values represented in the fourth column. Precisely because the stories can be read as documents of the cultures that have embraced such a set of values is all the more reason to view them as representative of how those cultures realize general story templates into very specific cultural values.

The sorting of text data I have provided here has another facet as well. A vertical reading of each of the columns enables one to make generalizations that can be validated in the four topical emphases, further focuses that guide a reader through this world: the column headings for events, behaviors, institutions, and representative ideas. The event column suggests, for example, why Harry Potter books are contemporary variants of hero stories: heroes must surmount daunting obstacles, take risks, need helpers, remain pure at heart, and ultimately triumph over evil. The behavior column provides clues to the psychological make-up of these heroes. Independent thinkers, they don't get distracted by their own ego-involvement or other's sycophancy. Consequently, combating evil retains its priority over all other considerations. The third column sheds light on the Dursley family and Hogwarts as contrasting, child-rearing institutions. Inequities characterize the Dursleys' world but Harry is physically safe, even though seriously bullied by two adults and his peers in that environment. At Hogwarts Harry is physically at risk due to outside forces he confronts but not physically mistreated or successfully marginalized by legitimate faculty or by students of the school (although sometimes one

of Voldemort's interlopers sneaks in and plays havoc). Some faculty and students are bullies, but their influence is offset by other people at Hogwarts.

Looking at the chart in another way, in the representative idea column, one might read out of it an implied critique of western child-rearing practices. Families in which children are raised to privilege by getting everything they want produce ill-bred, potentially dangerous adults. Even children from wholesome families such as Ron's and Hermione's thrive best in a school community that provides the discipline of a rigorous education. The fact that that education includes hazards such as breaking a leg or unpleasant results of misused magic (such as suddenly growing fur all over one's body) prepares students for the normal transformations that occur in the painful transition from child to adult. Remedies are available for burns, spells that go haywire, broken bones, and acne. Physiological changes need not prove permanently debilitating.

The vertical reading of even this very provisional inventory of "normal" childhood experiences reveals how the Potter stories play into a contemporary cultural horizon, as well. The inventory of factors lays stakes for a fairly broad age span (from about eight to fourteen), youngsters to whom magic and a playful version of adolescent experiences appeals. Given the heavy, well-marketed competition from alternative hero scenarios (the violent adult prototypes embodied in actors like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis), the cultural features mirrored in this particular volume of scenes suggest the concerns and perceptions of a younger audience. First and foremost, pre-adolescent and adolescent readers alike can identify with other pre-teens and teens struggling to be

accepted and often misunderstood. They recognize that adult role models have foibles, and that life is full of inexplicable, unpredictable and occasionally hazardous happenings.

The point from this series of examples has not been to give the final word on Harry Potter or to praise or censure the series. I've tried only to illustrate how different sorting systems grow out of different focuses and that the data arranged under a particular focus can yield informative readings. As illustrated in the final matrix above, systems relate to one another, when compared horizontally and vertically; as such, they provide the basis for critical analyses based on a selection of textual information—they allow for responsible readings with various focuses. My concern here, as in every chapter, is to demonstrate how responsible, interactive reading works, and what it's good for. I want to show how any reader might connect any text to a broader discussion about what matters to them and to their society. As indicated above, each of the four focuses sets up a different sorting system—no single reading of any meaty text adequately addresses all its issues.

In other words, to arrive at conclusions that make sense to other people, readers must choose from a relatively finite number of options and stick to them. It's the *reader* who must decide the tack to take. It's the *reader* who chooses to look at the text from the standpoint of its events or institutions or its issues or its character's personality traits. Each sorting focus points to two dimensions: one for the text, which is factual and textbased, and one the reader chooses to reveal a particular implication or reading of the work as s/he sorts the events characters, institutions, or ideas.

And again, this way of looking at texts rests on the existence of familiar templates. Events, behaviors, institutions, and ideas are reflected to greater and lesser degrees in most texts. Consequently, whether the reader decides to correlate events with relevant features or results or ideas or participants or other objectives will depend on what that reader is trying to find out. The choice of features for each column in the matrix may predict the style of reader reflection that might be made, once the data is collected. Events and relevant features might be more likely to yield an analysis of text aesthetics (the values inherent in the textures of the work), than an analysis of events and their results for characters in a work (how those figures develop or the values they represent). In contrast, comparing events, behaviors, or institutional features of a work with the reader's take on what ideas seem to be represented forms the basis for cultural or sociological analyses. Each dimension of a matrix sets up a somewhat different basis for drawing some inferences about a work's messages, whether about its high culture antecedents, its popular-culture appeal, or the reader's own focus.

