4. Audience

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Audience has always been at the core of technical communication, both as a defining concept and as a cornerstone of the field's identity.[1] Two of the most commonly taught principles are "know your audience" and "write for your audience," which students begin hearing in their very first courses—and continue hearing throughout their studies and careers. Historically, the notion of audience and its importance are rooted in classical *rhetoric*, dating back to at least the fifth century BC. Aristotle's (1926) definition of rhetoric as the "faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" establishes the importance of those whom a rhetor seeks to persuade. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defined audience initially in relation to judicial hearings and courts of law (Oxford University Press, n.d.). These definitions date back to the 12th century and are rooted in oral traditions. *Hearing*, *being given a hearing*, *being heard*, *attention to what is being spoken*, *performance*, *listeners*, and similar terms and statements are prevalent across the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of audience. Less prevalent are the terms *reading*, *readership*, *publication*, and *writer*, which appear in the 18th century, after printed texts had become more commonplace.

Technical communication gained prominence as a ***professional*** field after World War II. Early scholars often considered audience as they defined technical communication or described what technical communicators do. Charles Stratton (1979), for example, said a technical writer in "a particular art, science, discipline, or trade . . . helps audiences approach subjects" (p. 10). Another early scholar, W. Earl Britton (1975), implies an audience, albeit a passive one, when he says, "The primary, though certainly not sole, characteristic of technical and scientific writing lies in the effort of the author to convey one meaning and only one meaning in what he says" (p. 11). A few years later, David Dobrin (1983), in "What's Technical About Technical Writing?," suggested as a new definition: "Technical writing is writing that accommodates technology to the user" (p. 242). Dobrin explained that he focused on "user" rather than "reader," "because technology is meant to be used" (p. 243). As the field has matured, one constant has been the value placed on understanding and writing effectively for audiences in the workplace, and, in

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1. Ideas in this chapter, especially those expressed at the end about future directions for audience research and about the fluid roles of writers and readers, were influenced by research and conversations carried out in collaboration with Rachel Spilka, formerly of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. These conversations occurred between 2010 and 2015, and these ideas are connected to concepts that Dr. Spilka and the author developed together.

the classroom, on teaching students how to write for audiences. Additionally, audience became what distinguished technical communicators: It is often their **knowledge** and skill in addressing audiences that is recognized as "adding value" in the workplace; technical communicators are those best positioned to function as audience or user advocates.

As fields, both technical communication and rhetoric and composition have long and conflicted histories of stressing the importance of audience. Audience figures prominently in Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's (1969) *The New Rhetoric*. They define audience, consonant with Aristotle, "as *the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation*" (p. 19). They also put forward an idea that has been carried forward in numerous considerations of audience—that knowing an audience with certainty is impossible.

In their germinal 1984 article, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford presented two notions that continue to guide both our scholarship and **pedagogy**: "audience addressed" and "audience invoked." While the former refers to the "concrete reality of the writer's audience" (p. 156), the latter depicts the audience of "written discourse" as "a construction of the writer" (p. 160). With regard to the latter, they said,

> The central task of the writer, then, is not to analyze an audience and adapt discourse to meet its needs. Rather, the writer uses the semantic and syntactic resources of language to provide cues for the reader—cues which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text. (p. 160)

There also is a distinction for Ede and Lunsford—and others—between speakers and writers, with speakers, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca also acknowledge, having the ability to know their audiences with greater certainty. Ede and Lunsford also acknowledge the work of Herbert Simons, who presents "a continuum of audiences based on opportunities for interaction" (Simons, 1976, as cited in Ede & Lunsford, 1984, p. 162). The importance of interactions with audience members has grown over time as **research** and theory have placed great emphasis on the roles and responses of readers.

