

Williams

# Tuned In

Television &  
the Teaching  
of Writing

Bronwyn T. Williams

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## Television and the Teaching of Writing

Bronwyn T. Williams  
*University of Louisville*

Boynton/Cook  
HEINEMANN  
Portsmouth, NH

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# Switching Channels

## Authorship and Authority on Television and in Print

*We have our distances but we cannot escape television, and we move easily, naturally in its world, on its terms.*

—Stephen Heath (1990)

The conventional way of discussing television is to portray it in terms of programmers and audiences. The former are aggressive and manipulative and the latter are passive and malleable. The image of the couch potato, of the television zombie mesmerized by the images on the screen, oblivious to the world, going on all around, pervades our culture from cartoons to conversations to television advertisements themselves. Even the common expression of “watching” television is a much more passive construction than “reading” a book, “attending” a play, or “going” to the movies. A more thoughtful consideration of what happens when people sit down in front of the television, however, reveals that the activity is much more participatory and interactive than the conventional caricature indicates.

To begin this chapter I will address the active nature of reading television texts as illustrated by students’ comments. I see connections between how students develop as television viewers and how they develop as readers of print. More intriguing, perhaps, are the ways in

which remote control technology has altered the way younger people shape and experience their television viewing. I also discuss how television positions viewers, including our students, as members of the “audience,” and how that influences their view of authorship and of what is authoritative or “real.” Underlying all of these elements is the visual nature of how information is received from television.

### **Growing Up and Reading Both Television and Books**

The popular view of the television audience is one in which individual members cannot reply in an organized way to what they are watching. Margaret Morse says that “Your television (via the intermediaries of hosts, anchors, and spokespersons of all kinds) cajoles, instructs, and directs you incessantly” (1998, 6). Stephen Heath adds that “Sitting in front of the television screen, we have always to remember that, whatever else, programs are so much wrapping paper and that what is being wrapped up for delivery [to advertisers] is us, an audience” (1990, 271).

The domestic settings in which we watch television do isolate us from the events we watch, even as they bring the public world into our homes. Scholars such as Morse and Todd Gitlin maintain that, when we receive images of the public world in our homes or dorm rooms—images that may run counter to our own beliefs—we are cut off from any public discourse or response we might make beyond our ability to turn the set off (Gitlin 1994, 521; Morse 1998, 39). When you watch television alone in a domestic space, you don’t have the opportunity to talk about the program that you would have if you were at a play or a political rally. People also would feel rather silly talking back to their televisions when they watch alone. This makes television different than other oral forms of communication that it might resemble; watching a speech on television is a different experience than attending a speech with an audience.

On the other hand, defined by these characteristics, watching television alone is not that different from reading in terms of isolation and the power to respond. The idea that books bring the world into our domestic spaces, are usually read in isolation, and offer no form of organized response aside from closing them is not seen as problematic in our society, but can be constructed as some of the more common and powerful arguments for reading. Yet with television, these same attributes are constructed as being dangerous and manipulative. The difference in these constructions can be traced, at least in part, back to the conventional wisdom, shared by the students in this study, that

reading is an active and worthy activity while television watching is passive and wasteful.

Certainly there has been research that indicates that some television watching is indeed a passive activity that requires little concentration. Notable among this research is the work of Robert Kubey and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, particularly their *Television and the Quality of Life* (1990). Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi argue not only that people watch television without engaging actively with the programs, but also that people often turn to television to help them escape the discomfort of unstructured time, rather than turning to other activities. I have no doubt that many people often watch television in the ways that Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi describe. In fact a number of the students I interviewed talked about watching television in just this way for just such reasons. Watched in this way, television can suck away startling amounts of time, and cultural commentators of various stripes are justified in their concerns about such practices.

What Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi don't emphasize that other researchers do (Morley 1992, Lembo 2000) is that this is rarely the *only* way that people watch television or engage in leisure activities. People in these studies who watched television passively also sometimes watched it in a more engaged and concentrated way. People who used television to fill up unstructured time also engaged in more mentally stimulating activities (Lembo 2000, 135). As I illustrated in Chapter Two, students I interviewed who described watching television passively, distractedly, and as electronic wallpaper at certain times talked about watching at other times in a concentrated and focused way and recognized the difference in engagement between the different kinds of watching. (It has also been interesting to me to discover that writing teachers have often heard of the work of Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi and their criticisms of television watching as passive and debilitating but not of the work of researchers who describe different patterns of television watching.) Again, as writing teachers we accept as a given that different print texts require different levels of engagement. Every morning I breeze through the sports pages in the newspaper in a distracted, passive manner. I jump from one article to the next, rarely reading one all the way through, often stopping my reading (or not stopping) to talk with my wife and children, get breakfasts and lunches made, and dress for work. I would be hard-pressed to recall many details from what I read in this way. When I sit down with a scholarly article, the level of my engagement and concentration is markedly different, though I often read such work in isolation. If we accept that print texts are read in different ways, why is it so difficult to accept that although television is often watched passively, it is also often watched interactively and with a clear focus?

Watching television is also criticized because its content is different from that of print media. Television programs are regarded as shallow, manipulative, and broadcast only as a means to get viewers to stick around long enough for the commercials. This is obviously true and was obvious to the students I interviewed. It is worth noting that many print texts are no less manipulative, shallow, and devoted to the propagation of commerce as can be demonstrated with a trip to the magazine aisle at the grocery store or the bookstore at any airport. Both media also offer texts that are provocative and intelligent, and whose value transcends the imperative of capitalist markets. Many of the students I interviewed watched some of the best programming on television and could make insightful comments about its content and structure.

