

5 Audience and Purpose in Writing

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To most of us, the word “audience” presents an image of people in an auditorium applauding the efforts of an entertainer on stage. Certainly I would have used such a definition several years ago when I was a sophomore at Conestoga Senior High School in Berwyn, Pennsylvania. I took world history, then taught by the football coach, Mr. Antonio, a man of no great nuance. I had personal goals at that age, and since traditional methods of success seemed doubtful, I determined that I would gain worldly and social success as a comedian.

As I sat listening to my history class discuss the shipping trade in the Mediterranean Sea before Christ, I realized that my first opportunity was approaching. While I couldn’t stand up in front of the group and perform, I could amaze them with a comic answer to one of the teacher’s predictable questions. I guessed what question Mr. Antonio would ask and practiced my reply, polishing the subtleties of pause and inflection. I did not wait in vain, for on a clear October afternoon my opportunity arrived.

The Mediterranean test would be on Friday, and Antonio read through his list of review questions. Then it came.

“What are some contributions given us by the Phoenicians?” he asked. My hand waved like a sunflower among cabbages, and he nodded at me.

“Phoenician blinds,” I said, carefully articulating and projecting my words so all in the classroom could hear. The roars of laughter washed over me from my appreciative audience, but I didn’t allow this expected response to change my demeanor, for I knew that a good comic responded to his own gags with a deadpan.

The bell rang, and I heard Mr. Antonio say something about my being sharp as a marble, but I was not concerned with his attempt to diminish my limelight.

Out in the hallway, however, a classmate revealed that my careful planning had backfired when he asked why I thought the sailor-merchant Phoenicians had also worked on windows.

"That was a joke," I told him.

"Really?" he said. "When you didn't laugh I figured you were serious."

Although I had failed to understand my audience in that history classroom, I had made a distinguished effort. I neglected to realize that my reputation as a comic was not well established, and thus when I didn't laugh at my own remark, the other students interpreted my reply as serious. And stupid. I was correct, however, in believing that they would find humor in the juxtaposition of a modern window shade with an ancient culture. I am proud of my participation in that classroom of fifteen year olds because I had considered some complex elements of audience analysis, such as what humorous material the group would respond to and how a joke might best be communicated—in this case, as classroom dialogue between instructor and student.

Many students, I believe, also have an understanding of audience, but it is limited to oral rather than written communication. In my history class I was communicating in a familiar setting to people I knew. I was vividly aware of my classroom audience because they were present, and I had dealt with them numerous times before. If, on the other hand, I were writing a report on Phoenicians to local members of the National Geographic Society, I would feel much less secure because I had no experience with such an audience. Maxine Hairston makes the same point in *A Contemporary Rhetoric*: Students, she says, know enough to vary tone and argumentative methods when dealing with parents and peers, but given an audience that cannot be seen and does not provide immediate feedback, the communication produces material which is often meaningless to everyone but the writer.¹ In communicating orally, I as a student was aware of several audiences; but in written work, I could have named only one. The sole audience for my written work as a student was the adult in front of the room who ran the class and who regularly gave me essay tests. And generally found me wanting.²

From the research of James Britton we know that, depending upon the class level, students direct virtually all writing at an instructor who is viewed in one of two ways: as a "dialogue participant," or as an "examiner."³ The stance which occurs earliest in a child's school experience is the "dialogue participant," in which the teacher is seen as friend, as someone interested in two-way learning through written communication. An example might be the encouraging notes an elementary teacher writes at the bottom of a work sheet, such as "I enjoyed the story you wrote about your brother," to which the student

replies on the next submitted paper, "My brother didn't want me to tell that story, but I'm glad I did." This dialogue produces an attitude supportive of writing. Unfortunately, the opportunity and motivation for teacher/pupil dialogue diminishes, often because of teacher and curriculum policies, as the student rises through the class levels.

The second category may develop unnecessary fear and anxiety in student writers if the "teacher as examiner" is the sole focus of written communication. Britton points out that almost half of all student writing is from pupil to examiner, with all the pressures and anxieties inherent in such communication.⁴ If writing, however, is used for activities in addition to grading, such as in journals, and in classes other than English, this anxiety may diminish.

Besides the problem with writing anxiety, students who write only for the "teacher as examiner" fail to learn methods of writing to other audiences. Clearly, this limited use of written communication ill prepares students for adult life, when they will be forced into dealing with numerous audiences. But it is difficult to bring audiences other than the teacher into a classroom, and students know that virtually all graded assignments are judged by the teacher, regardless of who is the "assigned" audience. Some instructors avoid this problem by sending the student-written material to outside graders in business and industry, but this solution is unavailable to most teachers.