Regardless of that focus, the reader who examines the text by sorting events or behaviors or institutions or representative ideas systematically has consciously negotiated what the text says with a focus s/he selects, but one that demands a consistent approach to textual information and to sorting that information. Just as noting a sequence of events may lead to a matrix that juxtaposes events with results stemming from those events, it could also lead to assessing the responses different characters have to those events. No single sorting predicts an optimal arrangement of categories, only the criteria of

informativeness, consistency, and textual verifiability that grow out of a shared, predictable underlying template.

### Reactive and prejudgmental reading as flawed literacy

Thinking of reading as such a sorting process has further advantages. It presents alternatives to two common ways of misreading: by personal reaction and by prejudgmental reading. Researchers have studied how people read by having them "think aloud" as they read. • Many readers react to a text personally, linking the familiar with their own experience rather than a prediction about what will happen next. When thinking about *The Lion King* or a Harry Potter book, such a reader would not be looking for human characteristics or trying to anticipate events from another world. In other words, the reactive reader would not be doing the kind of systematic inventory that children do about the shapes, colors, and powers of the Pokémon figures, or the features of the wizarding world of Harry Potter.

Instead, s/he starts on (and tends to stay on) a very personal train of thought that leads back to him or herself, e.g., "Harry is misunderstood and lonely. I feel that same way." Equally subjective in another direction: "This book is about wizards and magic, so it will teach me how to be a magician." When such an initial reader bias *dominates* the comprehension process, this reading style overwrites much of what could be registered in the text by saturating it with the reader's own history and background. Consequently, it reflects a reading guided by reader-presupposition inhibits comprehension—or at least, it inhibits comprehension defined as registering new information. • In this sense, it's less a misreading than a missing the reading itself, bypassing a great deal of what the text has to offer.

Often, direct distortion occurs when a reader overwrites judgmentally in this way. More seriously, few processes seem to be harder to modify or bigger barriers to accepting new ideas than a prejudgmental reading. “This book is about wizards and magic. That’s unhealthy and unchristian,” or “Another book about magicians is a waste of time.” Readers’ heavily prejudgmental positions often interfere with reading in the most obvious way: they lead to non-reading, precluding more than initial exposure to new information. Even if a reading is purportedly being undertaken, prejudgmental perspectives will tend to derail the prejudging reader’s attention to the text and lead to focus on what the reader wants to believe rather than what is there. Instead of negotiating between what the text says and what the reader thinks, the text gets rewritten, even hijacked into the reader’s world [Steffensen, 1979 #221]. Unless a reader collects information more neutrally, conclusions about what the text is worth or what it will be about become self-fulfilling prophecies: the person hated the film or the book from the beginning and will have only noted the information that supports this prejudice. Depending on the degree of preoccupation with a fixed idea, prejudgmental reading results in "reading" our own preconceptions—turning our prereading spin on the text into a distorted reading.

#### The innately non-judgmental multiliteracies of children

Frequently it is children who do better inventorying of story materials than adults do. A five-year-old's recall of *Aladdin* or *The Lion King* will often be more precise in concrete detail than Mommy’s or Daddy's. As young minds just learning to collect textual facts, young children don't suffer from automatic overreading so characteristic of adults. The very schemata that adults have learned, while they help orient mature readers to the known in texts, can be so personal and prejudicial that they inhibit reading for more than what such readers have learned to anticipate.

The apt comparison here is between child and adult learning behaviors with computers. Lacking any preconceptions about what computers ought to do or frustrations about learning the unfamiliar, children can accept computers on the computers' terms. They play to discover options, getting excited when they can make the machine do things for them, and remaining sanguine when their strategies yield unexpected responses or no results at all. Adults, on the other hand, tend to become impatient. They approach computers with tasks and problems to solve. When they discover a new function key, instead of celebrating discovery, many see only that the discovery impedes getting a job done. Often adults' habitual or automatic responses override curiosity. Hence, with relatively little guidance, children can teach themselves to use and even program computers at early ages, while many of their parents remain comparatively computer illiterate.