My point here, and in this book, is not that television as is currently exists is equivalent to print. Such comparisons of the two media strike me as reductive and irrelevant. I am also not interested in engaging in a subjective debate as to whether what is considered high-quality television is or could ever be the equal of high-quality print. I do believe that one advantage of print is that it allows for kinds of thinking and reflection that are not available on the screen; that's why I am a writing teacher. Yet if my students read television texts often, and often well, I have to consider how that will affect my work as a writing teacher. My point here, however, is that to criticize television watching, in comparison to reading print, for its isolating effect and for its limitations on viewer response is a shaky argument and distracts from the more important issue of teaching people how to watch television, and to read print, more critically, more selectively, and with an eye toward making connections to other texts and experiences.

When students *do* watch television attentively, they engage in an active reading of the televised text. Barry Brummett argues that the audience is not always passive, but that critics of television cannot see, "through expositional spectacles" (1991, 24), how viewers engage with televised texts. Students' comments about television they have watched attentively again reveals the intertextual nature of their interpretations. This kind of intertextuality is an attribute we value and draw upon when students demonstrate it in their responses to print texts. We can use the intertextual interpretive skills students use with television to show them how critical reading and writing of print depend on similar skills. Unless we ask students about their interpretations and analysis of television programs, however, their active reading remains hidden, just as their reading of print texts remains hidden unless we ask for reading responses, essays, and class discussions.

Is it a coincidence that who students have watched television with, and how those companions have changed over the years, is not remarkably different from the way engagement with print literacy is expected

to progress in our culture? Early television watching and reading experiences are often communal and family oriented. Mary, for example, talked of how she watched *Star Trek: The Next Generation* with her father each week and how her whole family watched television together on Sunday evenings. Karen and Irene spoke about how much their parents read to them as children and how much they enjoyed those experiences. These comments were repeated by most of the students I spoke with. Parents read to children, chose television programs, and watched with children. As the children got a bit older the pattern shifted, with the children reading aloud and parents and children watching programs that the children had selected. As the students I spoke with reached adolescence, both their reading and television watching became more private and isolated. Reading and writing were expected to be done quietly, and they often watched television as far from parents as possible. Although the communal living situations of first-year college students create opportunities for communal television watching and response and interpretive conversation, the parallel narrative many students provided of their patterns of reading and watching television while growing up is a correlation that, while beyond the scope of this project, is worthy of further study.

### **Zapping and the Making of Meaning**

For most of the students I talked with, remote-control devices offered considerably more ways to respond to television programs than simply using the off switch. The ease of using a remote control means that viewers can act quickly, without trouble, on their critical judgments. The growth of multiple cable television channels that has accompanied the growth of remote-control use—more than 80 percent of U.S. households now have a remote-control device (Bellamy 1993, 211)—means that viewers have both choices and the power to be choosy. The practice of zapping around the channels had developed into a form of narrative control for the students I spoke with. Although two of the students spoke of not liking to zap at all, the rest said that they would zap for at least some of their television viewing time, particularly time that Lembo would define as “undirected viewing” (2000, 220). Students reported far less zapping when they had a specific program they wanted to watch intently. As I noted above, zapping gives the viewer the ability to change easily from a show that’s become boring, or to explore what better shows might be on the air. Through the remote-control device, students often exercise their critical judgments about television programs quickly and decisively. Andrew said, “I’ve got it [zapping] down to a science. I’ll just keep pushing it at a steady motion. I’ll just look at

it and judge it right away." Few students expressed the same level of confidence and capability about judging print texts or even their own writing. Andrew's comment also confirms the ability of viewers to process visual information quickly. If you are familiar with the forms and conventions, it only takes a glance at the screen to know whether a program is a talk show, newscast, sitcom, soap opera, or music video.

More than just allowing the viewer to escape boredom, however, zapping also lets the viewer create an individual mosaic or collage of meaning out of the fragments that go whizzing by. Just as television creates meaning out of movement, of images, of narratives, from one program to the next, students at times use the movement of their zapping to make meaning. This kind of television viewing, which is not as concerned with narrative coherence and is more within the control of the viewer, contains an element of play (Bellamy and Walker 1996, 163). Each fragment of programming is read in the context of the fragments that precede and follow it. Similarly, our reception of any fragment is altered by the context of the next destination of our zapping. This kind of associative, nonlinear combination of elements is not unlike a "found" poem or collage that requires us to make meaning out of juxtaposed words or images. A collage of zapping happens if the viewer simply proceeds from one channel to the next in the order the cable company has arranged. A number of students, however, spoke of zapping as being a much more controlled and conscious process than the popular image of mindlessly flipping through channels. David has a set of channels that he restricts himself to when zapping, including Comedy Central, Fox, MTV, and HBO. And Joe will often zap among two shows and a sporting event as he watches. In this kind of zapping, the student with the remote control is creating meaning by drawing fragments from several different texts, then doing the interpretive work needed to reconcile the competing messages into a coherent viewing experience.

This is not to suggest that all zapping is done purposefully and employing a kind of critical consciousness. Zapping is sometimes a distracted search for something diverting to watch. Zapping can be like wandering a shopping mall with no goal, no purpose beyond a low level of stimulation, and no particular attentiveness to the distractions around you. This kind of zapping is familiar and matches the stereotype of the young person with a remote-control device in hand. Although this kind of distracted, purposeless zapping happens, so does zapping in which students display agency and judgment about when and why they push the next button.

