



MEETING MODERN READERS ON A COMMON PLANE

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“Who is everywhere is nowhere.”

Seneca, Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium

The digital age we now live in demands our willing participation and adaptation. We must incorporate many devices and digital interfaces into our daily lives. Our willingness, and in most cases eagerness, to comply with the demands of our digital environment has changed the ways we process information. Major cognitive shifts like this are not unprecedented; inventions such as the clock, the map, and the book have changed the way we as individuals, and as a society, function.¹ These inventions have also changed the way our brains process and encode information.² What does this “digital cognitive shift” mean for us as readers and writers?

Vladimir Nabokov’s 1948 lecture “Good Readers and Good Writers” discusses the relationship between the reader and the writer. This relationship is like any other: for its success both parties must strive to understand each other, as well as work with and for each other. He describes what it means to be a good reader and what obligation they have to the writer:

A good reader . . . is an active rereader When we read a book for the first time the very process of laboriously moving our eyes from left to right, line after line, page after page, this complicated physical work upon the book, the very process of learning in terms of space and time what the book is about, this stands between us and artistic appreciation.

Here, Nabokov directs us to invest time and energy into a literary work. These investments have become an obstacle many modern readers struggle, or are unwilling, to overcome. This obstacle can be traced to our increasing use of digital technology.

¹ Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

² The way our brains adapt to our changing environments is known as neuroplasticity. For more information, check out BrainFacts.org.

Between 2000 and 2015, the average attention span dropped by 3.75 seconds.³ A recent attention span research report produced by Microsoft states:

Tech adoption, social media usage, and multi-screening behaviors mean consumers are getting worse at paying attention for extended periods of time, but they're able to do more with less through higher bursts of attention and more efficient encoding to memory Filtering out distractions isn't related to tech or social media usage or media consumption, but it declines with more multi-screening. Brands need to hold consumers' attention to compete with other stimuli, but there's also potential to grab attention away from other interests.⁴

Multi-screening behaviors pull our attention away from the text at hand, enabling a phenomenon I believe anyone with an ounce of Internet competency has experienced: falling down the Internet Rabbit Hole. This is when we become distracted from what we are intending to do and are continually coaxed by hypertext, banners, pop-up windows, etc. into clicking links that lead us to pages with more links, as if the next thing we find will be more interesting and more compelling than the last.

When we experience the Internet Rabbit Hole, our mode of reading becomes one of scanning. Scanning for information does have its merits: for instance, we glance over an article to assess if it has pertinent information—then we dive in deeper, or not, based on our initial judgments. But reading by jumping from topic to topic allows us only a superficial understanding of a broad variety of subjects. Compare this to the full comprehension of one subject promoted by the typical format of a book.

We no longer use skimming or scanning for the assessment of information but for its full comprehension.⁵ Yet, even as our brains adapt “through higher bursts of attention and more efficient encoding to memory,”⁶ scanning as a way of attaining information will not facilitate the neural processes needed to transfer information into long-term memory.⁷ In *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr gives a fitting description of scanning as a cultural phenomenon:

What we're experiencing is, in a metaphorical sense, a reversal of the early trajectory of civilization: we are evolving from being cultivators of personal knowledge to being hunters and gatherers in the electronic data forest.⁸

We can now order nearly anything to every residence, contact someone anywhere in the world, produce virtual reality, etc. With new technological advancements, physical exertion is no longer a

³ Leon Watson, [“Humans Have Shorter Attention Span Than Goldfish, Thanks to Smartphones.”](#) *The Telegraph* (London), May 15, 2015, accessed May 3, 2017.

⁴ Alyson Gausby, [“Attention Spans.”](#) *Consumer Insights, Microsoft Canada*, Spring 2015.

⁵ Carr, *The Shallows*.

⁶ Gausby, “Attention Spans.”

⁷ E. Kandel, and J. Schwartz, [“Molecular Biology of Learning: Modulation of Transmitter Release.”](#) *Science* 218, no. 4571 (1982): 433-43. doi:10.1126/science.6289442.

⁸ Carr, *The Shallows*, 95.

necessity to attain what we want, enabling us to easily feed our desire for infantile and passive pleasures. I believe this could be explained by the digital cognitive shift as well as its surrounding cultural phenomenon that expands beyond literature and concerns our inability to delay gratification, and where we as individuals place value. Simply put, we're experiencing shortening attention spans and an intolerance for exerting effort.