The example illustrates how the learning process relates to learner expectations. As such, it also illustrates how learning processes can also reinforce negative as well as positive expectations about approaches to reading. Like learning about computers, reading can be a responsible interaction with a text, or it can be just a non-interactive registration of data. Educational policy that encourages a definition of literacy restricted to information-gathering leaves the discovery of what else can be done with texts up to the readers. My point is not that students never learn to become responsible readers on their own, just that our schools rarely teach or test strategies for interacting with texts, particularly longer texts with voluminous detail (more than any reader can reproduce verbatim). Nor do they often teach or test students about how to express points of view about the macro messages of those texts.

Instead, emphasis in class work is generally restricted to word and content recognition coupled with affective response (“What did you like about this story?”). Tests, especially standardized tests, are often restricted to recognition and recall

questions that do not ask children to sort and assess the information they assimilate. Such omissions actually subvert what older children did naturally as very young children: collect data for documented conclusions. Good little empiricists, young children rarely have automatic stereotypes about people and the things they do – they can still change their minds. Even though he's a "bad guy," kids can still wonder about the fact (emphasized in the Harry Potter books) that Voldemort shares many important features with the hero, Harry Potter.

Such similarities represent the nub of cultural values that inform our ethical decisions and our views of good and bad, safe and foreign or dangerously alien behavior. As class discussion or essay questions, even fairly young readers can reflect about such plot elements. They might, for example, consider the nature of evil as a question of free will (decision-making) rather than innately preordained as often depicted in cartoons or in adult texts and movies. (ftn: Dumbledore's message Bk 2, p. 333) In other words, children's minds tend to explore problems from several points of view. Prejudgment hasn't closed off responses to new ideas. But class work and testing from a more purely informational or affective point of view tends to narrow other interactions.

Unlike adults, young children don't reject texts at the outset as "dumb," "bad," "silly," or "boring." As long as they know what to look for, children enthusiastically sort textual messages and participate in weighing the results systematically ("Harry Potter helps everybody at Hogwarts. Voldemort bullies everybody!"). Children feel free to draw personal and social inferences based on weighing that evidence ("Harry Potter helps people at Hogwarts because it's his real home and family."). What I am suggesting here is that young children learn to read by sorting ideas as well as letters and sounds. The primary school system knows this. Grade schools abound with teachers who encourage those children to share a point of view about a text and collect data to document their conclusions about what the story says to them.

After the grade school years that focus on having children achieve fundamental literacy—the ability to register words on a page—, textbooks and tests often treat the literacy equation as a question of having students use reading primarily to learn information or to motivate them to express their own point of view. The ability to interact with and critique an alternative point of view, increasingly possible given middle school readers’ developing cognitive and social growth, gets little encouragement.

#### How textbooks can undermine the bent toward reading for meaning

Along the way toward middle school, that process of growth towards being an active reader gets derailed. Textbooks do their part in taking readers out of the driver's seat. As noted earlier, many textbooks simply lack a point of view. Under the guise of objectivity, bland writing and omissions can also result in a bias—a point of view with which young readers might disagree. (nt. Efforts to contrary or examples•) Even fewer books that present reading at more advanced levels point out more than generic strategies for collecting information (skimming, scanning for information). None that I know about present a systematic approach to negotiating between what the text says and reader responses to those messages.

To be sure, most textbooks pose intelligent questions about concerns similar to the ones presented in this book: character development, events, ideas in story. But a world of difference exists between asking, "What is Harry Potter's relationship to the evil wizard Voldemort?," and suggesting a strategic task that would encourage higher levels in collection, e.g., "If you think character relationships are important, look for passages that reveal how characters in this story relate to one another. Then draw some conclusions based on similarities and dissimilarities in those relationships."