The quick reading of programming that is required for effective zapping comes from practice and experience, just as learning to skim an article for a particular piece of information. If you haven't watched

enough television to know the forms and genres, you can't zap with speed and confidence. Programming that students have grown up watching, from *Sesame Street* to MTV to much of the television advertising directed at children, often uses collage and rapid cuts and edits, which gives viewers experience at processing images presented in an associative, nonlinear manner. It should come as little surprise that the willingness and ability to zap is often defined by generational divisions. Older viewers are less likely to zap than younger viewers; one study in the mid-1990s found that the most active zappers, 71 percent, were under the age of forty and that the most active of that group were between eighteen and twenty-three (Bellamy and Walker 1996, 97). Andrew said, "My dad always yells at me and tells me I'll break the TV because I'm going too fast. I just go at a steady pace." Bellamy and Walker cite research indicating that gender is the other significant factor that affects zapping (they note that current research indicates few differences in terms of class or race), particularly when control of the zapping is at issue between a man and a woman (127). Such differences in remote-control use diminish significantly, however, in studies with respondents under the age of thirty (130). This is consistent with responses from the students I interviewed: Male and female students who said they engaged in zapping described virtually identical practices.<sup>1</sup>

It might seem initially puzzling that college writing students who seem comfortable with the associative and fragmented nature of zapping get frustrated and confused with print works that are not straightforward narrative. Essays and fiction that work with collage or poetry often bother students and meet with anxiety or resistance. This happens in part because students who are unfamiliar with such forms in print often miss the rhetorical cues that help experienced readers make meaning from the printed work. These students understand the cues used on television, but not the ones used in print. If we uncover the connections between the way students process images and metaphors as they zap and the way such material can appear on the page, we can help bring students' authority and experience with collage and associative reading of television into the classroom in a productive way. This will help reduce their initial anxiety and resistance and enable them to gain the vital experience and practice with print texts that will eventually result in a similar authority and confidence in their reading and writing.

### **The Invisible Author**

Although we can make some connections between the experiences of the television viewer as part of an audience and a student writer in a first-year composition course, there is one particularly important

difference: a sense of authorship. Television usually lacks a clear, singular authorial voice or point of view. Most of us, including most students, are stumped if asked to name the “author” of a television program. Whom do we mean by “author” in such a context? The scriptwriters? The producer of the series? The director of the episode? The newscaster reading the news or the reporters and researchers who have gathered and written the stories? The talk show host or the talk-show host’s staff? The rhetorical skills that the students I interviewed exhibited in their conversations about watching television did not include a sense of authorship about the programs they discussed. With the exception of Peter, who talked at length about the quality of the writing on television programs, none of the students assigned any specific sense of creative agency to anyone involved with television programs, from producers to directors to writers to actors. Students spoke of television programs by the program’s name and by the characters portrayed on the programs. Jennifer said, “I just watch the people on the show. I’ve never really spent much time trying to figure out who is making it.” Even when they discussed news and documentary programs, they spoke of the content, not who might be involved in the production or whether those people might be promoting a particular point of view. Julie said, “If I watch a show and I like it I’ll think it was a good show, but I won’t think, ‘Oh, it was written well.’ It’s just that one show will be better than the other.”

This sense of not being authored is not limited to television. Winifred Wood talks about some students in her film courses who have a similar lack of awareness and even resistance to seeing films as being “authored” rather than being spontaneous productions (1998). Yet even students who are not film buffs can name and describe the jobs of Stephen Spielberg or George Lucas, and more than half of the students I spoke with could name other well-known filmmakers, from Martin Scorsese to the Farrelly brothers to Oliver Stone to Jane Campion. None of the students could name a single producer of a television series, a position in television programming with the same authoring and authoritative position as the film director (Newcomb and Hirsch 1994, 510).

Although there is no clear author for most television programs, that does not mean there is not an implied narrative presence. As Sarah Kozloff points out, “The ‘implied author’ of a television show . . . is not a flesh-and-blood person but rather a textual construct, the viewer’s sense of the organizing force behind the world of the show” (1992, 78). For example, the implied author of *South Park* might be a rebellious adolescent boy, while for *ER* or *NYPD Blue* it might be a serious urban adult with a social conscience. Some programs, such as *Unsolved Mysteries* and talk shows, use hosts and some, such as documentaries and

*The Wonder Years*, use voice-over narration (79), but viewers don't mistake these narrative stand-ins for the actual creators of the programs. More often the textual context is established through an opening theme song or visual sequence, not by the names of the creators of the programs. Indeed, as I noted in the previous chapter, the names of the creators of programs—producers, directors, writers—have often now been pushed to edge of the screen while previews fill up the rest and distract us from the literally marginalized names.

Consequently, a television program's message may be more open-ended and polyvocal than most of us realize when we are watching alone and not in immediate discussion with other viewers. The message usually comes in the form of actions and dialogue, not from an explicit authorial voice. At the same time, paradoxically, there is a unity of point of view provided to the television viewer through the view of the camera. The camera, and the person who points the camera, does not speak. Yet, as the viewer delegates his gaze to the camera, it provides a seemingly objective view of events that seems to provide the viewer with a truth, with a coherent message. The camera flattens, distances, and depersonalizes all comments and actions and delivers them to us in the same spot—our television set. The camera's point of view gives the viewer a sense of impersonal authority, if not of an individual "author." The action takes place in front of the camera and we sit, detached and alone, on the other side and decide about the nature and quality of the message.<sup>2</sup>

This stance is sometimes reflected in our students' personal or narrative writing, in which events, people, places are viewed with a kind of impersonal detachment, as if through a camera lens. Because the camera does not reflect on the story, but allows the audience to draw the message from the actions in front of it, our students sometimes write the same kind of stories they see on television—stories that are strong on plot and action but lack reflection or commentary. The student writer assumes that the audience, like a television viewing audience on the other side of the camera, will get the message by watching the actions and interpreting the plot. The idea of an author controlling and reflecting on the story is a rhetorical convention with which students have little familiarity. When they write, it is as if they are transcribing screenplays, but they don't have actors or other collaborators to provide the emotional and intellectual introspection and depth we experience through performance.