Different audiences, however, may be simulated. A geography instructor might assign a report detailing the environmental conditions of southern Brazil and tell his students that they are to write for a hypothetical agricultural loan officer in the World Bank. The geography teacher begins his assignment by leading a class discussion identifying what a World Bank official expects in a report. Thus, while the students write for the instructor's approval, they nevertheless must compose their material for the target audience, and their work is judged on how well they meet those expectations.

Few beginning writers unfamiliar with audience analysis, however, could successfully complete the assignment of writing to a World Bank official without considerable help. A more practical approach to teaching audience is through a series of increasingly more complex assignments, beginning with relatively simple, easily-visualized readers, and moving toward audiences that are less familiar or more specialized. Such assignments would systematically lead students away from their inability to perceive audiences beyond themselves, a situation termed "cognitive egocentrism."⁵ James Moffett speaks of this problem when he refers to an inexperienced writer's "assumption that the reader thinks and feels as he does, has had the same experience, and hears in

his head when he is reading, the same voice the writer does when he is writing."⁶

The following assignments offer a variety of possibilities for teaching audience analysis. While few teachers may have the time to use all that is offered, a selection of two or three should provide students with an understanding of one of the most important considerations in communicating successfully. In a sense, studying audience might enlighten beginning writers much like sitting in a dark room, then raising the Phoenician blinds.

Audience in the Classroom

Before any communication is attempted, writers should first determine what information they possess. To assist them in generating ideas, instructors may assign journals and free writing, not only to bring forth possible writing ideas, but also to diminish the writers' anxiety about having something to say. I remember the fears which nearly always accompanied me during essay exams. No matter how much I had studied, I was still anxious when I first read the essay question. "Not this topic!" I thought to myself. "I didn't study this one enough." However, when I began writing, I discovered shelves of stored information waiting to be written down. Students often experience the same feeling—relief at discovering they have something to say. For the teacher, an added advantage of prewriting activities is the opportunity they present during class discussion to guide students away from trite material. Of course, the awareness of overused expressions and ideas is also part of audience analysis, for the knowledge of what is a cliché indicates that a writer knows what may potentially bore the reader/listener.

Prewriting need not be done on class time, but it should precede most assignments. The instructor might begin with a journal write asking the students to list some personality aspects of the target audience, such as age, personal interests, and educational background. For the more sophisticated assignments, the teacher could place the class in small groups, directing each to analyze one of the personality elements in more detail. Another group might contemplate suitable format for the discourse, and an appropriate tone.

One useful technique for introducing audience to the class is to distribute a questionnaire on the subject to determine class attitudes. The questions might first ask the students to explain their understanding of the term "audience" and then focus on the writer's need for such knowledge.⁷

1. List the different audiences for whom you have written in the past year, both in and out of school (for example, a particular relative, editor of the paper, school official, certain teacher, other).
2. Select two of the above audiences and briefly explain how you wrote differently for each.
3. How is a school newspaper article written differently from a book review for English class?
4. Why is the article written differently?

The results from such a questionnaire are not only useful in organizing class discussion, but they also automatically teach some of the principles behind audience analysis, such as shaping material for the reader. In other words, simply posing the problem of audience to a class will raise the level of audience awareness among class members.

The Interview

Interviews are important in many academic disciplines. Social and political scientists, for example, conduct polls to determine group attitudes and concerns, while journalists and researchers consider the interview an important tool for obtaining information. An exercise in interviewing also offers at least two advantages to the student of audience analysis: it diminishes writer's anxiety while simultaneously developing an understanding of audience.

To begin, the class might consider a journal entry describing what a newspaper reporter would ask a subject in order to write an interesting personality profile. In the discussion which follows, the teacher could guide the students away from overreliance on listing hobbies, place of birth, and the like towards revealing more vivid personality attributes, such as why the subject enjoys contact sports or cars. The interviewers should look for the unusual, that which sets the person apart from others.

Useful class discussion could also come from a study of professional interviews, such as those published in syndicated newspaper columns or national magazines, such as *Time* or *Newsweek*. Some teachers might select interviews from periodicals in their own disciplines, such as *Engineering Education*, then slant the assignment towards the special needs of their classes. Students could then discuss what segment of the article they found the most interesting and why. The people interviewed in periodicals are often controversial, and the class might benefit from a study of those questions dealing specifically with what is controversial: how are they worded, and in what order? Classmates are seldom controversial, of course, but nevertheless there is something

which distinguishes everyone from the rest of humanity, and if the class is simulating a journalistic interview, the students' job is to discover that element and draw it out.