The two options for asking about comprehension differ in the way the textbooks urge a reader to define three seminal literacy functions: the function of actual language in

the text, the function of messages and their coherence, the function of the reader. Thus, answers to the question "What is Harry Potter's relationship to the evil wizard Voldemort?" may or may not yield thinking about what the text says; it can be answered without reference to specific passages in the series ("he hates Harry). Moreover, it solicits no reader thinking about how Harry Potter's relations to other characters tells us something about those other characters (cross-correlations of data); it only elicits information or opinions. It does not build or create explicit links to larger issues in the text. Finally, it subverts any decision about whether relations between people interest the reader; it puts the reader in a position of cognitive passivity – as someone looking up or coming up with somebody else's "right" answer, rather than collecting and organizing data to discover their own ideas.

Using the matrix template proposed in this chapter, collecting and cross-referencing data from the text can lead to practice in synthesizing ideas and making cogent generalizations. When students attend to tasks such as finding representative ideas, sorting events, or comparing the way schools function as institutions they create data bases from which generalizations can make sense. If the organizational choices ("what does this mean to me?") become the reader's, not the question asker's, it follows that the generalizations from those choices can stem from students as well.

Even if readers find it difficult to engage in synthetic reasoning initially, they will at least be selecting examples that speak loudest to them and learning how to read from their own perspective. Instead of answering questions originating in someone else's point of view, they are asked to construct a trail of reasoning so that other people can "read" not only the same text, but also those readers' "take" on the text—the information that seemed important to them and representative of particular messages in the text. Asking students to collect and cross-reference data from the text encourages them to look for patterns in its messages, patterns that substantiate or validate their opinions.

### Peer pressure contra the courage of individual reading perspectives

This suggestion of what responsible reading is has real social and cognitive implications for readers. Just as primary school children need to learn to sort information, preteens and teenagers need to learn how to be articulate about the information they have – to manipulate it more actively to fulfill complex goals such as defending an unpopular point of view. As peer groups gain in significance, they put pressures on kids. All too early, those pressures inhibit young adults' independent thinking. As growing children gravitate toward particular social circles, in- and out-group stereotypes arise and, with them, stereotypical takes on themselves and others. Peer group influence often guides what music, movies, and books kids choose and how they evaluate them. The group schema automatizes individual readings. What peers think begins to dominate what literacies kids choose for pleasure and how they read them.

Consequently, these burgeoning literacies (expansions of young children's simple sorting) don't occur in an environment that encourages young readers to sort out the agendas of stereotypes found in popular books, movies, and MTV. As a result, young adults lose the articulate moxie they had as young children. They forget how to express a substantiated idea by marshalling textual evidence. Instead of "reading to" (discover text agendas), they're "reading from" (the perspective of their peer group).

This loss occurs in part because the fun stuff that "their group" chooses rarely coincides with what is read in school. Most school boards and textbook committees make sure that schoolchildren read things that are good for them, one version of the high-culture or culturally-approved texts at the heart of the culture wars discussed in chapter one. Unfortunately, most textbooks also simply aren't interesting. Public pressure demands that textbooks give the least offensive version of every major event, discovery, or prominent figure. Textbook writers extract the blood and guts of controversies (tracts,

polemical arguments, original texts) and refer to polemics with bland generalizations that will offend no one because they say nothing. Typically, textbooks get approved by parent organizations and are voted down through reader disinterest in the schools – they do not have points of view for maturing student readers to practice on, which leads, predictably, to disinterest.

### Mass culture and responsible literacy

A second set of pressures keeps what kids would naturally consider interesting out of their hands, as well. The public pressure for students to read high culture texts as such – unrelated to the "trash," the media books, movies, music, internet information most young adults seek out and talk about – puts Shakespeare and Dickens on a pedestal that their original, historical readers (their implied readers) never erected for them. Their original “readers did not idolize these authors as high culture. The depiction in *Shakespeare in Love*, with the venerable English bard as a hack writer for the Globe Theater was based, in part, on the fact that he wrote an average of four plays yearly.

Dickens was literally a writer of pulp fiction. His novels circulated originally as newspaper serial stories. In their times, both men were popularly-marketed authors who entertained and had something to say about the lives of the people they entertained. Only now are they "classics." Yet none of these classics were originally labeled unapproachable (and hence uninteresting) works. By framing them that way— as “classics”—in the public school system, we set the canon off limits for all but a select few, and draw a line between "good" and "interesting" reading. Yet students will happily go see a film based on them, if it is retitled, for example, *Romeo Must Die*.

