

Additional Information About Hypertext

What Is Hypertext? Landow (2001) defines it as “text composed of lexias (blocks of words, moving or static images, or sounds) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended web” (p. 154). He emphasizes that the “link” plays the “defining role” in hypertext, “for all the chief practical, cultural, and educational characteristics of this medium derive from the fact that linking creates new kinds of connectivity and reader choice (2001, p. 154).

According to Jane Yellowlees Douglas (1998), hypertext was created to make documentation more accessible to a variety of users (p. 145). The term, as defined by Ilana Snyder (1998), is a medium of information existing only online in a computer (p. 126). Douglas (1998) states that hypertext, as a computer-mediated form of writing, enables “authors to construct texts that can be read in a variety of orders, suitable for different audiences with widely divergent interests and even reading skills” (p. 145). It is a text that is never read the same way twice, according to fiction hypertext author Michael Joyce (1990). As Douglas (1998) states, “hypertext is the ‘glue’ that holds the Internet together, linking a travel company’s page on escorted tours of Istanbul with a page on the history of Istanbul’s Hippodrome or a chronology of Byzantine history supplied by a university department of history” (p. 145). Of course, what he is describing here is a living collage, its continually changing form dependent on its readers.

Joyce (1998), in his discussion of hypertext fiction, states that we experience it as “wayward, embodied and illegitimate” (p. 179).

This is the cyborg [fictional bionic human] consciousness, what Donna Haraway (1991, p. 177) calls “an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction.” Hypertext, even on the web, both embodies and is itself solely embodied by what in print is an invisible process of nonetheless constant waywardness. The reader of a hypertext not only chooses the way she reads but her choices in fact become what it is. The text continually rewrites itself and becomes what I term the constructive hypertext: a version of what it is becoming, a structure for what does not yet exist. (p. 179-80)

Snyder (1998), too, uses the term “hypertext” to represent both the structure and the content of this type of information technology and states that it is “constructed partly by the writers who create the links, and partly by readers who decide which threads to follow” (p. 126). Because hypertext encourages rapid, non-sequentially ordered reading, in contrast to the linear nature of reading that a printed text most generally offers, according to Snyder, “Hypertext differs from printed text by offering readers multiple paths through a body of information: it allows them to make their own connections, incorporate their own links, and produce their own meanings. Hypertext consequently blurs the boundaries between readers and writers” (p. 127). This description of hypertext reveals how it affects reading and writing, as well as how we will teach reading and writing in the future. According to Snyder (1998), it will affect “how we define literacy practices” (p. 127).

Snyder (1998) also points out that due to its networked construction of links “between words, ideas and sources,” hypertext “has neither a center nor an end” (p. 127). To read hypertext, one must navigate it “taking detours to ‘footnotes,’ and from those ‘footnotes’ to others, exploring what in print culture would be described as ‘digressions’ as long and complex as the ‘main’ text” (p. 127). And, Snyder (1998) continues, “The extent of hypertext is unknowable because it lacks clear boundaries and is often multi-authored” (p. 127).

Landow’s web project, [cyberartsweb.org](http://www.cyberartsweb.org) provides a list of characteristics for defining hypertext (<http://www.cyberartsweb.org/cpace/gender/raymond/ghypertext.html>). Hypertext is “a-linear,” multivocal, an equal-opportunity environment for both writers and readers, decentered, a form of prosthesis, and both supplement as well as text.

[T]he hypertextual environment allows for the a-linear progression of ideas [It] allows true multivocality. Supplementary texts; footnotes; texts that, in book form, would exist physically isolated from supplementary texts, can be physically implanted in the network of texts This multivocality gives the reader more agency Some programs offer the reader the same environment as the “author”—such that the reader can append and link their own comments, additions, to the text, in such a way that there is no distinction or boundary between the original text and the additions, thus shifting and blurring the boundary between reader and writer [The term “prosthesis” has been used for this

concept of writing, which relates back to the fictional cyborgs, which use “technological prosthesis in order to constitute their own subjectivities” (Greco, qtd. in Landow, cyberarts.org).] Finally, a hypertextual text has no fixed center; rather, its center keeps shifting as the reader pursues various links and trains of thought.

According to Diane Greco, “Hypertext [is] a literal embodiment not only of postmodern fragmentation but also its possible resolution” (from *Cyborgs among Us: Bodies and Hypertext*, qtd. in Landow, cyberarts.org). One advantage Snyder (1998), agreeing with Greco, sees for using hypertext in education is “that it simulates and subsequently clarifies some of the most significant ideas of postmodern literary theories” (p. 134). Landow, along with other postmodern theorists (Bolter, 1991; Lanham 1993; and Johnson-Eilola, 1994), also agree. Landow (1994) sees the parallels between hypertext and postmodernism are so strong that the two fields have “converged” (p. 3). According to Snyder (1998), both Landow and Lanham “enthusiastically advocate the benefits of hypertext for education in the humanities and social sciences” (p. 139). Lanham (1993) believes that a techno centric view,

permits theorists to make judgments about the type of interactions readers and writers will have with hypertext as well as predictions about its effects on the institutions of publishing, education and government—all based on the physical characteristics of hypertext as an environment for discourse. (p. 423).

Likewise, student writers can make informed judgments and predictions of this nature.

As one can see, it is difficult to fully define hypertext, because it occurs in many forms. “As with print, the projected audience for hypertext largely determines the system’s characteristics” (Snyder, 1998, p. 127). Snyder (1998) suggests that instead of trying to create a generic, one-size-fits-all definition of hypertext, that “it is more helpful to identify the principle types” (p. 127). This can be a useful exercise for classroom discussion, as students examine various hypertext sources and conduct an audience analysis on each one.

Snyder (1998) suggests that hypertexts be analyzed along a continuum:

At one extreme, a hypertext document may be so restrictive that readers find they have no more (and perhaps even fewer) navigational choices than they would with a linear version of the text. At the other extreme, a hypertext document may be so open, interconnected and reader-controlled that users could be overwhelmed by the multiplicity of choices. (p. 128)

Snyder (1998) warns that there are those who praise hypertext with hyperbole, while—at the other extreme—there are those who see it as a threat and a “totalitarian nightmare” (p. 129). Claims on both extremes, according to Snyder (1998), “must be interrogated assiduously” (p. 133). Cynthia Self and R. J. Self (1994) support Snyder, stating, “computers, like other complex technologies, are articulated in many ways with a range of existing cultural forces

and with a variety of projects in our educational system . . .that run the gamut from liberatory to oppressive” (p. 482).

It is important for teachers to be informed of this technology and its potential effects on reading and writing, culture and society. As Snyder (1998) points out, “Teachers who are neither trained in nor sympathetic towards hypertext pedagogy will either ignore or subvert its potential” (p. 140).