An alternative prewriting exercise consists of writing questions for distinguished personalities. The instructor writes on the board a list of names, say Darwin, Freud, Madame Curie, Shakespeare, and perhaps the local mayor or school president. The students should consider what questions they might ask one of those individuals, and explain *why* one question rather than another would be preferable.

In the discussion afterwards, the teacher could move the class towards an understanding of why they asked certain questions. The point is that they had a personal interest in certain topics, such as the school president's views on improving campus parking or raising tuition, or whether Madame Curie feels that the position of women in science has substantially improved since her lifetime.

Besides the opportunity of learning how to phrase questions, these two prewriting exercises produce an analysis of each individual student as audience, a looking inward at what each of them wants to and needs to know. They also provide understanding of what it is about certain topics that motivates a listener and a reader. The actual interview between students should take only about twenty minutes, with some additional time for the subjects to make comments about the interviewers' sketches, their factuality, appropriateness of tone, and so on. Finally, each reporter reads the article to the class or the other members of their smaller peer group. The follow-up discussion considers highlights of the better interviews, again searching for generalizations about why certain information is more interesting for the class to read.

This assignment is useful at the beginning of the school term because it allows classmates to become knowledgeable about each other. It also provides a writing situation which is nonthreatening; beginning writers fear being criticized, but less so from their peers, especially ones sitting across from them who have the same assignment to fulfill. Students often fear not having sufficient material to work with, but an interview generally produces a surfeit of information.

Writing Technical Directions

Practicing how to write directions is useful for students in scientific and technical subjects, for those areas require individuals with the ability to carefully describe experimental procedures. The following assignment has an extra advantage in that success or failure is immediately apparent when the students exchange their work and try to accomplish each other's directions. Here are some topics from which to choose:

Games

The instructor may divide the class into two groups or use two different classes. Each group will view the demonstration of a different simple game by an individual who will avoid "telling" how to play, although some elements, of course, must be verbalized, such as the object of play. No written information should be supplied that will shift the writers' reliance from themselves to the demonstrator. Student pairs might play once or twice before combining talents on writing the directions for their counterparts in the other group.

This assignment works best when uncomplicated games are selected, such as "penny pitching," and the old "bar" game involving thirteen match sticks. In the latter, either player may begin and select from one to three sticks, which are set aside. The opposing player then selects from one to three, and so on until the loser is left with the last stick.

Even if some students know these games, the assignment is still useful because the focus is not on the playing but on the articulation of how to play. The instructor should ask those reading the directions to act as if they have never played the game before, and to follow the directions exactly as written by the student authors.

Sandwich Making

Writing directions for making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches shares the advantages of the above ideas, but it doesn't involve multiple groups. The class completes directions for the sandwich, and the papers are then read aloud to a "chef" at the front of the room who, the class learns, is an alien with only a literal understanding of English. The chef follows the directions word-for-word, using the necessary sandwich components. Common mistakes include failing to consider the following: the kind of bread as white, rye, wheat, etc.; whether it is in whole loaf or slice form; how much of each ingredient is used; which utensils are required and when; and which comes first, the peanut butter, or the jelly.

Classroom Science Experiment

An alternative to the sandwich topic requires students to write directions explaining how to perform a simple experiment. The instructor discusses an experiment which is appropriate for the class level, and requests a set of directions containing sufficient detail so that someone not in the course could perform it. Afterwards, the instructor could perform the experiment from sample, student-written directions, identifying what common but necessary elements are often neglected in writing lab reports.

Follow Up

These writing assignments teach students that directions must not only consider the audience's skill level, but also any possible misinterpretations and pitfalls. The assignments are particularly useful when peer groups are used to aid in understanding and promote learning.

Some students will employ visuals and other assistance in their directions, but even if none do, the follow-up discussion might mention such a possibility, and the usefulness of including the following items:

- lists of items needed to play the game, make the sandwich, or perform the experiment

- graphic aids, such as indenting, numbering, drawing lines around important information, and the use of "bullets" to emphasize information

- illustrations of a hand performing the card trick; or a line designating the wall for the penny pitching; or the size beakers needed for an experiment

- hints on how to hold the cards, win the games, pour the chemicals

Audiences beyond the Classroom

The audience considered in the previous section consisted chiefly of class members, a group towards which student writers could aim merely by being aware of themselves and their own abilities in understanding written material. Target audiences of the following exercises will require more careful examination, for they consist of groups or individuals whom most beginning writers have probably not yet had reason to meet or even consider. These audiences exist in business and industry.