So a two-tier system of culture—popular and high culture—gets reinforced in the schools. It leads to two styles of reading: reading for pleasure, or for school and work. Unlike pleasure reading, the reading at school or work generally has a focus imposed on it

by an institutional structure—but not one chosen by the reader, and so the reading of such “classics” is rarely perceived as interesting. That reading will be imposed by the teacher ("Answer the questions at the end of the chapter") or required by task at hand ("check these court decisions to see if we need to add any").

At the same time, that "popular" reading gets dismissed by schools and parents as uninformative, high culture reading gets dismissed by students as unintelligible (and hence boring). All groups can justify their stances because the sorting systems that render all texts potentially interesting and informative have gotten lost along the path from grade school in a flurry of avoiding clear points of view. Whether high or low culture, then, reading in America ignores half of literacy: reading to better understand ourselves vis-à-vis the world we live in (or that predecessors did).

In that sense, our educational system actually seems to discourage readers from thinking they can learn anything relevant from reading. Small wonder that most people reading for pleasure read what they want to find. They have rarely experienced how reading can be meaningful as a strategy for opening up new potentials in self and public awareness. They preselect the text for the guarantee of few surprises, minimal discomfiture, a "safe" entertainment. The easiest way for a reader to preselect this way is by sticking with particular genres—and their variants. Publishing houses and trade bookstores display extreme sensitivity to the fact that particular genres have particular audiences.<sup>15</sup> They mark those genres accordingly, courting the comfort zone of that audience, frequently along gender lines. Most bookstores organize, sort, and color-code just like Pokémon figures qua adult books ("mystery," "romance," "best sellers").

Thus some publishers target middle-class housewives for romance, some concentrate on men for adventure stories or Westerns, others on mysteries for a crossover public, and fantasy fiction for young adults. Book Clubs may look for audiences interested in representative publications in both fiction and non-fiction, mysteries or "true

crime" reports, although some commercial clubs seek out a specialized audience in, for example, the environment, science, social sciences, history, or business. Under the aegis of "new," self-help books (*Seven Habits of Successful People*) promise their audience the comfort of knowing how to behave or who they are (*Care of the Soul*) or where they may be going (*Megatrends*).

If they rely on their "preselect" rather than generating a text-based focus, what people retain from these books is largely random information, confirming prejudices about the materials—a passive stance characteristic of non-critical reading. If a reader registers particular habits of successful people, then s/he does so largely in terms of a personal agenda ("this is what I wanted or didn't want from this book"), not in terms of its consistent messages. To be sure, critics often tell readers or movie goers or home-video buyers what the text says about society, but readers themselves rarely take an independent look at all this entertainment stuff – they have selected them for what they already know. They don't feel they ought to take romances and mysteries as serious business, as critical messages about what society thinks and why. The reader of romance novels is not inclined to think of them as instruments of oppression in terms of *The Feminine Mystique*, as critics would have it. Which is the same thing as saying people don't read media for other people's agendas, for what the media say about *them* or to have a debate about modern parallels to Southern belles. For most people, that approach to literacy went by the wayside shortly after fifth grade.

#### Creating the tangibles of responsible reading

This chapter has dealt with ways readers can identify a particular pattern of meanings in texts to negotiate between a text and reader point of view. With reference to media phenomena such as Pokémon or a publishing phenomenon such as Harry Potter, my emphasis here has been on illustrating how to build such patterns, after the reader has

determined his or her point of view (chapter two). For this second stage of responsible reading, I have proposed four sorting strategies and shown some typical examples of ways to use those options as templates of narrative understanding. The reader finds representative instances of either events, or character features, or institutional operation, or ideas in the text, documents their location in that text, and notes them as a series of descending items in a column. All examples chosen need to consistently represent the topic focus designated in the heading for that column—the reader’s choice of focus. Generally three or four such examples suffice to render plausible a reader’s claims about what the work says concerning that particular category.

Step two in this second stage involves creating an opposing column, a matrix, that juxtaposes either reader or textual information that casts light on focus of one column. In a sense, the second hand column provides the syntax for a reader’s thesis by employing those rhetorical conventions most common to making an argument—comparison and / or contrast, cause and effect, problems and their solutions. The matrix illustrates not only what the reader is trying to find out from this text, but how.