In their efforts to explain audience, many scholars, early on, developed **visual** renderings or models, which typically depicted a stable and usually one-directional movement of **information** from writers to readers (e.g., Corbett, 1982; Kinneavy, 1971). James Porter (1992) describes such models as misleading (p. xi). He also calls attention to the uneven distribution of power they tended to depict: "Such a conception isolates rhetor from audience, thereby creating a political division that privileges the rhetor with access to knowledge (and hence, truth and power) and that places the audience in a non-participatory subordinate role" (Porter, 1992, p. xi).

A few of the early models were more sophisticated and ahead of their time. J.C. Mathes and Dwight Stevenson (1976), for example, portrayed different

"players" (not just writers) interacting in intertextual, interactive contexts while planning, designing, evaluating, and finalizing documents. Their "Interactive Audience Chart" was criticized for being too complex; however, they were innovators in portraying the "*range* of possibilities" (Porter, 1992) and in acknowledging the importance of relationships and interactions between writers and audience members. This is something numerous scholars eventually have also addressed (e.g., Albers, 2003; Beaufort, 2008; Blakeslee, 1993, 2001; Johnson, 1997, 1998; Kitalong, 2004; Long, 1980, 1990; Mirel, 1992, 1998, 2002, 2004; Mirel & Spilka, 2002; Rafoth, 1989; Rosenbaum & Walters, 1986; Roth, 1987; Spilka, 1988a, 1988b, 1990).

As scholars in both composition and technical communication began paying greater attention to concepts like *genre*, document *design*, and discourse communities, conceptions of audience evolved (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Faber & Johnson-Eilola, 2002, 2003; Flower, 1979; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Johnson-Eilola, 1996; Mirel, 2002; Porter, 1992; Schriver, 1997; Spinuzzi, 2003; Swales, 1990). Various theoretical turns have also influenced the field's approaches to audience. For example, reader response theory prompted the field to focus more on how readers respond to writing. Poststructuralism shifted the field's focus to even more fluid and dynamic conceptions of audience, foregrounding interactions between readers and writers and the contributions of readers to developing and evolving texts (Porter, 1992). Over time, the field has shifted from a view of writing as mostly *style*- and writer-focused to more complex views that attend to how writing actually occurs and to how readers respond to writing. These views also consider how writers might anticipate readers' responses as they plan and design documents, and how writers and readers, through different kinds of interactions and relationships, may even co-construct texts. These shifts have been supported by the field's greater attention to *collaboration* and social constructionism, social epistemic perspectives, and, more recently, usability and *user experience* research.

In addition to Porter's scholarship, work by scholars such as Ann Blakeslee (1993, 2001), Robert Johnson (1997, 1998), Barbara Mirel (1992, 1998, 2002, 2004), Karla Kitalong (2004), and Rachel Spilka (1988a, 1988b, 1990), among others, also supported these more collaborative and participatory conceptions of audience— with power distributed across an array of "players" as opposed to being situated exclusively in the writer. Kitalong (2004) addresses traditional audience analysis categories, contending that with the proliferation of *technology* comes a "proliferation of users, who are now more fully diversified than ever before in terms of the traditional audience-analysis categories of educational background, profession, age, gender, race, and economic status" (p. 171). Blakeslee's (2010) workplace case studies of digital writing suggest a more contextualized approach to analyzing audiences rooted in problem solving. Her findings counter Porter's argument for a universal digital audience. Other workplace researchers also make important contributions to the field's understanding of audience (e.g., Beaufort, 2008; Johnson, 1997; Spilka, 1988a, 1988b, 1990; Spinuzzi, 2003; Winsor, 2003). Although not all of these researchers focused directly on audience, their findings shed light on its

complexity. Dorothy Winsor (2003), in *Writing Power*, provides a perspective on the complexity of audiences in the workplace, and Clay Spinuzzi (2003) critiques our field's paternalistic assumption that readers in the workplace are helpless without our support. His critique, however, does not offer suggestions for resolving this. In fact, much that we understand about audience in technical communication comes from works, like these, that address it as an aspect of some other focus. Because of this, they fall short of helping the field develop and test successful, evidence-based conceptions of and approaches to considering audience.