Do writers have a fighting chance to compete with infinitely more stimulating media forms? Carr finds that the best examples of writers' adaptability concerning the digital cognitive shift so far are found in newspapers:

Many papers, including industry stalwarts like the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Los Angeles Times*, have over the last few years moved to trim the length of their articles and introduce more summaries and navigational aids to make the scanning of their content easier In March of 2008, the *New York Times* [began] devoting three pages of every edition to paragraph-long article abstracts and other brief items [In contrast, a] few magazines, realizing that competing with the Web on its own terms is a losing proposition, have reversed their strategies. They've gone back to simpler, less cluttered designs and longer articles.⁹

These are two approaches writers can take in the battle for readers' attention: we can pander to the Internet's form, enabling our readers to view our work in this less linear and drastically attenuated fashion, or we can write in a style that is the antithesis of the Internet's form, where we push our readers to do the heavy cognitive lifting that seems to be slipping away from our culture as a whole.

However, I'd like to stress that these approaches are not a dichotomy; they function as a spectrum, and when deciding what method to use we should handle each writing task individually, determining what the best approach may be for the intended reader's active mental investment and full appreciation. A reader will not gain much without the hard work of the author. But once a piece is done, the question that remains is, will readers put in the time to contemplate and deliberate over the author's work?

Even before the Internet's recent effect on our cognition, authors have struggled to hold readers' attention. In the '90s, David Foster Wallace wrote a dense, encyclopedic novel called *Infinite Jest*. At the time, public interest in literary fiction was waning. Literary fiction could not compete with the popularity or profitability of genre fiction, such as the work of Stephen King or John Grisham. Concerning *Infinite Jest*, Wallace admitted in a radio interview, "One of the things I was trying to do with this book is have it be long and difficult, but have it be fun enough so that somebody would be almost seduced into doing the work."¹⁰

Today, we have only become more apprehensive to do this heavy cognitive lifting. Accepting the neurological and cultural changes in audience attention, while still working with readers, can be frustrating, but writers must keep in mind that writing, at its base, is communication. Understanding

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ David Foster Wallace, [interview by Leonard Lopate](#), *The Leonard Lopate Show*, WNYC 93.9 FM, March 4, 1996.

contemporary audiences and being willing to meet with them on mutual ground is something that writers must do for effective communication.

In 1979, Linda Flower wrote an essay on Reader- and Writer-Based prose, an essay which discusses, in part, meeting readers on a mutual ground. She writes:

Reader-Based prose is a deliberate attempt to communicate something to a reader. To do that it creates a shared language and shared context between writer and reader. It also offers the reader an issue-centered rhetorical structure rather than a replay of the writer's discovery process. In its language and structure, Reader-Based prose reflects the purpose of the writer's thought; Writer-Based prose tends to reflect its process. Good writing, therefore, is often the cognitively demanding transformation of the natural but private expressions of Writer-Based thought into a structure and style adapted to a reader.¹¹

This transformation is by no means an easy task—we call our first drafts “rough” drafts for a reason. Just like the reader's work, turning Writer-Based prose into Reader-Based prose takes time and dedication. But meeting readers with Reader-Based prose is vital to the reader's ability to perceive the intent of an author. How, or if, you choose to meet your reader is a choice only you can make. And yet, readers are not the same as they were in 1979. We must now meet our readers in entirely different ways than Linda Flower or Vladimir Nabokov could have anticipated in the twentieth century.

New forms of media will no doubt have words and will have writers writing them, but how are we going to face the changing climate of language in the digital age? The Internet is unavoidable. These cognitive shifts are not mere contemplations; they have already altered us. We now have constant stimulation from our different media mediums. We can only wait and watch our language adapt and evolve. However, do not forget that neutrality in communication is impossible: every time you use a word you increase its chances of being used again by those who hear it, and because of this, every word we write, sentence we construct, and paragraph we scribe is part of the ongoing plasticity of language, human culture, and the cognitive functions of every individual. We can't be perfect readers or writers, but we can strive to be good readers and good writers, exerting all we can afford into anything we read or write. Everyone will play a part, no matter how small, in the coming evolutions of communication.

¹¹ Linda Flower, [“Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing.”](https://doi.org/10.2307/376357) *College English* 41 no. 1 (1979): 20, accessed April 20, 2017, doi:10.2307/376357.