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Writer Types, Writing Strategies: Introducing a Non-English Text, *Schreiben und Denken*, to a New Audience

Abstract

This contribution aims to introduce a non-English text, a landmark study of cross-genre writing, to a broader audience. *Schreiben und Denken* (translated as *Writing and Thinking*) was published in 2000 by Hanspeter Ortner, an Austrian linguist. Ortner identifies ten different approaches to writing that he terms “writer types” or “writing strategies.” The ten writer types are introduced and their benefits for writing center work are discussed.

Writer Types

The comprehensive study *Writing and Thinking* (Schreiben und Denken), by Austrian linguist Hanspeter Ortner, was published in 2000 and has influenced German language writing center pedagogy ever since. It offers a handy typology of writing that invites writers to reflect on their writing strategies and their respective strengths and weaknesses. As shown in Andrea Scott's contribution in this volume, writing counselors use questions or little tests based on Ortner, so that writers can draw conclusions about their writing "type." In peer tutor training, the concept of writer types is used to raise awareness about the fact that tutors' own preferred writing strategies might not necessarily be identical to those of the students seeking advice in the writing center. Also, peer tutors learn to help writers with challenges typical to the writers' specific writing behavior.

Ortner's study on writing and thinking

In one of the first empirical writing studies in the early 1980s, composition theorist Linda Flower and psychologist John R. Hayes noted two opposing composing styles: "writers appear to range from people who try to move to polished prose as quickly as possible to people who choose to plan the entire discourse in detail before writing a word" (Flower, & Hayes, 1981, p. 374). These approaches are also referred to as "bottom up" and "top down" (Molitor, 1985, p. 342). People who work in a bottom-up manner develop their ideas while writing; they only structure the text in retrospect. In contrast, writers who prefer a top-down strategy, first draw up a structure, e.g., by way of an outline, and then formulate the text accordingly.

Hanspeter Ortner, however, provides the empirical support for the hypothesis that there are more than two different writer types. While Ortner's concept of writing strategies has influenced German-speaking writing center pedagogy largely, his study is not as widely read as one might assume. Ortner's comprehensive analysis exceeds six hundred pages and is conducted from a linguistic point of view, which means that readers with a non-linguistic background can find it challenging to read. Still, his findings have been adapted in nearly every German handbook for academic writing pedagogy and nearly every German writing center uses learning materials or workshop concepts derived from Ortner's theory of writer types (Scott, 2017, p. 49). Most of the German peer writing tutors are being trained in reference to Ortner: they learn how to identify and advise different writer types and how to use a broad range of writing strategies to support students' skill-building in academic writing (Grieshammer, Liebetanz, Peters, & Zegehnagen, 2012, pp. 29–42).

Ortner stresses that, with writer types, he wants not to implement “a new chapter in the psychology of personality” (2000, p. 124), but to explore the range of possible approaches to text production. Since he uses the terms “writer type” and “writing strategy” almost as synonyms, many writing instructors and writing tutors prefer to talk about writing strategies. This way, it is more obvious that an inclination to a specific strategy does not mean that this is the only strategy a person will ever be able to use as a writer: it is a writer’s choice, not a writer’s fate.

When Ortner’s study was published in 2000, only two or three writing centers already existed in Germany, and there was hardly any German scholarship focused on academic writing. To this day, “Composition and Rhetoric” does not exist as a discipline in Germany, so the empirical research on academic writing still originates in different disciplines and constantly has to be “translated” into writing center pedagogy. Typical disciplines that do writing research are psychology, German literature and language, or educational sciences—all of them having discipline-specific theoretical frameworks and using a broad range of research methods.

Ortner’s perspective is that of a behavioral linguist. In his study, he analyzed “writing behavior (self-) portraits” (Ortner, 2000, p. 354) of prolific professional writers. For the identification and categorization of different writing strategies, he focused on autobiographical statements from (at least in Austria and Germany) well-known novelists and philosophers, such as Franz Kafka, Herrmann Hesse, or Ludwig Wittgenstein. He analyzed a large number of primary sources that had already been published, such as diary entries and journals, interviews, letters, and other written comments from the writers themselves (Ortner, 2000, p. 111). He also included the German translations of the first and second series of “Writers at Work, The Paris Review Interviews,” in which North American authors such as Henry Miller or James Thurber elaborate about their writing (Cowley, 1958; Plimpton, 1963). Relying on self-reports of professional writers as data produces some validity challenges typical to qualitative research: Do self-reports about writing procedures really describe those procedures, or do self-reports represent what the writer might think of as an ideal depiction of a writing process? This might be even more the case in published self-reports of professional writers because those writers might consider their self-reports as a tool for image-building. In a self-report, difficulties in writing might be omitted, and the writer’s brilliance might be exaggerated.