An Exercise in Audience Analysis

This inclass assignment can be accomplished in one class period, is excellent for small group work, and could be used as prewriting work before a longer assignment, such as the analysis of a periodical.

Directions: (1) What kind of person (educational level, personal interests, motivation, etc.) would enjoy reading each of these three example selections? Be as specific as you can. (2) What characteristics in the selection led you to this view? (3) Choose one of the selections and rewrite it for a different audience.

Example A

Voyager Camera Transmissions from Saturn

On day 1460 (November 12) at 00:52:33 GMT, camera transmissions from Voyager 1 were received at the Deep Space Network sites in Canberra, Australia and Madrid, Spain; high resolution photos from these transmissions were compiled by an ARC 9000 computer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California. Voyager's proximity of 124,240 km from Saturn afforded 487 complete video transmissions of outstanding quality, and when studied by JPL scientists should reveal extensive details of the planet's gaseous core.

Example B

Space Explorer Discovers Icy World

Voyages to the Stars

Voyager I Visits Saturn

As Voyager I plunged onward through the silent blackness of space, scientists and space engineers on Earth stood in wonderment before their complex sensing instruments millions of miles away. They were transfixed by the immensity of what they and the tiny space craft had accomplished.

Suddenly the scientists' video screens flickered again as Voyager's television eye focused on Saturn's lifeless moons, arcing gracefully, along with billions of ice chunks and assorted space debris, across the face of this giant planet. The Earthship quickly began transforming this wondrous picture into electrical impulses and transmitting them back to its distant home planet.

Soon afterward, Voyager's camera motors whirred again, focusing its lenses on the greatest marvel of the spaceship's two year journey. Earth-bound watchers prepared to see their first close-up of Saturn's concentric circles, a wonder of our solar system that has fascinated humans since the invention of the telescope.

Example C

Profits in Space

Will Space Produce the Rich Markets That Will Be
Industry's Greatest Challenge?

In your mind, picture giant space vehicles moving effortlessly through the voids of nothingness between planets, delivering precious cargoes of minerals needed for building space platforms and factories on other planets.

This may sound like science fiction, but in Atlanta last week a mixture of governmental officials, military, and industrial leaders met in the beautiful downtown civic auditorium to discuss this very subject: mineral exploration in space.

As North American Aerospace officials looked on, experts spoke of the possibility that civilian spacecraft will soon be transporting precious minerals between planets. . . .

This assignment shows that writers adjust the scope and delivery of their material in attracting and sustaining the interest of an audience. Students will discover that subject matter is merely the first of several elements the writer molds to fit the readers. This exercise works especially well when small groups are assigned to each excerpt. Afterwards, a spokesperson for each group may list the conclusions on the board and discuss the group's findings.

Example A. Students discussing Example A may initially overlook the title's blandness, which indicates that the author did not feel flashy beginnings were necessary for the technical audience at which this excerpt is aimed. They will, however, point out the detail (the numbers: 00:52:33, 9000, and 487) and the jargon ("GMT" for Greenwich Mean Time, "Deep Space Network," "video transmissions," and "JPL" for Jet Propulsion Laboratory). Someone may point out that the excerpt contains numerous passive voice constructions ("were received," "were compiled"), and the instructor might ask someone to rewrite these sentences in active voice to compare the difference in readability, clarity, and emphasis. Passive voice is no longer automatically accepted by editors of scientific periodicals unless the writer wishes the sentence to emphasize the object rather than the subject.

Example B. Perhaps the most notable feature of Example B is the use of drama promoted by the expressive verbs, adjectives, and adverbs: "plunged," "blackness," "wonderment," "complex," "transfixed," and so on. The author of this article wants the readers to imagine themselves participating in the event, moving along with Voyager I to Saturn and seeing what it sees. The breathless prose style is another feature. Some students may be annoyed at the "Soap-opera" quality of this excerpt, with all of the action occurring at the peak of emotion. The titles, similarly, look as if they were on movie marquees. That there are two indicates the author is not neglecting any possibility for attracting the audience's attention. Unlike Example A, this article has a simple sentence structure, and short, journalistic paragraphs with virtually no complexity or major demands on the reader.