If that reader wants to look at how events work in Harry Potter, then the person interested in high culture issues such as comparisons with antecedents in prestigious fantasy literatures or the aesthetics of the series’ genre structure, might compare events in one or all of the books with prominent models in world literature dating back to antiquity – column number 2. If interested in popular culture, the reader might want to look at the textual evidence in both columns but sort it out by comparing characteristics of key figures in categories of good versus evil, muggle versus wizard, adults versus adolescents. Thus textual discussions from the mundane (acne leading to drastic measures) to the profound (the nature of good and evil, of present and past action, of obligation and trust) can be contrasted.

The resulting chain of evidence would not necessarily speak to differences, but it could gird an argument. Possibly the comparisons reveal subtle similarities in style or strengths and weaknesses between behaviors across columns as well as within the two categories. The implications for popular culture would emerge in a vertical reading of both columns. Whether similar or dissimilar, what does the sum of these comparisons reveal about the audiences captivated by these books or the society in which those audiences live? For the high culture reading, what features of the episodes in J. K. Rowling's series mirror or vitiate aspects of the previously acknowledged classics of this genre and, based on those findings, what is revealed about the quality of these volumes as "well-wrought urns?"

If exploring cause and effect, the same rules apply. The categories must be consistent, and at least one column must be completely textbased or, of course, the reader's reflections based upon it cannot be responsible to the text. In a matrix that uses an exclusively textbased analysis in both matrix columns, one might look, for example, at Harry's, Dumbledore's, or Voldemort's actions and the responses others make to those actions. The rhetoric of problems and solutions would operate along similar lines, just with a different column heading and direction for individual entries: Harry's (or Dumbledore's or Voldemort's) problems and the solutions found for those problems. The creator of such a matrix interest might subsequently undertake a vertical reading to see whether the character chosen finds his own solutions or depends on others. Or it might reveal developmental patterns or, if characters were compared, contrasting ones.

The rhetorical options of cause and effect or problem and solution should both be textbased unless column 2 is clearly marked as reader speculation ("this cause [problem] will probably have this effect [solution]"). One could undertake to compare two columns in which each category reveals a specific cause for a resultant event, but this tactic amounts in practice to a comparison of causal relations. Thus a rhetorical logic that

explores how Hogwarts, the institution, might affect students in later life, would point, in column 2, to real-world-cause-and-effect parallels or differences in educational institutions in the US or England.

In such a matrix, column 1 might collect, for example, textual references about the fact that Hogwarts teaches where and how students can use good magic as well as what magic is tenuous, trivial, or even inadmissible – as a result, students have the foundation to develop not only into honorable wizards but also into frauds, jokesters, and dark wizards. Column 2 might then sort equivalent facts about middle- and high school curricula in the United States or England to see if any similar cause and effect relations exist between what is taught and how that learning is applied. As noted above, while both columns hint at a causality component within columns, across columns one must undertake a contrast or a comparison. Thus the syntax of the matrix evolves in relations across columns, and a relation which reflects a particular macro-pattern available in the text. Within columns one looks at textual semantics – consistent pieces or development of the same subject.

The matrices that result from these strategies will, depending on the length and complexity of the work read, yield readings that are unique to each reader. Even readers who use similar macro-patterns to compare ideas or identify cause and effect relations will select different examples and arrange them according to their individual reader contexts. The thrust of the matrix—the arguability of its point of view—depends on its fidelity to consistent features in the text, not to the particular details chosen by an individual reader.

Since, as noted above, the point is for the reader to be representative in sorting data and establishing an argument rather than to recreate a comprehensive inventory of *all* representative features, a very few examples suffice. Thus, if sorting institutional features typical for Hogwarts, one student might chose the battered, old, talking-hat and another

the mock-tragedies experienced by a ghost called Nearly-Headless-Nick. Both examples suggest the same representative idea to characterize the magical world: surprises and absurdities make life at Hogwarts interesting and fun.