Ortner argues that by using published self-reports, he can access and analyze a very large text corpus. He points out that poetic reflections by professional writers in a lot of cases consist of very detailed and precise descriptions of the writing process. Also, conceptualizing writer types should not be confused with conducting case studies; the typology has been generated by

identifying a range of behaviors in a large number of writers, examining those behaviors for similarities and differences, and finally grouping and categorizing characteristics of specific behaviors (Ortner, 2000, pp. 116–127).

Ortner's basic observation is that different writers prefer different writing strategies. He defines strategies as “*repetitively performed procedures—identical techniques to overcome similar problems*” (2000, p. 351, original emphasis). Accordingly, writing strategies are “*tried and tested procedures to manage specific writing tasks and potential writing difficulties in specific writing situations*” (2000, p. 351, original emphasis). First of all, this means that writing strategies are procedures that writers can fall back on, as they have already successfully handled a particular type of writing task in this way on several occasions. Second, writing strategies refer to specific writing situations; a writer may employ one writing strategy to draft a short story, a strategy suited to their creative work and relaxed environment at home, and then use another strategy entirely to write an examination in a classroom. Third, writing strategies' efficacy differs from person to person (Ortner, 2000, p. 351).

Also, I should point out that Ortner's systematization into precisely ten writer types is just *one* of many possible models. Yet a concept that offers a broad range of types is extremely useful in the field of writing pedagogy as it features a high degree of differentiation. Ortner highlights the individuality and diversity of each strategy and stresses that it is not only customary, but desirable to change or mix approaches. Depending on the writing task at hand, the writing context, process stage, and individual writing procedure, specific strategies can prove to be particularly useful for successfully producing text. Matching a specific writer type simply means to prefer specific writing strategies. The ten writer types (or writing strategies) that Ortner identifies are flow writing, text-to-idea writing, multiple-version writing, writing by editing, planned writing, writing in the mind, step-by-step writing, syncretistic writing, writing in segments, and puzzle writing. I will summarize each of them briefly below.

Flow Writing

Flow writing means, according to Ortner, spontaneously and quickly writing down everything that springs to mind. In flow writing, no plan is followed while writing; there is no specific subject, no writing prompt or direction, as the method is based on free association alone. The aim of this is to achieve an “exploration of that which is actually already present in the mind but sometimes deeply buried and often difficult to access” (Ortner, 2000, p. 373). Stylistically, texts which are created in this way have an expressive impact and are often oriented towards a style typical of spoken language. This strategy emphasizes the composing process over the quality of the text; self-expression

supplants effective communication with an audience. Flow writing is a quick and motivating way to generate new ideas. When flow writing, a writer can produce large amounts of text in a short period of time, some of which may be repurposed in the real text project (Ortner, 2000, pp. 356–391).

For academic writing, flow writing was discovered as a brainstorming technique and a tool to help blocked writers. The American writing teacher Peter Elbow first introduced the method under the name “Freewriting” (Elbow, 1998, p. 3).¹ Freewriting is useful in giving the writer a start, helping to develop new ideas, and outsmarting the inner censor.

Text-to-Idea Writing

Writers who use the text-to-idea writing strategy are flow writing, but they are directed by a prompt, guiding question, claim, or theme. Among writing pedagogues, this technique is also known as *focused freewriting*. When engaging in text-to-idea writing, one writes in an associative and additive manner; the previous sentences provide stimuli for the subsequent development of a text’s content. Texts created in this way, especially those of inexperienced writers, exhibit an oral style and are not at all or only lightly revised.