Example C. This final excerpt is similar to B: they both share the sense of narrative and drama. It begins with a rhetorical question for its title and contains, as the lead paragraph, a visually appealing hypothetical scene of space travel. Readability is augmented by short paragraphs common to journalism. This article is easily visualized through its use of colorful images like "giant space vehicles" and "precious cargoes." The target audience may be ascertained from

several key phrases. "Rich markets" and "Industry's Greatest Challenge" imply that this article is for businessmen or stock holders, individuals who find excitement in the challenge of making money in new markets.

This discussion is by no means exhaustive, and students have other elements to point out. Certainly an explanation of why certain excerpts appeal more to them than others could be useful in understanding audience. The following is a brief list of possible areas the class might consider.

Titles: snappy, melodramatic, or restrained

Sentences: lengthy or short, periodic or standard

Tone: dramatic or subdued

Format: amount of "white space"—areas without printing, such as frequent paragraph indentations and wide margins (Extensive white space conveys the impression of something quickly and thus easily read, like a newspaper or popular magazine.)

The three selections should provoke a useful discussion on several major points of audience analysis. For example, students should realize that the same subjects are often described in diverse ways, according to the needs of the particular audience, and that successful writers must be skilled in understanding these various readers. Continuing this point, the class might discuss what magazines would print each of the excerpts. If, say, *Scientific American* printed an article on the exploration of Saturn, how would it deal with the subject differently than *Popular Science*? Such a discussion would be particularly useful before the class turns to an analysis of periodicals, for the excerpts should prepare students to analyze writing style in determining audience.

Audiences of Periodicals

Magazine or journal analysis is a useful assignment for everyone, because nearly all disciplines report information to the public through such media. This assignment shows that professional writers must carefully consider their audiences before composing.

The class should have access to several magazines which address special groups, such as certain hobbyists, age groups, or academic areas. While in small groups, the students identify the audience of the periodicals they have been assigned and what features led them to this conclusion:

- the various advertisements for special products
- topics discussed in the articles

formatting—whether conservative and restrained like *The New Yorker* or flashy like *People* magazine

the editor's requirements for submitted articles—topics considered or encouraged; manuscript length and style sheet to follow; use of photographs

indication of whether the editor or outside referees decide on acceptance or rejection of the manuscript, and how long this decision normally takes

A student or the teacher should list the conclusions on the board, after which students are asked to write an analysis of a periodical of their choice, selecting one or two representative elements from the magazine (advertisements, format, etc.) and describing the audience to whom these appeal.

Audiences in the Business World

Business communication is much concerned with audience analysis, whether it involves reports, letters, or memos. Writers at the various levels of business organizations always consider who may read the correspondence; often their success or failure depends on their ability to skillfully analyze and write towards a particular audience. Students can be given experience with the conventions of business communication—especially its concern with audience—by combining letter-writing assignments with the case method.

The case method was developed in business and law schools to present students with actual situations and allow them to contemplate the evidence and circumstances, as did the original attorneys or businessmen. This method now frequently appears in classrooms of various disciplines, and it can be used quite effectively to teach audience. The cases may be simple or complex, depending upon the skill level of the class and the time allotted to the assignment.⁸

Letter-writing assignments often provide students with a practical look into the work world. Because they are relatively short yet significant pieces of communication, letters work well in the classroom. Generally, these assignments are more realistic if the instructor does not read the problem, but rather distributes some form of written communication to which the students respond.

In the periodical audience exercise, the students visualized an audience (probably without realizing it) and tried to reconstruct an author's subconscious reasoning while composing for a specific audience. In this next exercise, however, the students themselves attempt to determine how their audience may be best addressed and where their audience is open to persuasion.

Negotiating by Letter

After several days you and your wife found a home you liked and could afford, although barely. You painstakingly determined the maximum monthly payment you could pay, and located a bank which would give you mortgage money at 11.5 percent. You return to your older home and get ready to move when the following letter arrives from the lending bank. Write a letter in response.

May 22, 1981

Mr. and Mrs. Paul O'Hara
209 Spring Valley Road
Columbia, MO 65201

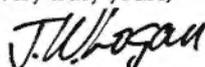
Dear Mr. and Mrs. O'Hara:

The Copper Country Bank is pleased to offer you a commitment in the amount of \$25,500 for a term of twenty (20) years at an interest rate of 11.75 percent.

I have heard that you have already taken care of the property insurance with a local agent. As you know, the amount we require must cover the loan proceeds and show us as the mortgagee, which you have done. With reference to the loan rate, you will note that it is a quarter percent above what we discussed at the time of the application. During the time we were underwriting the loan and prior to our commitment, our rates did increase. The new payment is on the enclosed Real Estate Mortgage Loan Disclosure Statement. I hope this does not inconvenience you.