Depending on the macro-syntax of the matrix—the headings chosen to organize the two columns—even the same examples could be used to illustrate a different point. Instead of uncovering premises about Hogwarts as an institution, they also point to the adolescent nature of the humor in the series. Rhyming hats (shades of Dr. Seuss) or ghosts deprived of social status because they are not completely headless (a nod to Washington Irving) are probably more amusing for a reader at thirteen than at thirty. Inevitably, the formulation of the macro-syntax for a matrix (whether, for example, the columns compare styles of humor or correlate the functions of humorous experiences in revealing character development), will vary to some degree as well, because it necessarily reflects one individual’s context and point of view about a much larger field of choices. The depiction of Voldemort and his supporters, for example, as lacking any sense of humor except a bullying one could be contrasted with Harry and his friends’ light-hearted fun and ability to laugh at themselves (along with enjoying some rougher retaliatory measures taken at the expense of opponents).

#### Matrices as aids in responsible reading

The process of creating a matrix, described here, is interactive in sorting data, setting point of view, and recovering a text’s structures: part reader articulation, part textual verification. It necessarily commences with articulation of a reader perspective – what that reader wants to find out – and a systematic investigation into that issue. To some extent, a reader’s opportunities for insights based on these processes depend on the length, subject matter, and treatment of any given written or other media text. Moreover, since responsible reading is interactive, the active reader’s role in identifying what to look

for and how also determines how interesting and informative a reading will be. If applying the matrix system suggested in this chapter, differences between readings of the same text can be negotiated on the basis of the building blocks for reader opinion rather than argued on the basis of opinion itself. What I have been describing is going from registering a text into being able to argue with it, through it, and about it in effective ways.

When reading texts of all kinds, those considered classics and those representing current or popular tastes, readers who learn how to construct matrices as systematic points of views confront the relative richness or paucity of information in a work. When those readers first establish the typical ways characters or relationships in a work of fiction are depicted, they are then ready to take the next step of determining whether these depictions are relatively stereotypical or multi-dimensional—to assess rather than react to them. In sorting the evidence behind claims found in expository writing, whether articles or opinion pieces, the matrix work prepares students see how authors weigh information to argue their point of view. They learn to look for ways authors massage data by zeroing in on particular institutional practices or representative ideas. Such reflection eventually primes students to make discoveries about what might happen to an article or a book’s messages if they were conveyed with a cause and effect argument instead of a simple comparison.

In sum, the matrices approach to responsible reading, described in this chapter, enables students to uncover the textures and dimensions in a work – as well as the lack thereof. Consequently, they offer a fruitful way to address the issue of that work’s cultural value. That issue, so widely debated by the experts in the eighties, emerges as tangible evidence in a textbased reading, particularly when that evidence results from students’ own work with a text as a system of meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Kant’s categories

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<sup>2</sup> The anime-style programs popularized by the Power Rangers now hold a large share if not the majority of time slots on the after-school and Saturday morning schedules of the WB and the Cartoon Network. Because such anime phenomena as the Pokémon series and its offshoot Digimon offer children “an empowering story line” and a sense of honor, it is not viewed by parents groups with as much hostility as the earlier Japanese prototype, the “Mighty Morphin Power Rangers” [Rutenberg, 2001 #277].

<sup>3</sup> *The Official Pokémon Handbook*, 157 pages in length and published by Scholastic Press, sets forth the details of the system at a time when there were only 150 creatures (1998). In the introduction to the system (pp. 3-19), the author stressed that those not “into the battle aspect” can collect Pokémon as friends. Each has an individual personality (some like to travel with you, all want to be the best that they can be). I am indebted to Jay Schwartz for his recommendation of this book and his explanation of Pokémon’s appeal.

<sup>4</sup> See p. 11 of the *Handbook*.

<sup>5</sup> Pokémon fans have conventions, use Ebay to purchase cards, and have won and lost money in trading, buying, and selling cards. The Business Day section of the *New York Times* reports on the financial lessons young investors learned from the market crash in those cards during the general dot-com decline [Barnes, 2001 #74].

<sup>6</sup> Of course, children eventually learn that they have been objects of commercial manipulation, but they may not have much insight into how the system worked—nor should they necessarily care if the fun was worth the price [Barnes, 2001 #74].