The advantages of text-to-idea writing correspond to the advantages of flow writing: writers are motivated, produce a lot of text in a short time, and experience writing as a means of discovering and elaborating new ideas. In addition, as a text-to-idea writer elaborates on a unifying theme or idea, this strategy results in slightly more polished texts than writing freely associative, write-from-the-gut flow texts (Ortner, 2000, 391–408).

According to Ortner, text to idea writing is commonly taught in primary and secondary education: “At school, writing linearly to create texts on a topic in *one go* is the most frequent form of writing” (Ortner, 2000, p. 400, original emphasis). Students, accustomed to the time constraints of an examination, are inclined to spontaneously create both content and text structure by way of linear writing. Such impositions on the writing process cut short the planning stage, a necessity for specialized and academic texts. Also, students who write exclusively linearly may skip the all-important revision stage entirely.

1 For freewriting, a timeframe of, say, ten minutes is set, in which the writer spontaneously writes down everything that comes to mind. First, it is important that the writer does not subject themselves to self-censorship because it does not actually matter if the text generated is correct, incorrect, important, or irrelevant. Second, the writing hand should always be moving. If the ideas come to a halt, the writer should try writing the letter “e” in loops or repeating the last word written, for instance, until a new thought enters the mind (Elbow, 1973, p. 3).

Multiple-Version Writing

In multiple version writing, writers begin in the same way as text-to-idea writing: they write a text in response to a prompt. But to avoid revision, they then start again and write a completely new text in response to the same prompt. This procedure is repeated several times, so that various stand-alone texts are created. Essentially, writers use the flow until they no longer progress. Each new text is presumably more complex and to the point than the text that came before. According to Ortner, for this strategy, “every version is perceived as an improved approximation” (2000, p. 421). The early drafts of multiple-version writers are sketchy and experimental, a means of “shaping the rough idea” (Ortner, 2000, p. 422). Rather than prewriting, planning, and organizing, these writers structure their ideas through trial and error. Since they are not attached to any draft in particular, such writers rarely suffer from procrastination or excessive perfectionism (Ortner, 2000, pp. 408–428).

Writing by Editing

Writers of this stripe quickly generate a first draft, typically by flow writing. The first draft is then continually revised and reworked. This strategy exhibits the writer’s recursive work on a text: as with an oil painting, the text is created layer by layer. Writers who work by editing start with a text’s imperfections: “verbosity, gaps, ambiguities, incoherencies, leaps, poorly formulated or factually inaccurate passages” (Ortner, 2000, p. 435). The editing writer might either edit thoroughly from beginning to end or just select single passages for revising. The editing processes are comprehensive: passages are rewritten, reorganized, removed, or expanded upon. The text is not edited one single time, but rather is reworked many times so that the final version is very different from the first.

Such writers, unbound as they are to any linear method, run the risk of approaching their work according to the pleasure principle; that is, they have a tendency to skip difficult areas of the text, procrastinating the most labor-intensive passages (Ortner, 2000, pp. 428–439).

Planned Writing

With planned writing, there is a catalyst for the writing process, a central idea to be elaborated. “The plan is not the text, rather it is an *organized sequence of ideas* for a text,” as Ortner points out (2000, p. 450, original emphasis). The planning process is a form of pre-writing and occurs independently of the production of the actual text: an idea is “developed discursively” (Ortner, 2000, p. 449), in written form (notes, mind maps, outline), *before* the writer

begins composing the actual text. Characteristic of planned writing is that the composition of the work can only begin once the writer has finished the macro structure of the text.

Thus, the plan serves as scaffolding for building a text and may take a variety of forms, such as key words on handwritten notes, sorted collections of quotations or summaries of texts, mind maps, outlines, or exposés. Just how detailed the plan is may vary considerably; a writer's plan may be a collection of colorful sticky notes with key words on them or a meticulously organized and detailed outline very close to the author's final text (Ortner, 2000, pp. 440–462).

Writing in the Mind

Writers who produce their texts in the mind develop the structure before they write, as with planned writing, but these writers formulate sentences, paragraphs, or, sometimes, entire texts in the minds before putting pen to paper. In contrast to the strategies introduced before, in-the-mind writers produce the text extra-literarily, that is, independent of the physical act of writing. This is experienced as the thinking phase and does not always happen while sitting at the desk. Many of the in-the-mind writers Ortner researched developed their texts on walks or strolls.