Thank you for your interest in the Copper Country Bank, and we look forward to seeing you in the future.

Very truly yours,



John W. Logan
Branch Manager
Copper Country Bank
Houghton, MI 49931

If the class knows little of letter-writing skills (format and structure) further class discussion on Logan's letter could prove useful. In business writing, Logan's correspondence would be called a "Bad News Letter." He has bad news to present, and, of course, wants to give it as painlessly as possible. How is this done? Bad news is least upsetting when it is deemphasized, so Logan begins his letter with the *good* news that the loan has been approved. One can sense the drama of the first line, almost as if it were accompanied by fanfare: "The Copper Country Bank is pleased to offer. . . ." Logan temporarily continues with good news into paragraph two by referring to the insurance requirement being fulfilled. While this information isn't as exciting, it may be legally necessary, and it certainly is not disappointing. However, after we are lulled into believing that life is worth living and God is on our

side, we are presented with the bad news. This begins very innocently with the phrase: "With reference to," a vague, colorless group of words common to legal documents—Logan is retreating into business jargon. The bad news has not only been held until the middle of the letter, it is further embedded in a weak part of the sentence.⁹

To prepare the class for writing the response, prewriting techniques might include class discussion and a journal write. General class discussion will clear up any confusion the students may have about the problem the bank's letter poses—how to talk Logan into returning the interest rate to the previously agreed level. A journal write or small group discussion will assist the students in considering arguments that might change Logan's mind. They should consider where a bank is vulnerable; in other words, what is the major concern of such an institution besides being profitable? One possible approach: the bank's reputation for honesty and fairness.

Finally, the students must consider how to structure their response. Should they also write their letter with the bad news embedded, or should they place their irritation in a more forceful position? Here is a sample response:

209 Spring Valley Road
Columbia, MO 65201
May 25, 1981

Mr. John W. Logan, Manager
Copper Country Bank
Houghton, MI 49931

Dear Mr. Logan:

I wish to thank you for informing us that our loan application has been approved.

However, my wife and I are upset and confused by the notification that our interest rate has been raised from that agreed upon in your office a few weeks ago. During our short visit to Michigan in early April we contacted several lending institutions and decided upon Copper Country Bank, both for its competitive loan rate and its reputation among our new acquaintances in the area. I talked over the telephone with a Copper Country loan officer, and he double checked on the interest rate. He assured me that the current rate for such a loan was 11.5 percent. My wife and I later drove to your bank and discussed this rate. The legal papers you gave us at that time specifies the lower interest rate. Thus I am surprised that Copper Country would raise the interest rate after we left the area and returned to Missouri.

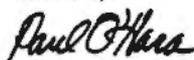
If a bank can do this, how does a customer determine whether information received from bank officials is valid or not? Your letter states that the bank had not yet made a "commitment." Certainly the commitment to grant us the loan had not been made, for the bank must check our credit references; but we accepted the

information given us for the interest rate, and that commitment, I believe, should be upheld.

My family and I are presently 900 miles from the Copper Country Bank, and are thus in no position to negotiate a new loan with another lending institution. Nor do we wish to do so. Therefore, I am asking Copper Country Bank to reconsider and loan the mortgage funds at the interest rate specified when the application was made three weeks ago. We are looking forward to our new home in Michigan and hope that our dealings with one of the area's leading banking institutions does not begin with this unfortunate situation.

Please let us hear from you soon about this matter.

Sincerely,



Paul O'Hara

Unlike Logan's letter, O'Hara's response is more forward. The author felt that one of his major weapons was anger, and thus he states in a prominent place that he is disappointed that the interest rate was changed. He didn't, however, wish the bank to forget about the loan entirely, for he was several hundred miles away and couldn't easily find another bank. Besides, the other banks wanted even higher interest rates (if not, he would have dealt with them to begin with). Therefore he began and concluded the letter by mentioning that he did not want to change lending institutions.

The second major argument in this letter is that the bank's action is unfair. The majority of the copy is directed at this point: building up the case against changing the rate. If such things can be done, the author asks, how can anyone do business? Note that the letter lacks hostility; rather than empty rhetoric and threats, the letter makes its point with detail—a step by step record of the transaction and why the O'Hara's were surprised at the change in interest rates.

The letter concludes with images of what all banks hope to be in the community—pillars of honesty. Of course the implication here is that if the bank does not change the interest rate then they do not fit into the appropriate pattern of honesty.

