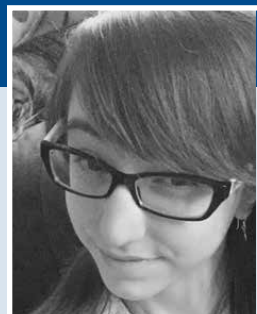


# Tutors' Column: Making Audience Visible: Readership and Audience In Writing Centers

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Even though “writing” is usually in our job title, being a *writing* tutor requires a lot more *reading* than one might think. And while tutors serve as an *explicit* audience for student writers, how we help student writers become aware of their *implicit* audience is not so clear (“explicit audience” refers to an actual, physical presence, whereas “implicit audience” refers to notions about readers one has while writing). In order to help student writers understand the need to think about implicit audience while they are developing a text, our writing center has begun creating Rhetorical Reading Guides (RRGs) of model papers, guides that highlight a readerly experience by making audience visible. In her article in this same issue, our Writing Center Administrator, Amanda M. Greenwell, describes RRGs:

In the margins of model papers from various disciplines, tutors are documenting rhetorical readings with an emphasis on readership—marking and explicating textual features that contribute to, and, in many cases, orchestrate a reader’s experience of its content.

Our goal with RRGs is to make implicit audience *visible* as a way to strengthen audience awareness for students and tutors alike.

In our center, model papers are student-written essays faculty have deemed exemplary pieces of effective writing, and our copies often have professors’ comments in the margins. These comments may be shorthanded phrases such as “Nice wording” or “Effective transition”; however, many student writers are still working to understand the overall meaning of these phrases on both local (sentence structure) and global (logic and critical thinking) levels. Student writers may view such comments as complimenting properly written sentences, but how often will they consider the experience of the *reader* who encounters such sentences?

David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky in *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers* label the notion of writers thinking about readers the “social interaction” between reading and writing (1). In other words, despite the reader and writer being distanced from one another, effective writing should ultimately be able to communicate the writer’s ideas clearly and coherently to the reader. What students may forget (or fail to realize) when writing for a professor who knows their work and the context in which they write is that the only way for a reader to interact with the ideas being proposed is through the writer’s *writing*. A disconnect between reader and writer can occur when a writer neglects to acknowledge their audience, which leads to miscommunication. When we make audience visible through the marginal annotations within RRGs, we are acting as a bridge that can solidify communication—the “social interaction”—between reading and writing, and ultimately, between reader and writer.

Annotating a readerly experience requires nuanced language that calls attention to the reader. For example, when devising a RRG for a literature review of empirical research studies, next to a sentence where the author defines a term, I’ve noted:

Here, the author is defining the term “agoraphobia.” When readers read this definition, they gain a more accurate understanding of what the term means and how people who suffer from this disorder are affected. The author chose to use the term “agoraphobia” at the beginning of the introduction without necessarily going into specifics, and as readers, we now have a broad understanding of what this paper will be about.

Where some professors may have underlined the student’s definition of “agoraphobia” and marked “good” next to it, I explicitly state *why* presenting the definition is “good” by explaining what I gained as a reader from the definition. Later in the RRG, next to a concluding paragraph, I also explain how, as a reader, I felt supported by the writer’s choices:

In an essay as long and complex as this, this paragraph that draws the attention back to the overarching thesis is important. As readers, we can easily get caught up in each conflict as it is currently being addressed, which can cause us to forget what the overall purpose of the piece is. This all-inclusive assessment not only creates a conclusion to the conflict assessment, but it also prepares the reader for the next section of the paper.

By highlighting my thoughts as a reader and marking them explicitly, audience is made visible.

During tutorials in our center, we strive to implement the notion of readership. We believe that student writers using RRGs in a tutorial should take a step back from their position as “writer” and grab a front-row seat in the audience as “reader.” We tutors typically begin this process by determining who will read the text (student or tutor), and then begin listening for areas of effective and ineffective writing. If we come across an area that could leave readers feeling lost, we can turn to a RRG and show the student writer places in it where a reader might have responded to an effective handling of a similar issue. In this way, student writers are redirected to focus on audience and can be made aware of how their writing may impact a reader’s experience, be it positively or negatively.

I’ve found that RRGs have made it easier for me to place myself into what Robert Browne described as “Audience X” in *Representing Audiences in Writing Center Consultation*: “Tutors are regularly called upon to read and respond from the imagined perspective of the target audience,” and tutors often qualify themselves as “a reader, not *the* reader who will ultimately evaluate the work”. As a reader, my job is not to say whether student writers are “doing it right”; however, I can take note of areas within their writing where I feel supported as a reader or where I might need some clarification. I might begin a tutorial dialogue with a student writer by saying something like, “As a reader, I am able to follow your train of thought because of your explicit use of transitions.” I find that when I use this type of language—the same language used within RRGs—something often clicks. Student writers are often more responsive to feedback and often become aware (or more aware) of the aspect of audience.

However, the task of becoming a reader is difficult even for tutors. While creating my first RRG, I tended to slip into “instructional” comments rather than “readerly” ones. Now I’m able to see the distinction between a “how-to” comment and a “this is what your writing did for me” comment. For example, where I might have said, during an instructional moment, something along the lines of, “*Here, the author is introducing a new type of therapy that has also been used in the treatment of agoraphobia,*” I am now aware that such a comment does not express an aspect of readership. In her article in this issue, Greenwell discusses the readerly implications of this note in more detail. Here, I want to emphasize that even tutors may find it difficult to cast themselves as readers. We are hired, in large part, because we are effective writers; however, student writers do not need us to write their papers; they need us to *read* their papers effectively.

Seasoned writers use a variety of writerly-readerly moves to guide their readers through their texts, but many students don't understand what such writers are doing for readers. While I initially found the effort to shift my perspective from "writer" to "reader" a bit perplexing, I now view this shift as an "invisible step" that most effective writers make. Even without having an explicit audience present, experienced writers can consider an implicit audience as they craft pieces that are coherent on both local and global levels. In contrast, many student writers do not often consider audience as they write. However, by using RRGs and asking student writers readerly types of questions, we can help student writers make "invisible steps" visible, too. Through that process we can help student writers access the aforementioned implicit "social interaction" between reading and writing—we can help them make that notion explicit. Unless we are making a direct address to someone (as we do when writing e-mails or letters), how often do we forget that we are not writing in vacuums, or that our writing will be received and read by someone else? Unless writers address audience within their writing, their texts may end up being similar to a stage performance with the curtains still closed. Our writing center is determined to open those curtains. When the audience cheers, we'd like to know *why* they are cheering. In order to do this, we must speak out, cheer louder, and make our overall experience visible.



### WORKS CITED

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