Thinking first and then writing the thoughts down second are experienced as two separate phases of the writing process. Writing mentally can be challenging if the task is to create lengthy, comprehensive, and complex texts: “The particular difficulty is forming the structure by processing the knowledge just in the mind” (Ortner, 2000, p. 483). This approach can lead to cognitive overload and writer's block. As writing down the already thought-out text has very much the technical function of recording, the writer might experience it as an extremely boring chore that can, in turn, lead to procrastination and a loss of motivation (Ortner, 2000, pp. 462–484).

Step-by-Step Writing

Most self-help books for professional writing prescribe some version of the step-by-step strategy. Research comes in the beginning, then the material is structured (e.g., in an outline), then the raw version of the text is formulated, and, finally, the text is edited and proofread. Step two is the result of successfully completing step one, step three comes after completing step two, and so on.

According to Ortner, the concept of the ideal writer, as it is represented in textbooks, is a myth: none of the professional writers that he researched conformed to a tidy step-by-step procedure in their writing processes (Ortner, 2000, pp. 484–490). Therefore, Ortner dismisses the step-by-step strategy,

calling it “didactics’ darling” (2000, p. 485). Indeed, if the steps are presented as the only possibility and truly correct way, they can quite easily lead to insecurity among writers.

Nevertheless, the step-by-step writing strategy is quite useful for didactic purposes, particularly for instructing novices in academic writing. In academic writing, literature *must* be researched, the research process *must* have a conclusion, and the research *must* be structured following the logic of a research question or a hypothesis. Thus, regardless of this model’s relative irrelevance to the subjects of Ortner’s study, it is a good idea to make clear to novices in writing that there are specific steps in writing an academic text—even if the number and chronological order might differ from student to student. Even though Ortner does not approve of rigid step-by-step instruction, he concedes, “Almost all comprehensive texts are worked on step by step. . . . [T]he number of steps there are differs individually, writer by writer. . . . [T]his is how writers are different” (2000, p. 490).

Syncretistic Writing

Syncretistic writing incorporates all of the writing strategies presented so far, applying each as a sub-strategy of a greater, rather adaptable, if disorganized, approach. Syncretistic writing is, in Ortner’s words, “working by chaos” (2000, p. 491). Some parts of the text might be written according to a plan, some paragraphs are rewritten several times, and other parts are amended editorially or written in free flow (Ortner, 2000, p. 514). The writer focuses on generating an abundance of ideas and material. This “supply of knowledge elements [is] pushed forward by the writer . . . and [is] never completed” (Ortner, 2000, p. 535). The writer collects materials guided by impulse and intuitive connections. “Any and every idea is welcomed immediately whenever and wherever it appears. Everything is being collected, even if it does not initially seem relevant” (Ortner, 2000, p. 528).

While the constant switch of writing strategies appears chaotic, the system is not merely haphazard. A syncretistic writer employs a sub-strategy most effective in testing, exploring, or experimenting with the material at hand. Ortner describes such writing projects as a city under permanent construction: “In some parts of the text, a building has already been erected, whereas in others the foundation is only just being excavated. The silhouette only appears gradually after a long construction period” (2000, p. 536). Thus, there are several construction sites within the text, all in various stages of development and, of course, destruction. Syncretistic writing is particularly suitable for connecting different fields of knowledge in new ways and creating new knowledge (Ortner, 2000, pp. 491–540).

Writing in Segments

People who use this strategy complete single sections of text in a linear fashion and then deliberately skip others. Accordingly, such writers do not stop to fine-tune weak paragraphs; instead, these writers move on to work wherever they find their writing flow. Segment writing can adopt various forms: perhaps the conclusion is already in place, and the text is written afterwards with the end in mind; maybe both the conclusion and the introduction have already been drafted and “just” the main section must be developed; alternatively, isolated sections may need to be put in order and given an overall context. As the writer completes individual sections, a coherent vision for the gestalt of the text emerges.

Writers who draft text segments can begin writing at an early stage because they do not require a detailed plan to start. They produce specific passages or isolated paragraphs, compiling decent chunks of text in the process. These writers can then use the existing sections as building blocks to develop a coherent structure. This usually prompts the creation of transitional text, which ties the isolated passages together. The risk is that the focus of the segments may be so diverse that it is not possible to join them together in a coherent way. A writer may find that only a selection of the passages is suited to create a text, and the rest must be cut. This strategy may lead inexperienced writers lacking editing skills to produce incoherent text (Ortner, 2000, pp. 540–543).