In a college writing course, however, few concepts are more important than authorship. Teachers may be willing to talk about "the death of the author" in theory seminars, but we expect students, especially first-year students, to write from the position of an author. Whether they are writing memoir, argument, or criticism, we teach students to

write with a specific and identifiable point of view. Pick up most handbooks or rhetorics and, regardless of their pedagogy or focus, you can easily find statements such as “Revising means shaping and developing the whole argument, with an eye to audience and purpose; when you revise, you are ensuring that you have accomplished your aim” (Crusius and Channell 2000, 748). Or, “Writing can be described as an inward journey. The process of discovering what resides within your mind and your spirit begins anew each time you start a writing project” (Ford and Ford 1998, 8). Even textbooks that focus on media and mass popular culture ask students to step out of the audience and write as an individual critic. “As a critic, you respond to a text by creating one of your own, by writing out your ‘reading’ of it in the form of a paper or article” (Harris and Rosen 1995, 8). Similar statements can be found in many course syllabi and are uttered by teachers time and again in writing classrooms across the country. We want our students to stop being part of the audience and to display on the page for us the individual qualities of their minds.

It is not that students don’t understand the concept of authorship. The romantic view of print authorship as the creative action of an individual dominates our culture, including the minds of our students. Many of the students I spoke with could name the authors of books they had read. (Although in class sessions I have also seen students discuss a single author’s work by referring to the writer as “they” until I ask them to look again at the name of the author.) Many students I have taught over the years have so internalized the romantic conception of authorship that they are skeptical that ordinary mortals can be taught to write (or convinced that they are artists whose creative impulses should not be tampered with by a mere composition teacher).

It’s not that students don’t know what an author *is*. Instead, because they watch more television than they read works with a strong authorial presence—such as the articles and essays assigned in first-year composition classes—they have much less experience with what an author *does*. The communication, the narratives, they are most familiar with come from the authorless medium of television. Just because they can summon the romantic image of an author writing in a garret does not mean they understand how writing teachers see that consciousness transferred to the page. Consequently, when students write narratives or arguments or research, they are more likely to replicate the forms of communication with which they are most familiar. This is why student writing may often be strong on plot or dialogue or even description, yet be missing the reflective or analytical qualities valued in the academy. That many students have in high school primarily been asked to write summaries and reports only exacerbates this phenomenon. Even when they write about literature in

high school, many students are given assignments that focus on providing a correct answer about the book's content. This is also not a form that encourages students to write with a clear rhetorical "I" in their work.

I asked the students I interviewed if they thought they could write a television script, and whether that would be easier than writing essays in their writing courses. I was surprised at how many students, almost two-thirds, answered in the negative. Julie said, "I guess I could if I sat down and thought about it. But it's like everything has been used up, all the scenarios. I don't think I could come up with anything different than stuff that has been used on one of the shows." Their answers again demonstrated an understanding of the forms and conventions that they saw every week on television programs, and how those would have to be worked out in writing a script. When Andrew said he thought writing for television wouldn't be easy and that he couldn't do the same quality work as television scriptwriters, he also indicated that he understood in detail the challenges writing for a weekly series would present:

You have to think about future episodes. How do you want this character to come out in future episodes? What do you want to happen to him? Do you want this to be a good preppy kid? A bad kid who drinks and does drugs? You have to think about things to carry it on week after week after week to get your viewers to watch it again and again.

Only one student, David, who was working on a play, answered the question with an unequivocal "yes." The other students who said that they thought they could write a script qualified their responses by specifying a particular type of show or genre. Kevin said, "I think I could write a *Simpsons*, but not an *X-Files*. I'm not bizarre enough to pull that kind of stuff out of my head. I could come up with a *Simpsons*, though." Peter, whose background in reading made him the most overtly aware of the role of writing on television programs, said he thought he couldn't write dialogue well enough to compose original scripts. He did see the possibility of using his critical abilities, though: "If somebody gave me a script I could definitely make some suggestions for improvement. Like a script doctor."

These responses show that the students saw television as a "read-erly," not a "writerly," text. They could read, interpret, and criticize what they watched, but they were unprepared for the possibility of having to create a similar text themselves. Television is a medium they are used to receiving, but not producing. This is similar to the implicit distinction that composition textbooks, and many composition teachers, make between mass popular culture texts to be studied and the analytical print texts to be produced by students. The distinction

reflects the divide Roland Barthes described between “readerly” texts and “writerly” texts. Barthes defines readerly texts as “products (and not productions)” (1974, 5), while he defines writerly texts not as things, but as “ourselves writing before the infinite play of the world” (5). Although Barthes was concerned with literature, it is not difficult to apply his definitions to television and composition in order to recognize one of the fundamental points of conflict. Television is a readerly text for most people. It presents material to be consumed by the viewers and rarely if ever created by them. It is, for most viewers, product and not process. For most people watching a television program, the point is not how it was created, but how they decode and interpret it. In the composition classroom, however, the writerly text is the primary emphasis. Particularly with the advent of the writing process movement, it is the act of writing, the process of creating text that is of primary importance, rather than the final product. Because of this conception of the text, it is easy to believe that such a readerly text as television does not influence the production of writerly texts in the composition classroom except as a means of distraction.