Other important sources for understanding the field's approach to and perspectives on audience are its textbooks. Generally, technical communication textbooks reveal that we continue to rely, even after decades of stressing the importance of audience analysis, on universally applicable and abstract principles in considering audience. Most textbooks still depict audience analysis as a linear, one-way process of identifying, analyzing, and then writing to or accommodating the audience. This process is also still generally portrayed as being controlled by the writer. For example, students often are told to describe their readers using demographic categories, and textbooks also often emphasize using tools such as profiles or late usability tests. However, without access to firsthand information about their audiences, students may mis-categorize and/or simply guess, make up, or overlook important aspects of their readers' experiences and identities (e.g., their ableness, languages, backgrounds, cultures). Our increased and much-needed attention in our field to critical topics like disability, ***social justice***, and anti-racism point to the importance of much more detailed and nuanced considerations of audience that eschew profiling, generalizing, and categorizing in ways that perpetuate the violence and oppression of perspectives like ableism, racism, white supremacy, and xenophobia (Browning & Cagle, 2017; Cedillo, 2018; Colton & Walton, 2015; Condon & Young, 2016; Haas, 2012; Melonçon, 2013; Mutnik, 2015; Oswal, 2013; Palmeri, 2006; Yu, 2012; Zdenek, 2020). Training writers in how best to analyze an audience in a way that is limited to activities of identifying and categorizing them precludes a strong research-backed and inclusive focus on types of analysis that can and must go deeper. In short, students often are taught to cobble together information about audiences from varied sources and to work from more generalized instead of particular, more specific, accurate, and representative conceptions. Few textbooks, for example, advise writers to interact with or research readers directly, which more recent scholarship suggests has value (e.g., Blakeslee, 2001; 2010).

In general, scholarship on audience in technical communication—and rhetoric and composition—has focused mainly on early invention activities—identifying, thinking about, and analyzing audience, generally viewed as a collective. Later stages, including accommodating and influencing audience(s), are still less well understood. There is benefit—and a need—to call into question the status quo around audience and to strive, through empirical research and re-theorizing, to arrive at more expansive and encompassing conceptions. Porter addressed this need in his 1992 work, and it still exists—and is even more urgent, particularly as

we interrogate our professional practices for those aspects of them that ultimately are biased, exclusionary, and unjust. Revitalizing and expanding both scholars' and practitioners' understandings of the rhetorical dynamics and complexity of audiences, especially in contemporary contexts, is vital. We must explore and advocate for ways to understand and honor the multiple identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences of our readers.

This is also true in relation to recent and ongoing transformations in how individuals write and work. For example, advancements in technology and in ways we communicate have increasingly blurred the roles of and relationships between writers and readers. In **social media** (see, for example, Breuch, 2017, and Potts, 2009, 2014) and other realms, we see how the audience can become writers at any time, and how the principal roles of some writers can be to read and respond to audience input. This points to conceptions of audience that are increasingly relational, discursive, and participatory. Technical communicators need to understand that regardless of the extent of their experience and familiarity with an audience, they must research, continuously, both recurring and new audiences (and this may well necessitate engaging, firsthand, with those audiences). This will assist them with deciding how best to negotiate the ever-changing rhetorical and social contexts of each writing task. Rather than "writing *to* or *for* an audience," we should be thinking instead about "writing *with* an audience" or "writing *as part of* an audience."[2] Audience, moving forward, must be addressed in the context of 21st century writing, technology, workplace contexts, social consciousness, and cultural responsiveness. Rather than privileging writers in relation to readers and end users, and as is often the case only certain readers and end users, technical communication scholars can strive to develop new theories and practices that align more closely with current trends in digital **literacy**, participatory rhetoric, anti-racist pedagogy, social justice, disability studies, and user engagement.

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2. This idea emerged from the 2010 to 2015 work and conversations of Rachel Spilka and the author.

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