Puzzle Writing

When writers are faced with subject material too complex to tackle in a single coherent text, they might turn to puzzle writing. In puzzle writing, the primary concern is not the creation of a cohesive text, but rather mental and spoken precision: “The objective to create one text is abandoned. Many texts are written instead, but the puzzle pieces created cannot be joined to a full picture” (Ortner, 2000, p. 524). The puzzle writers mull over the same subject matter, constantly looking for new approaches.

As the writers rework and rethink the subject matter, they produce text fragments, or puzzle pieces. At best, a loose correlation exists among and between these fragments, and it is difficult to impose a coherent structure on them because the writer’s perspective on the subject matter is continually changing. The writers are preoccupied with specifying even more precisely what they want to say. Thus, their revisions, while ongoing, focus on local levels. The resulting condensed, exploratory, often short to very short texts are

aphoristic² in nature. It may be challenging for puzzle writers to move beyond the work in progress stage, because the big picture might not emerge (Ortner, 2000, pp. 543–564).

Conclusion

Even though the writing strategies concept has been developed with data from literary professional writing, a successful transfer into the practice of teaching and tutoring academic writing has taken place in German-speaking countries. As early as 2000, Ingrid Böttcher & Cornelia Czapla integrated Ortner's findings into a writing-across-the-curriculum course aimed at strengthening students writing skills in general (Böttcher & Czapla, 2002, pp. 182–201). Katrin Girgensohn followed in 2007 with a slightly different concept (Girgensohn, 2007a, pp. 68–70; Girgensohn, 2007b). Both concepts translate Ortner's writing strategies into ten writing assignments that enable students to experience and evaluate a broad range of strategies.

Also, most of the German handbooks for the pedagogy of academic writing stress the importance of considering different writer types and writing strategies (Grieshammer, Liebetanz, Peters, & Zegenhagen, 2012, pp. 29–42; Girgensohn & Sennewald, 2012, pp. 38–42; Sennewald, 2014, pp. 169–190; Scott, 2017, p. 49).

Meanwhile, follow-up research based on Ortner's initial study has been conducted. For example, Gisbert Keseling (2004) uses Ortner as heuristic to research writer's block in students' academic writing. I also developed a research design based on Ortner's findings (among others) to gain insights into novices' academic writing: for a study within a larger research project, the students used different writing strategies and reflected afterwards on their writing processes. I analyzed the corpus of students' reflections by using grounded theory (Sennewald, 2017, pp. 209–226). The results indicate novices in academic writing greatly benefit from a practical introduction to writing strategies. First, and as mentioned before, novice writers recognize that there is not a single "correct" approach to writing. Second, they learn to reflect on their own approach to writing. Third, they expand their own repertoire by trying out new writing strategies. Fourth, novice writers learn to match the writing strategy with the writing task at hand. And fifth, they develop the skill to actively change their writing strategy if necessary (Sennewald, 2021, p. 160)

2 I am using the definition of aphorism as "a concisely formulated individual remark" (Fricke, 2007, p. 104). In other words, it refers to a brief, pronounced, and possibly insightful statement, which has no direct link with what is written before or after it. The paragraphs within a long text characterized by aphorisms could therefore also be arranged completely differently, without changing the meaning of the text as a whole.

In sum, the attraction of Ortner's concept of writer types or writing strategies has been the same now for almost twenty years in German-speaking countries. It explains why different writers encounter different challenges at different points in the writing process and why writers might struggle with one genre while having fun with another. Ortner's concept has been integrated into writing center work in German-speaking countries by deriving a broad range of writing exercises and adapting them to the specifics of academic writing. (Admittedly, working with a broad range of writing strategies might be less relevant in STEM-disciplines, in which the genres and the steps in the research and writing process are more standardized.)

Those adaptations enrich writing center work in many ways. Once it is accepted that not only writing skills, but also writing preferences differ individually, writing instructors and writing tutors can support their students in writing conferences and workshops accordingly.

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