The students’ responses about writing television scripts also indicate a difference that can be drawn between *writing for television* and *television-like writing*. Although I see student writing that lacks a strong authorial presence or a rhetorical “I” and that takes the position of the camera, watching the characters in the work as if they would soon be inhabited by actors, I rarely see student work that actually replicates television scripts, explicitly constructed so that they can be picked up by actors and interpreted for an audience. Instead of writing as if they are producing a television program, with camera and stage directions to go along with their dialogue, students are more likely to write as if their readers are *watching the program with them*, and can thus see the same things on the screen. Students take details in their writing for granted for a number of reasons. Still, I believe that the influence of watching television programs, where students know that a huge audience has seen the same programs as they have, even if they were alone when they watched, adds to the tendency of student writers to write as if the details can be taken for granted. We all saw the same show, so we can skip the details. Or, even if we missed last night’s episode, we have seen the show in the past, so we don’t need to have the main character (let alone her apartment or her best friend) described to us. One of the easiest ways to explore the difference between television-like writing and the kind of detailed reflective or analytical writing favored in composition courses is to use the activity described in the *Classroom Practice* at the end of Chapter Two and confront head-on the way television texts are created and make explicit the need for images and actors to make television programs work.

## Reliable Sources

The unified point of view that the camera provides the television viewer creates an authority that reinforces this clear and resolvable narrative on the screen. The camera does not speak and the person who points the camera is invisible, but they provide a seemingly objective view of events that appears to present the viewer with a detached and depersonalized truth, with a coherent message. Even when competing voices are shown, they are all filtered through a single, and what appears to be a neutral and authorless, point of view through the transparent camera. There is only one way to see something: the way it comes through the screen. There is only one way to see the images on the screen, only one view (Baudrillard 1994, 23). Every voice is subsumed by that point of view so that dominant and oppositional statements merge into a single, containable point of view. By being so contained, and merged, there is, again, the illusion of resolution, reinforced by the pithy closing statement of the television correspondent.

Thus what happens before the camera has an illusion of reality and objectivity, allowing viewers to “see things for themselves” through an objective and detached camera rather than through mediated words on a page. Some students say that this sense of being able to see things for themselves, lends television a greater authority than print. Television, through its virtual window on the rest of the world, brings that world into the comfort of our living room. One of the characters in Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* remarks, “For most people there are only two places in the world. Where they live and their TV set” (1985, 66). This virtual encounter with the rest of the world also affects our students. For most, the majority of the information they get outside of their face-to-face experiences comes through television, more than virtually all other media combined (Kaiser Family Foundation 1999).

The students I talked with implied a distrust for the slipperiness of language compared to the hard objectivity of the image. As Kevin said, “It’s so much better to get it live and on the screen than going through newspaper articles and stuff like that. It [television] is so much more accessible.” For some students the problem was not only print, but the idea of the single authorial presence behind the printed words. Karen said, “If I had to choose the news on television or the news in the paper, I’d prefer the news on television because I have this picture of newspaper editors being really biased.” And Julie also said that, “When I want to be able to really know what happened someplace I’ll turn on the TV. That way I can see it for myself rather than through the eyes of one person who is writing about it.”

The idea of “seeing it for yourself” is, of course, part of the great power of television. It plays on the immediacy television can offer and its

sense of liveness to provide us with the illusion of unmediated communication. The idea of seeing something with your own eyes is a powerful measure of reliability and accuracy in our culture. David Marc points out the central authoritative role of television by noting that for a revolt to succeed in the nineteenth century, the revolutionaries had to gain control of public squares; today's revolutionaries must set their sites on television stations (1995, 57). Marc imagines a situation in which a military figure appears on CNN declaring that he has deposed the president and taken power:

Would the viewer scoff at this as nonsense, or would the very fact that this person is appearing on television lend credence to his claim? Indeed, wouldn't the burden of proof fall on the elected government to demonstrate that a coup had not taken place? What strategy might the elected government choose to attempt to reassert itself? It would have to "take back" CNN (for Ted Turner, or perhaps away from him) or make convincing counterbroadcasts over other networks. (1995, 57)

It is difficult to imagine a way in which print, whether newspapers or novels, could command the same form of cultural authority in our society. What would give the coup leader credibility would be his "live" presence on television, more than what he might actually say.

It is not without purpose that so many television stations title their news programs *Eyewitness News*. Television's potential to provide live and seemingly unmediated communication during a breaking news story lends the illusion of liveness to many of its broadcasts. This sense of liveness, in turn, provides television with a great deal of authority and credibility with viewers. What we see on television does not seem to have been mediated or interpreted through a single consciousness the way an article in print does. People talking to a news reporter on television talk to the reporter, not the camera, giving the viewer the illusion of dropping in on a more "normal" conversation. Only the "representatives of television," such as news anchors (or talk show hosts or the president) get to talk directly to the viewer (Morse 1998, 38). In current broadcasting, the reporter may talk toward the camera, creating the illusion of being in conversation with the news anchors sitting at the main desk, rather than with the viewers. Courtney said, "When you're watching, it puts it all in front of you so you don't have to imagine it anymore." Even though a news story on television may be reported by someone standing in front of the camera, we still turn to television news primarily for its sense of immediacy and its powerful images. It is also the stories that have the most powerful images that dominate television news programs.

It is this impression of reality, of the camera's being turned on the "real world," that makes television significantly different not only from print, but from film as well. We expect artifice on film, delivered in the theatre. But our television screen functions like a special window in our house that can bring the events of the world to us (at a comfortable remove). Our view of the world is mediated by what we see through that window. So, while violent crimes in schools may have decreased every year since 1991, the rash of highly televised school shootings in the late 1990s increased the public perception that schools were more dangerous than before, and led to a flurry of proposed laws to protect schools from what was actually a minimal threat.

