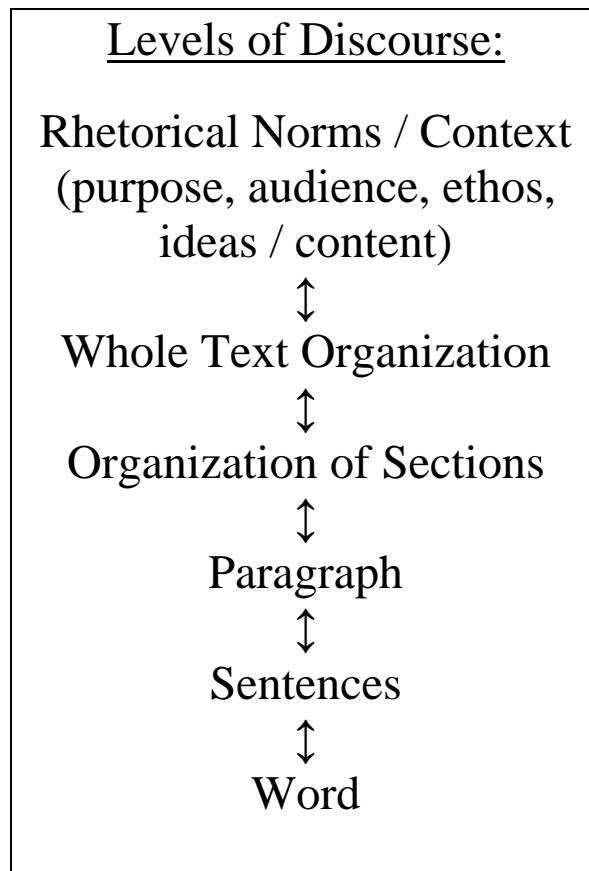


LEVELS OF DISCOURSE

Writing, like speech and all other forms of communication, involves complicated processes or sequences of decision-making, informed by the rhetorical norms / contextual elements of purpose, audience, ethos (the personality that comes through the text), and subject matter. At every moment in the production of a written text, the writer must choose from among an array of alternatives. Writing also involves decision-making at a variety of different levels of discourse, from the most all-encompassing level of the rhetorical norms (the level of thinking at which writers conceptualize the writing project) to the levels of organization (levels where writers conceive of how to arrange what they want to say) to the most local levels of stylistic choices (levels where writers make decisions about paragraphing, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling).



Several points need to be made about levels of discourse:

- Levels of discourse tend to blend together, and so, it is not uncommon for there to be some confusion regarding a writer's decisions. Word choice is an example. Some choices of words are less important than others. Deciding on whether to restate a noun already used or to replace it with a pronoun is a lower-level choice, important for stylistic reasons relating to the development of a writer's ethos but less important to the actual ideas of the text. On the other hand, some word choices involve crucial rhetorical decisions about what subject matter to present, who the audience for the text is, and what ethos the text should express.
- Conceiving of discourse as levels of decision-making suggests a hierarchy—that is, a ranking—of decisions, with the upper-level rhetorical norms being most important and the lower levels of paragraph, sentence, and word being of lesser importance. In a sense, this ranking is justifiable. Decisions about purpose, audience, ethos, subject matter, and then organization are more important than decisions about when to include a paragraph break, how to structure particular sentences, what kind of punctuation to use, and whether to use “a” or “an.” Errors in purpose, audience, ethos, and subject matter affect the entire text and can even render it worthless. Errors at lower levels may not have such dramatic effects.

But thinking in that way, we can fail to see the genuine importance of lower-level decisions. The problem with classifying components of discourse in levels is that lower-level discourse decisions affect upper-level components just as upper-level discourse decisions direct and control lower-level decision-making. Most obviously, decisions about style can dramatically affect ethos. Serious grammatical mistakes and misspellings can cause a loss of credibility for the writer. Less obvious, perhaps, but no less problematic are stylistic errors affecting audience. For example, a failure to adequately create paragraph breaks can make a text difficult to read. Readability directly affects audience.

Thus, we need to attend to the arrows that connect levels of discourse in our graphic representation on the previous page. These arrows point in both directions, up as well as down, in an effort to try to capture the complicated relations that exist among the levels. But even the use of these dual-directional arrows really doesn't do justice to the complexities of decision-making involved in the production of discourse.