

## To Sleep, Perchance to Read

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“In the beginning was the word.” No one knows who invented writing (although it has been attributed to the Egyptian god, Thoth) or when the written word first appeared in human history, but it seems likely that for as long as there has been writing, people have dreamed about it, and no doubt puzzled about its meaning.

When we speak of “reading in dreams” we of course mean something quite different from the ordinary process of reading, as we shall see below. In everyday life, when we read a book, our minds construct an understanding of what the book is saying, but we don’t also have to construct the book. In dreams, we do. Thus, dream-writing is by nature less stable, definite, and fixed, as has been noted by lucid dreamers for many years.

### Reading in Lucid Dreams

As early as 1936, Alfred Embury Brown described reading in a lucid dream: “I have a book with an index. ‘I have never in a dream looked up anything with an index. I will try it.’ Quite realistically I verify an indexed title. I walk about the room. . . .I continue to dream but without lucidity.” (1) Most other lucid dreamers have not reported fully realistic dream-reading; as Oliver Fox noted, “In a Dream of Knowledge [Fox’s term for lucid dreaming] reading is a very difficult matter. The print seems clear enough until one tries to read it; then the letters become blurred, or run together, or fade away, or change to others....Other people have told me that they find the same difficulty in reading dream-literature.” (2)

In a 1938 article, Harold von Moers-Messmer reported on the instability of text in lucid dreams. “Afterwards on looking inside the room I have bright spots for several seconds. As soon as they have vanished, I pick up a newspaper which is lying on the table and read without difficulty. Then I attempt to read the individual words backwards. As I do so there are many more letters than belong to the corresponding words. When I have read several words in this way, partly forwards and partly backwards, something remarkable happens. Some of them have changed their shape; they no longer consist of the usual letter, but form figures which bear a distinct resemblance to hieroglyphics.” (3)

To educated adults, reading is normally a nearly effortless, automatic process. Thus, skilled readers may not be aware of how complicated reading actually is. To read, we must recognize specific letter symbols. We must recognize the order of these letters and then the arrangement of the letters into words and the words into sentences. We must deal with grammar, syntax and, in spite of ambiguity and vague reference, somehow arrive ultimately at meaning.

Reading in dreaming can only happen if the dreamer identifies the text, can make out the letters, can understand the meaning, and then retain the meaning of the first words long enough to continue reading or carry the memory of the words into more of the dream. In dreams, the brain is constructing the images we see without the help of an external source of visual information about what is being “seen.” As a result, the dream tends to be less

stable than the physical world. The more complex the process involved in constructing the perception, the more likely that there will be a noticeable difference between dreaming and waking experience. Thus, given the complexity of reading, it is perhaps to be expected that dream-reading is likely to be a less stable and consistent process than waking-reading.

### Testing the Re-Reading State Test

Indeed, the instability of writing in dreams appeared so consistent and universal that I proposed it in 1985 as the most reliable state test: "I find some writing and read it (if I can!) once, look away, and reread it, checking to see if it stays the same; in all my lucid dreams, it is yet to do so." (4) Although anecdotally, many lucid dreamers have reported successfully using this technique, no studies had previously tested how reliably it works.

In a recent *NightLight* study (5) designed primarily to test the effectiveness of the re-reading state test (RRST), we asked subjects to attempt several well-defined reading and re-reading tasks in a lucid dream. The instructions for the first part of the experiment read as follows:

- Find something short to read in a lucid dream. Ideally, it should be some sort of sign, one to four words or so in length, but in any case, it should be short enough that you will have no trouble remembering exactly what it said the first time you read it.*
- A. Read aloud the writing.*
  - B. Look away from the writing at your hand, repeat aloud the writing twice.*
  - C. Intend and expect that the writing will be the same as it was on first reading, and look back at the writing.*
  - D. Read aloud the writing again. Has it changed? If so, memorize the writing before and after. And (ideally) wake up and write out your report. If it hasn't changed, again look away from the writing at your hand and again repeat aloud the writing twice.*
  - E. Intend and expect that the writing will be different than it was on the first two readings, and look back at the writing.*
  - F. Read aloud the writing a third time. Has it changed? Whether or not it has, memorize what happened and (ideally) wake up and write out your report.*

Forty-six subjects (27 men and 19 women) submitted report forms and lucid dream accounts in which they described the results of attempting to follow the above instructions. Thirty-eight subjects (83%) reported that the dream-writing changed in some way on re-reading; only eight subjects (17%) reported that it did not change.

The instructions only asked subjects to re-read the writing a second time if the dream-writing had *not* changed the first time. Thus, only eight subjects were supposed to attempt a second re-reading; seven of these eight re-read the writing a second time. Six of these seven subjects (86%) reported the writing to change on the second re-reading. Additionally, 19 subjects for whom the writing had changed on the first re-reading also did a second re-reading; for all 19 of these subjects (100%), the dream-writing changed on both re-readings.