We look to television to give us the live and authoritative version of the important events of the day, the version we can see for ourselves. Because of the power of images and the immediacy and power of the real or virtual communal gathering around the television to see the breaking news, our memories of the important public events of the day often revolve around television. Ask someone under forty for her or his first memory of a public event and it may very well be tied to having watched it on television. For me, it was watching the funeral of the *Apollo 1* astronauts, who were killed in a launchpad fire. Even if we don't see an event as it happens, it gets replayed so often, so immediately, and in the same form in which it happened "live" that it may seem as if we did see it the first time. In a study begun immediately after the *Challenger* space shuttle disaster, psychologists Ulric Neisser and Nicole Harsch interviewed students to find out where they were when they heard the news. When they reinterviewed the same students several years later, many of the students who had not watched the disaster live on television insisted that they had, in fact, seen it happen on television. When shown their earlier interviews, they did not remember their initial description of events (Sturken 1997, 37). Neisser and Harsh concluded that "The hours of later television watching may have been more strongly rehearsed, more unique, more compatible with a social script than the actual occasions of first contact" (Sturken 1997, 37). It is not surprising that people rewrite their memories to include television because, not only would they have had the chance to see the events as they first appeared replayed time and again, but television is where we expect to find the immediate and authoritative version that we can see for ourselves and share with our imagined community.

As television becomes our virtual window to the world, we don't identify with the camera any more than we identify with our living-room window, but we do delegate our gaze to it (Grossberg 1997, 133). Because this televisual window often brings us real events in real time, it also makes the line between "real" and "manufactured" events

more difficult—if not impossible—to discern. After a while, after the television movie of the news event has been made and broadcast, it becomes difficult to separate the real story from the fictional adaptation. As Margo Jefferson notes, in this process of turning news events into entertainment the events “get reshaped, not only through editing, but also through storytelling, just as the ancient chronicles of war and conquest once did. And thus they become part legend and part history as they are passed down” (1999, B2). The attempt to respond to this ascendance of image over reality, according to Jean Baudrillard, is an even more robust effort to create reality in the “escalation of the true, of lived experience . . . [the] panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential” (1994, 7). It is no longer enough for television to offer movies “based on real events” in which actors re-create reality. Television has moved on to “reality” programming, such as *Real TV* with its home videos of tragedies ranging from firefighter injuries to small-plane crashes, or *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, in which home videos of less lethal mishaps are played for slapstick comedy. The result of these broadcasts, however, is not to provide real referents for the images on the screen, but to further intensify the sense that all of the representations are pure images without real referents. In this way viewers can watch a program such as *World’s Scariest Police Chases*, which shows “real” videos of high-speed car chases, complete with collisions into other cars, people, and buildings (shown and reshowed in excruciating slow motion), and not be sickened by the sight of shattered and bleeding bodies because those bodies are not “real” anymore. It is no longer possible for the audience to comprehend the real referent of that image of a person hit by a speeding car.

### Authority and Experience

Print, on the other hand, is never the reality it represents. As theorists have pointed out, the black marks on the page are abstract representations of real objects. There is nothing about words on the page that indicates liveness or immediacy. It is precisely the opposite. In the academy we rely on print not for immediacy or liveness, but for reflection, analysis, and detachment that we expect will represent the thoughts and insights of a single consciousness, the interpretation of an individual. The humanistic foundation on which composition and literature are constructed maintains that what we teach can somehow help students improve themselves whether as scholars, students, individuals, or members of society. Mediation through a single consciousness is as much the point of print as the illusion of unmediated liveness is the point of television.

When we measure the quality of printed work, we search for signs of the logical workings of that single writer's mind, of the writer's *ethos*. Ethos in a piece of intellectual writing is demonstrated through the quality of the analysis, the attention to detail, the thoughtful use of data and outside sources. Although figures on television, from newsreaders to talk show hosts to sitcom stars, often create a sense of ethos, particularly given the daily or weekly repetition of words and actions, their ethos results from viewers' emotional responses to the people on the screen. Thus actors who play doctors in television dramas can do effective advertisements for medicine, not because their authority is based on what they know, have done, or can demonstrate through their intellect, but because the image they portray, the figure they have become in the simulacra, makes them "feel" like a doctor to the viewer at home.

The paradox is that although students will say that they find television more authoritative than print, they will often read the print assigned in college courses uncritically, accepting claims and data without question. If they found the information in a book, they assume it is accurate. Such readings point to the institutional power of the academy in projecting its authority. We are all taught to regard schools as repositories of truth and facts; certainly that is how elementary and high schools portray themselves to their students. Consequently, most students don't arrive at college thinking that the truths and facts in their textbooks and library books are socially constructed and contested. The way they read a newspaper at home might be quite different than the way they read an article in a college course.

The other part of the paradox is that, though they may assign more authority to television than to print, students are not necessarily uncritical when it comes to the reliability of what they see on television. They often remain skeptical of the material on television. They are often aware that what they are seeing is mediated, and created with the goal of higher ratings in mind. Peter, one of the few students who regarded print as unambiguously more reliable than television, said that

TV kills itself with what it puts on . . . The networks are pretty famous for suiting their own agendas and putting their own spin on things. Like the show that put the explosive device under the Ford truck to make sure it did explode. Like Fox did the alien autopsy. They hyped it for weeks. "You decide if it's real!" Then a year later they do a thing on the greatest hoaxes of all time and there is the alien autopsy.