<sup>7</sup> [For an analysis of these foci as categories for understanding human activity see Foucault, ? #279]

<sup>8</sup> Academic critics have raised such concerns in response to relatively uncritical reviews and reception of the books in the popular press •[Johnson, 1999 #48][, #283][Rosenberg, 1998 #55][Winerip, 1999 #49]. In his chapter entitled “The phenomenon of Harry Potter,” or why all the talk?, Jack Zipes finds that the series has “blurred the focus for anyone who wants to take literature for young people seriously and who may be concerned about standards and taste that adults create for youth culture in the West” because market conditions (best-seller status) change criteria for merit, particularly when a children’s book enjoys “to a large degree” popularity among adults [Zipes, 2001 #63, pp. 171-172]. In his book about children’s literature he charges that it is commodity consumption that sets the parameters of reading and aesthetic taste. In other words, children are induced to be amused and distracted by marketing and media conventions that render a Disney film or a Barbie doll desirable. Nicholas Tucker, in his critical review, looks less at the means of production and dissemination, but is concerned about the potential myopia of Harry’s large and influential adult readership, estimated at least fifty percent of the books purchased. Unlike Zipes who sees the work as largely imitative, Tucker finds merit in Rowlings stories but hopes that readers will be aware of the books’ tendencies to date to be “looking back” rather than to “push ahead.” Thus Tucker hopes *Harry* will not obscure those books that offer young and adult readers stories about contemporary situations and address more directly and in depth the complexities and problems facing children today [Tucker, 1999 #47, pp. 234-235].

<sup>9</sup> This and future references to the *Harry Potter* series will be cited in the text by volume and page number from the Scholastic Books editions. •

<sup>10</sup> It is also, if course possible to view this world in other ways, such as elitist and male-dominated. Jack Zipes reads the books from this perspective by focusing on the author’s major characters and use of “old school” conventions. His reading adopts a perspective that brackets as peripheral features such as the multinational schools that appear in book 4 or the multi-ethnic constellation of students at Hogwarts. He views Hermione’s role solely as one that serves Harry’s purposes and consequently as a subaltern one. With this framing Zipes can reasonably conclude, that characters in the book “happen to be all white, all

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British, all from good homes, and that the men and boys call the shots” [Zipes, 2001 #63, p. 183].

<sup>11</sup> While Nicolas Tucker finds the books “return to traditional school story narrative” for their moral and conceptual framework. In such stories looking bad is being bad, as illustrated in the Dursleys who are all fat and have unpleasant personal characteristics (shades of Roald Dahl). Nonetheless, Tucker recognizes that some of this “moral simplicity” may be attributable to the author’s decision to have the characters grow up in subsequent books and hence the author deserves the benefit of the doubt.

<sup>12</sup> Zipes, for example, points out that the books “have clearly been influenced by mystery novels, adventure films, TV sitcoms, and fiction series and they bear all the typical trademarks that these popular genres exhibit” [Zipes, 2001 #63, p. 177]. Such comparisons might make interesting topics for writing or oral presentation.

<sup>13</sup> Some criticism has been leveled that the books deal with such issues in purely stereotypical fashion [Zipes, 2001 #63] and even more favorable commentaries find that the author insulates Harry and his fellow-pupils from the more pressing problems of the contemporary world. Nicolas Tucker notes that “drugs, alcohol, divorce, or sexual activity of any kind is simply not a problem. Difficulties instead arise from more remote, less instantly recognizable sources such as old-fashioned malicious teachers. . .” [Tucker, 1999 #47, p. 221].

<sup>14</sup> [For a discussion of the fairy tale elements in the book, see, \Zipes, 2001 #63, pp. 176-177]

<sup>15</sup> A case of modifying a subgenre (Christian fantasy novels) to reach new audiences, HarperCollins, wishing to capitalize on the international popularity of Harry Potter is apparently considering a reissuing of C. S. Lewis Narnian chronicles altered to eliminate the author’s allegories and imagery that mixed fantasy with Christian images. The Lewis estate and the publishing house “have started shaping a marketing makeover of Asian and assorted Narnian habitués to expand readership and extend the brand.” The policy of rejecting requests to create sequels or spin-offs to the Narnia series shifted as the C. S. Lewis company, led by a former marketing executive from Scholastic Press (the Harry Potter publisher), “assumed a more active role in managing the copyrights” [Carvajal, 2001 #291]