Advocacy with Diverse Audiences

A colleague provided me with the following example.¹⁰ It can be completed in one class period and calls for addressing several different audiences. The class should be broken into groups of five.

For several days rumors have been reported that federal and state authorities are considering the construction of a nuclear

power plant five miles north of town on the Eagle River. Each member of the group is to compose a response to this planned construction, directing the communication to one of the five audiences listed below (be sure that all five audiences are covered).

The self (as if in a journal)

A close and trusted friend

A teacher in a physics class who has asked you to discuss the advantages and/or disadvantages of such a project

A large, unknown audience, such as the readers of a locally published magazine or newspaper Sunday supplement

The governor of our state

Try to write one or two substantial paragraphs. You have about fifteen minutes to do this piece of writing.

After completing the writing, students identify their target audiences and read their material to other members of their group. Then group members discuss the differences of each piece of communication, noting how the different audiences produced different problems and how each writer attempted to solve them.

Here are student examples which resulted from this exercise in a freshman level composition class.

Journal Entry

I just heard they're building a nuke plant north of town. I hope it gets inspected well, is built far enough away so that if it explodes the dorm is still standing, and that the wind starts blowing to the north. At least we'll have some dependable power for once. I wonder how I'd look as a mutant?

This example shows a typical style of writing common to journals: although the first line establishes the subject, the paragraph has no formal beginning or end. Instead, each idea is discussed in the order the writer's mind becomes aware of it—in an informal, meandering way. He begins with an allusion to the power plant's danger, and worries about it exploding the dorm; then he shifts to a more positive view that it could provide dependable power, but then returns to the negative by mentioning the possibility of being a mutant. The paragraph also contains humor, and it assumes certain knowledge by the reader (himself), such as that he lives in a dorm. The perspective is from someone who has an interest in the subject but has not yet taken a stand for or against.

A Close Friend

Dear Nancy,

Have you heard the rumors about the Nuclear Power Plant that is being built in Eagle River? I shouldn't say it is, because I don't know for sure. I don't think it will ever go through though because too many people will protest the idea. No one will want a power

plant in this area. Personally, I am against it because of the imperfections of the plants.

If you hear anything about it let me know, I am very interested.

Sincerely yours,

Terri

Terri

Terri has written a slightly more formal piece of communication than the journal, but there are also many similarities. Like the journal, Terri's letter also makes assumptions about what her audience knows: for example, Nancy knows who Terri is and that an introduction is not necessary. The writing style is relaxed, and dusted with conversational phrases, such as "I don't know for sure," and "if you hear anything. . . ." Like the journal, her letter begins with a sentence establishing the topic, but instead of moving from one side of the issue to the other, her message supports a single view. The format is also different, for Terri has selected the more formal structure of correspondence, with a salutation and complimentary close. Some students might realize that the audience for a letter demands some logical structure and could be confused by the meanderings of someone's journal.

Physics Teacher

The possibility of a nuclear plant being built in the area has some advantages. The nuclear plant will be able to supply the area with power at a low cost with a resource that is in relative abundance. The reactor will produce power with no real air pollution. Also, the nuclear plant will have little effect on the forests and the creatures around it.

However, the cooling water of the plant could have a slight effect on the surrounding water if it is put back at too high a temperature. It may raise the water temperature too much and kill off the species of fish and plants. Also, the slight possibility of a nuclear spill could affect the wildlife if it was large.

This student made certain assumptions about his audience that are different from the previous writings. Although the directions indicated that the physics teacher would accept either advantages or disadvantages, this student felt that a science teacher would consider both sides. The formality is greater in this selection. There is no reference to human beings reading the material, and no reference to how the plant has the potential for harm to humans; instead, the author stresses the negative in terms of the environment and fish.

Unknown Audience—Newspaper

It has come to my attention that a nuclear power plant has been proposed for an area north of town on the Eagle River. A rumor

has spread that state and federal authorities are backing this issue. While no official word is out on this matter, my sources seem to agree that this rumor is true. No word has been given as to which town on the Eagle River has been chosen as the site of the proposed plant. The construction of a nuclear plant has always been a controversial matter, and this paper will cover both sides of this issue as it develops.

This student writer may be aware that an editorial should take a stand on an issue, but he may not be sure which side to support; therefore, he takes neither, promising instead that the paper will cover both sides in future issues. The author wants to provide as many specific details as possible, but he also senses that a newspaper should be objective and accurate, so he covers possible errors with vagueness: "a rumor has spread that . . ." and "while no official word is out." For style, this author knows that editorials are generally more formal than journals and friendly letters, and probably feels that this sense of formality can be communicated with the passive voice: "It has come to my attention," and "No word has been given."