Andrew also voiced skepticism about the motives behind some of the programs he watched. He mentioned MTV's *The Real World*, in which a group of young people are housed and filmed together for several months. Andrew said that the first season of the show was interesting,

but that subsequent seasons had gone downhill because “now people just want to get on it to launch their acting careers, so they will make things happen instead of you just seeing what things might naturally happen.”

Several students talked about their awareness of the way in which seeing events on television is not the same as seeing them in person. Courtney talked about watching *Trauma: Life in the ER*, a program that documents and reenacts cases that happen in emergency rooms. She preferred it to *ER*, the fictional program, because it was more “based in reality.” Yet she had questions about the reliability of what she saw on *Trauma*. For example, she imagined that people whose cases appeared on the show must get paid in order to be willing to share that much pain with the public. She also questioned the “reality” of what she saw on the program. “It’s not even really for medical teaching; it’s for entertainment. I know they probably edit out a lot and change it to make it more entertaining. They do a lot of reenactments. So it maybe doesn’t always happen the way they show it happen.”

In a similar way, Kevin talked about having watched programs such as *World’s Scariest Police Chases* and *World’s Most Bizarre Medical Cases* on Fox. Though he occasionally found such programs appealing, he also realized that they showed events he could only watch through the mediating influence of the television screen. Sounding as if he could be a French theorist, he said,

TV sanitizes things. It makes it look like it’s not real. Stuff like the police chases, all that is real. But there is so much fake stuff on TV that even when you know it’s not [fake], even at some subconscious level you think that it is. If you saw it right in front of you, you’d say “Oh my God!” and start freaking out. But when you see it on TV you point and laugh. It’s still people getting killed and there’s nothing funny about that. But for some reason when it’s removed it’s entertainment, not disaster.

This illuminates what results from deep experience with any kind of text. In this case, because the students had watched a great deal of television, they had an understanding of form and content, of what can be manipulated, and of how it looks when it is manipulated. Consequently they could be quite skeptical and critical of television because they know how to read it. In fact the ability to discern manipulation may be part of what makes the medium more authoritative for students; the more we can understand how something works, the more we trust it when it is working well. Certainly academics become more comfortable judging scholarly articles as they learn the ins and outs of research methods and rhetorical strategies. The same students often have less experience with determining the ethos of a writer or the

quality of analysis in a scholarly essay. They have read relatively few articles or essays of the kind they confront in college; their primary reading experiences in schools have either been with textbooks that present material as objective fact, or with literature that they are asked to read in order to be able to pass quizzes, fill out worksheets, and write expository summary essays. First-year students can't yet determine how and when they are being manipulated in the kind of print they are assigned in college. This unfamiliarity leads either to a dismissal of all work as being manipulative ("that way you never get suckered in") or to an uncritical acceptance of anyone who seems to write with authority and provide data.

What information is most authoritative is not necessarily the same as what information is most significant. Although the students I talked with said that they found television more reliable than print, they also said that they did not usually turn the television on for news or current-events programs. For these students, information and news were not the primary reason to watch television, though they were mentioned as possible reasons even by those who said they never watched the news. Instead, television was perceived primarily as a medium of entertainment, devoid of ideas. "TV is just there to take up time, to entertain you. You're not going to get any big lessons from it," Jennifer said. More than half of the students talked about perceived differences between the intent of a television program and the intent of a piece of writing. They regarded print texts as having a weightier and worthier purpose. Peter said, in the only comment to touch on the formal differences in writing between the two media,

I think in general when somebody writes a book they want you to think about something, some kind of moral or story. They really have something they want to convey. I think that a lot of times television is written because it has to be written. You have to put out twenty-four episodes a year until you get canceled. Television is supposed to be more about entertainment. It's not supposed to get you to think about anything challenging.

The perception that television is a medium of pure entertainment, a vehicle for selling advertising, and ultimately a mindless waste of time, results from television's reliance on emotion, images, and quick irony. This contrasts with the academy's reliance on analysis, words, and depth.

It is not novel to say that an integral part of teaching writing is the teaching of critical reading skills. Even so, we may need to spend even more time teaching those skills than we have in the past. We can't take for granted that students have experience with critical reading. Students respond to television with a complex combination

of acceptance and skepticism that we do not acknowledge or address in writing classes. Perhaps we would be able to begin teaching critical reading skills if we drew on students' critical television reading skills. If we can help students begin to unpack the paradox of how they consider the authority and reliability of a medium they read well, a paradox they may not have examined but can articulate when asked, then perhaps we can find more paths into the same considerations of how they can read print more critically and creatively. Such reading of print will invariably lead to better writing.

Television as a cultural force pervades all of our lives and influences some of our fundamental assumptions about communication. Yet, as viewers, we can remain unaware of these influences unless we examine and interrogate what may initially seem to be innocuous responses to the medium. The students I talked with did not, in making their comments about time, speed, authorship, authority, and purpose, see the same implications about writing and reading that I saw. And many of my conclusions about the implications came only after I had considered and reconsidered what the students had said. That is part of the difficulty in trying to understand how television affects what we try to do in the writing classroom. Television, as the Heath quote at the beginning of this chapter reminds us, is always present in our lives and the lives of our students, so it is always present in our classes, whether there is a set in the corner of the room or not. As writing teachers we can, however, examine our assumptions about television and writing, and talk with students about theirs. In doing so we can find potentially rich ways of opening up the articulations between the two media.

For four chapters I have discussed students' perceptions of television and writing and reading; and what they say about reading and writing is important and provocative. Yet what happens when students sit down to watch television, or read a print essay? How do they watch a television program? How does the visual nature of television influence how they "read" programs? What are the implications of how they watch television in a social context when compared with the social context of the writing classroom? These are some of the questions I will address in the next two chapters as I look at students in the act of reading television and print.