For all subjects taken together, only one (2%) of the 46 reported the dream-writing not to change on the second if not the first re-reading. For the vast majority of subjects (98%), dream-writing changed in two or fewer re-readings.

## Ways in Which Words Changed

The words changed in different ways. One way in which text changed was in the *form* in which it occurred. For instance writing on paper becoming fanciful text on stone. Sometimes the color of the background would change and the lettering style would change even if the words remained the same. One subject reported a change in orientation even though the word was the same. Eleven subjects reported that the words stayed the same, but of these eleven, two reported that the surrounding ornamentation changed and the position of the word changed. Only nine subjects did not notice any change at all. Two subjects reported a font change on the words.

A second way in which the text changed was *lexical*. Sometimes, a single letter or syllable in the word would change. For instance, subjects reported a change from “IN PRINT” to “IN PBST” from “Freedom•FG” to “Threesome•GF”; from “Friday” to “Forday”; and from “WW999” to “WWW999”.

A third way in which the words changed was in rhyming or alliteration. For example, “Ken Tips” changed to “Tin Lips”, “National” to “Official”, “Colombo” to “Comumumbum”, and “Choral Even Song” to “Chapel Even Song” and then to “Fable Even Song”.

A fourth way in which words changed was semantic. For example, a stop sign’s English “STOP” became the Spanish, “ALTO”. Another change in semantic content was through association, such as noticing something about the scene and having the change in words reflect the change in attention. One subject in seeing a stack of carpet samples read, “Plush Carpets”, noticed the colors and then read, “Many Colors”. As is the way of dreams, many changes had no obvious relationship to the original words. “Is This A Dream?” became “Ce Cete”. “Fawn of Seven” became “Twilight Time”. “Security Driving Service” became “Parrot 223”.

## Reading Something Interesting

The second part of the experiment involved setting some goal of finding text in a dream that would be meaningful or interesting. The instructions were as follows: *Before bed think about finding some book or other writing in your dream that will be somehow interesting to you. There are different ways you can formulate what you are looking for, such as, “I want to read something that will tell me what I most need to know now.” Or something that will solve some particular problem, or the answer to some particular question. Write on the report form the phrase you decide upon. Later, after the lucid dream in which you try to read something interesting, fill out the rest of the form and send in your results.*

The report form also asked what the dream-writing said, what it meant to the subject, and whether or not the subject thought he or she had succeeded in finding interesting writing in the dream.

Thirty-five of the 46 subjects reported attempting this second part of the experiment. Of these, 14 subjects reported success in finding something interesting, 8 did not find anything of interest and 13 were undecided about whether or not the dream-writing was interesting or meaningful at the time of the report.

Seventeen of the subjects asked relatively specific questions and 18 asked more vague questions like the example in the instructions above. Nine of the 17 subjects (52%) with specific questions reported no success in finding answers compared to only five of the 18 (28%) with vague questions. Thirteen subjects reported success or possible success with a vague question and only six reported success with a specific question. Yet, the vague questions often had vague interpretations and many people thought it might be meaningful, but were not quite sure. Often the meaning of the dream was only meaningful to the dreamer, as dreams often are, some vague pointer in a vague direction, or a feeling or a sense of a direction in which the dreamer should go upon awakening. In the specific questions such as finding lyrics for a song, or looking at a book on cats, the reports were very clear when the dreamer had success or no success.

This might suggest that being open-minded in a lucid dream in which you are looking for meaning will be more successful, but perhaps not as conclusive as having a specific question in mind. Also, from the reports, the dream-text was often very obscure and often apparent nonsense. Most subjects reported having “just a feeling” about the actual meaning which made them think that this choice was better than another. One subject asked, “What am I doing at this moment?” The text he read was “Stop” for which he had multiple interpretations, yet which he found provocative.

Another subject asked, “How might I find my heart’s desire?” Her answer in the dream-writing was, “In Hell the twins triumphant in their washing” a phrase she found rich in symbolism and possible meaning. She was unsure of how to interpret the dream-oracle, although found it none-the-less interesting. Another subject asked a more specific question about her family and found her name written backwards in the dream; she found this “answer” profoundly meaningful.

It seems likely that a more effective method of gaining wisdom from the dream would be to ask a “wise” dream character for advice, or to ask to be shown metaphorically the answer to a question. A future *NightLight* experiment will test this idea.

Because of the design of the Re-Reading Test confounds order and intention, we cannot access the extent to which intention affects the results of dream re-reading. However, given the fact that the second re-reading was more likely to result in change than the first, there may be a small effect due to intention. It will take another experiment to find out for sure.

The only question that this study definitively answered is whether or not the Re-Reading State Test is a reliable means of determining if one is dreaming the answer is clearly yes. If a dreamer re-reads text at least twice with the intention of having the text change, it is almost certain that he or she will discover that it *is* a dream after all.

## References

1. Brown, 1936, p. 64
2. Fox, 1962, p. 46.
3. Moers-Messmer, 1938
4. LaBerge, 1985, p. 123
5. *NightLight*, 7.3&4, Winter, 1995, pp. 13-16.