The Governor of the State of Michigan

Governor Milliken:

I have heard a rumor that the state and federal governments are thinking about putting a nuclear power plant in this area on Eagle River. I feel that this is a tremendous idea and that it would help the economy in this area a great deal. Not only would it provide jobs for hundreds or thousands of people, but it would also help this area come out of the past and move into the future.

I am sure that many people will disagree with this thinking but the economy is what must be thought of and nuclear power, I feel, is one of the answers.

This response is similar to an editorial in that it takes a strong stand on an issue. The writer is more highly aware of audience than the previous examples, for he refers to at least two audiences: the governor, when mentioning the economic advantages to the state (information that presumably would motivate a politician), and the opposition (to the author's view), "many people will disagree with this thinking but. . ."

To complete the assignment, the instructor makes five columns on the board, corresponding to each audience. The students then explain what formats, word choices, and tone they used in their paragraphs. The result shows the spectrum from expressive to transactional writing: from the relaxed, less inhibited characteristics of expressive writing, to the more formal, restrained tone and delivery of the transactional communication written for a general audience.

Conclusion

In our discussion of audience we considered a fifteen-year-old high school student testing jokes on his class, not realizing that he had, in the process, actually performed a complex though mistaken analysis of audience. One of the guiding principles of this chapter's discussion is that beginning writers, like the joke-teller, have an incipient understanding of audience, but they are unaware of how to use this knowledge when writing. This chapter has offered a method which guides writers through a series of classroom assignments, each demanding a more complex analysis of the readers. Students are thus guided from their intuitive understanding of audience to the complex demands of written discourse in the adult world. While audience is only one of many elements to consider when communicating, it is certainly one of the most important.

Notes

1. Maxine Hairston, *A Contemporary Rhetoric*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 107. James Britton also writes of this distinction between oral and written audience analysis. See James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (London: Macmillan Education, 1975), p. 58.

2. For a review of audience as taught in composition texts, see Lisa S. Ede, "On Audience and Composition," *College Composition and Communication* 30 (October 1979): 291-295.

3. Britton, pp. 68-73.

4. Britton, p. 122.

5. See Barry Kroll, "Cognitive Egocentrism and the Problem of Audience Awareness in Written Discourse," *Research in the Teaching of English* 12 (October 1978): 269-281. However, not every student whose writing neglects audience is necessarily egocentric. Fred R. Pfister and Joanne F. Petrick, in their essay, "A Heuristic Model for Creating a Writer's Audience," *College Composition and Communication* 30 (May 1980): 213-220, incorrectly label some of their students egocentric who "were so worried about getting down on paper what they had to say that they could not be bothered worrying about anyone else's response to their writing." Such individuals do not match Moffett's definition of the problem; rather, these students may well know the importance of audience but are unable to move beyond preliminary communication blocks, such as word selection. Because they lack the most basic word skills, they are unable to move on to later, more sophisticated steps like audience analysis.

6. James Moffett, *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 195.

7. While I have changed most of these questions, I am indebted for the initial concept to Pfister and Petrick's "A Heuristic Model for Creating a

Writer's Audience," *College Composition and Communication* 30 (May 1980): 213-220.

8. For textbooks using the case method, see John P. Field and Robert H. Weiss, *Cases for Composition* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979); and David Tedlock and Paul Jarvie, *Casebook Rhetoric: A Problem-Solving Approach to Composition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981). The text by Field and Weiss consists almost entirely of short, narrative cases, while the book by Tedlock and Jarvie, as their title suggests, also offers rhetorical methodology. Another distinction is in the types of cases. The latter book deals with more controversial issues, such as premarital sexual relations and gay rights.

9. A writer may emphasize or deemphasize ideas according to where they are placed in a sentence. When placed at the beginning or end of a sentence, key words communicate more vividly to the reader. This concept is easily proven by considering the trick question "How many animals did Moses take with him aboard the Ark?" The answer, of course, is that Noah, not Moses boarded the Ark. People are often fooled by this because the key word, "Moses," is placed in that part of the sentence which is least effective for conveying important information: the middle. The misleading terms "animals" and "Ark" occupy the more effective sections of the sentence, the beginning and end.

10. For this assignment I am indebted to Randall R. Freisinger, "James Britton and the Importance of Audience," *English Language Arts Bulletin* 20/21 (Winter/Spring 1980): 5-8.