## **Classroom Practice**

John Ellis, in his description of how television "works through" compelling issues of the day, provides both a way of understanding television and an easily available analogy for what we often want students to

find in the writing process. Ellis talks about how television news programs, from breaking news to analysis to chat, try to establish order on disordered events.

It uses words, providing forms of explanation and understanding, further information and the kinds of psychological perspectives that are impossible within the news format. Television also works through by providing increasing stability to the images of disorder: it reframes and focuses; it narrativizes and adds production values. (1999, 57)

As with the writing process, the method of television news is to take a disordered event—a breaking news story—and provide it with an explanatory narrative and, eventually, criticism and analysis. In any given semester, it is easy to find a breaking news story that will develop and be analyzed on television during the semester. This lets the class follow the process by which television works through the story. Initial explanations or narratives are either developed or discarded; new events or characters emerge and alter the story or opinions about the story; analysts draw different conclusions from the same events; and—as a potent reminder of the commercial motor that drives television and turns all events into entertainment—the story is eventually turned into a television movie with its own authoritative narrative.

This is, at one level, a useful analogy to the writing process, in which initially disordered events or ideas are put into order, revised upon further information or reflection, and eventually analyzed for underlying reasons. Students find this analogy particularly helpful when it comes to explaining the need to analyze or critique the information they have gathered. In the same way that television analysts are usually physically distant from the news events, I can help students see that they need to create an intellectual distance from the information in their writing to reflect on the reasons behind it, to answer the “why” questions. Sporting events on television are also a microcosm of the same process. The events of a game, spontaneous and unpredictable, are given first a narrative, then a postgame analysis, then a next-day analysis by the commentators.

One example of how this worked with a class involved the controversy over voting in Florida in the 2000 presidential election. I began by bringing in clips of reports that had been broadcast on network and cable news programs. We discussed these brief stories in class and had no problem generating a number of questions that the news stories didn’t answer. I continued to bring in stories over the next few days and we began to discuss the central narratives adopted by the news programs. By this time, news talk shows had picked up the story and brought in “experts” on “opposing” sides of the issue. Students quickly saw that the same narrative dominated the discussion on *Nightline*, the

*News Hour*, and the multitude of cable news talk shows. (They also noticed that some of the same people showed up on different shows and said the same things.) I emphasized that the talk shows were no longer reporting breaking events, but were discussing different opinions about the issue, even if often in a simplistic and confrontational manner. We kept track of which of our initial questions were addressed and of new questions that arose. By the time the story had developed for a week or so I was able to bring in tapes of *Washington Week in Review* or *Washington Journal*, where the discussion was more detached, analytical, focused on the reasons for and the implications of the events. At each point that I brought in a new clip of the television coverage, and this would usually be just part of a class session, I made explicit connections to how the students' thinking was developing in their writing projects. Were they discovering initial information about a topic? Identifying the key issues of the opposing sides? Beginning to step back and analyze the information they had found?

There are significant differences between what happens as television news programs process events and the way we want students to use reading and writing in the academy, and it's important to address those differences. The commercial and temporal constraints on television news require that events be increasingly simplified, rather than more complicated. The need to keep the largest possible audience engaged requires that television address issues not with depth, but with breadth and in a way that encourages easy comprehension. Ideas and issues are reduced to the point where they can be understood fairly easily. Consequently, the major television news outlets often quickly adopt a standard narrative of the breaking story. Analysis of this narrative on television often requires setting up binaries on a given issue. *Nightline* or *The News Hour* will often have two guests on to discuss a particular issue from what are constructed as the two opposing sides. News programs routinely set up stories to represent proponents and opponents of a plan and to distill those two arguments. My students easily understand that they have to address *both* sides of an issue in a piece of persuasive writing or journalism, but rarely, unless I remind them, do they assume that there may be *multiple* perspectives.

Toward that end, during the discussion of the 2000 election I brought in articles from alternative newspapers, Web sites, and magazines that had a broader variety of views about the subject. This allowed the students to see what voices were not being heard in the binaries favored by television. It also raised more questions about who was providing more reasonable and accurate information. At this point I could discuss the need for background, which could be gained from research, that would help us put the multiple voices into some kind of context. I also talked about how a need to understand an issue more fully could

probably not be met on television or even in the popular press. This is the point, I told my students, at which I would turn to books and scholarly primary sources that addressed the issue with more time, care, and thought if I wanted to pursue this issue further. These sources would probably not lead me to a simple answer, but they would help me have a more complex and thoughtful understanding. A number of the students in the class did pursue the subject in just this way.

Unlike the broad audience watching television, in the academy the intended audience is often assumed to be specialists in a given field. The level of specific expertise required to get through graduate school and find a job in the academy is no surprise to faculty, but it is often quite a surprise to students. Many times I have seen first-year students overwhelmed by an initial trip to the periodicals floor at the library, where they are confronted with a seemingly endless vista of shelves of specialized—and in their eyes esoteric and impenetrable—scholarly journals. I often feel the same way. My colleagues and I work so hard to keep up with the literature in our field that we rarely have time to venture into other disciplines in the humanities, let alone the sciences and social sciences. In academics, the point is to understand an issue in depth and with a full comprehension of the nuances and often contradictions of the arguments. Bringing this conflict between the generalist thrust of television, with its need to abbreviate and simplify, and the specialist focus of academe, with its need to expand and complicate, into the classroom can help students understand the conventions and assumptions that guide communication in both areas.