Strategies for Teaching Audience Awareness

by
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Audience analysis is a key writing skill, since a competent writer's analysis of the target audience guides his or her use of the other composing strategies. Research with skilled writers shows them drawing careful pictures of their target audiences in their heads from the very outset of their pre-writing. In the light of these audience pictures, mature writers then plan writing goals to reach specific target audiences. On the other hand, the research has shown novice writers writing into a void, with no sense of audience or purpose except to fill the requisite number of pages. However, when novice writers begin to see the responses of classmates to what they have written, "Engfish" begins to disappear fast. Hence the need for live, honest feedback from classmates and all other available audiences.

Another audience lesson that novice writers must learn if they are to be skilled at written communication is how to clearly distinguish between what is clear in their heads and what is clear on paper. Novice writers can be made more aware of this problem if we cover their papers with a blank sheet and then uncover them line by line, from the top while reading aloud. At half a page and then a page, we can stop and discuss the meaning and implications of what is explicit on the page—up to that point and how much their target audience has been clearly guided—or misled. At this point our students will often begin to realize that they are reading their own words in contexts that are <u>only explicit in their own heads</u>. Thus they are leading their readers in false directions they never intended. The "outsider" reader, unlike the teacher, cannot know or read their minds to know what is coming. Only live "outsider" readers, usually fellow students, can bring novice writers to see what they have written looks like on paper to the eyes of an "outsider." Students often don't fully believe what we English professionals tell them about their writing. But the honest responses of fellow students are stunningly effective.

The feedback from fellow students helps novice writers to see the gaps in their explanations and arguments, which they themselves are filling in from what they "see" in their own heads.

When they say, "But I explain that on a later page," we can explain the fact that only a subject teacher who does not need their written communication knows in advance the context, explanations, concrete examples, and distinctions a real audience needs to clearly understand their written communication line by line and page by page. Our novice writers must experience extensive, ongoing audience feedback, chiefly honest responses from their live audiences of classmates, family and friends. Letting students observe fellow students experiencing audience difficulties has proven to be powerfully effective pedagogy. By contrast, teacher homilies on audience analysis are virtually ineffective without our students' experiences with real audiences.

Another helpful strategy for teaching audience awareness is collecting the drafts on which students have been working and setting them aside for as long as possible. When students come back "cold" to their half-forgotten drafts, they become, in a sense, outside audiences for their own writing. This strategy is especially effective if students honestly share with one another their experiences of surprise with their old drafts. We can also have authors or classmates read those "cold" drafts aloud before discussing their responses with one another. They will be surprised at the hitherto unseen gaps in their written explanations. Thereby they will learn to grapple more effectively through their cycles and revisions with the slippery ambiguity of language.

In order to deflect resentful writer responses to criticism, we can remind them that skilled writers are very good at returning to their drafts with the critical eye of a disinterested and even hostile outsider. We can also remind them that "immature writers see their drafts as extensions of themselves and resent even constructive criticism, but mature writers seek out tough critics" (Our students will be much more open in these self-critical discussions if we have already shared with them our own draft revision experiences). Only after novice writers have been confronted with a real audience's bewilderment and

requests for clarification while they are reading their expository and persuasive writing, will they begin to understand that learning to revise for specific target audiences is critical to effective, real world writing.

Feedback only from an English teacher can be easily dismissed on the assumption that we English teachers are too demanding. But when our students see classmates falling on their faces trying to communicate challenging material to a peer audience in writing, they have learned a lesson that they will never forget. Such experiences are invaluable if the teacher maintains the group spirit of mutual assistance, explains the meaning of the experience, and makes sure that no one gets hurt by harsh criticism. Student writers only gradually realize that what they think they have said clearly on paper is really only clear in their heads. Then we can begin to explain that the brain is blind—that it relies as much on what the reader already knows and unconsciously provides from long-term memory through the two switching stations between the fragmentary and evanescent impressions that the eyes receive and the brain itself.

The next step in teaching audience awareness is to ask students, in conference and in class, what audience goals they wish to achieve in each written communication, e.g. "What chief point do you want to make?" "How do you want to affect your target audience's emotions?" "What other responses do you wish to produce in them?" "Why would that audience be interested in hearing your insights and arguments?" "What common ground can you and your audience build upon?" "What key insight do you want them to remember afterwards?" "How do you plan to organize your arguments so as to grab their interest and hold it as you convince them?"

At this point, students realize that their rhetorical goals are really more complex than simply parading information and insights before an all-knowing teacher audience. They want to share their enthusiasm for their subject, respond to logical objections and questions about their conclusions, and share some of their unique insight into their writing subjects. As in everyday oral communication, rhetorical goals often turn out to be sophisticated, subtle, and complex once they become explicit in the course of discussion. Then, through brain-

storming, conferencing, or class discussion, we can analyze these goals with our students, reconsider the mind-sets of classmates or hypothetical audiences, and then analyze the various rhetorical options available to student writers to achieve their audience goals. After just a little coaching from us, they can practice these audience strategies in small groups and then try out the results with the whole class. After all, they are quite sophisticated in using analogous oral strategies. Through talking about writing, they can pleasantly tap those oral skills.

Through class discussion, students can analyze the frames of reference in which various classmates and other target audiences live and think. Subjects that are controversial among students provide the opportunity for lively discussion in which several points of view can be articulated and persuasive strategies discussed. Then the unspoken assumptions of other audiences and writers can be analyzed through letters to the editor, editorials, class discussion of controversial articles, etc. In exercises of this kind, teachers can also present hypothetical audiences typical of those whom students might be interested in reaching, e.g. prejudiced groups, target audiences with strong preconceptions, e.g. very conservative or very liberal groups. Public figures make good, hypothetical audiences. Also, real audiences, to whom students might wish to write are available in the community or nearby. Students and teacher together can then "psych out" or analyze the mind-set of these special target audiences, their convictions, expectations, and prejudices. This is an interesting game to play, and students have been playing it all their lives in their oral communication, often with high degrees of success. Now they discover, with relief and satisfaction, that they can translate their well-honed oral skills into writing skills.

After the piece of writing has been tried out on teachers, friends, family, and fellow students and then revised in the light of all the feedback, it can sometimes be sent to a real audience. Much of the time, however, fellow students and teachers will have to be called upon to play the roles of the special audiences. Even in this more limited rhetorical situation, students' experience of audience analysis and audience focusing produces rapid writing improvement. It can also be fun.

Even though our students are already confident of their skills in dealing with problem audiences in oral communication, they can profitably point out blind spots to one another. In audience analysis and writing projects of this kind, the student writer continues to build upon oral skills in writing for multiple audiences: fellow students, teachers, readers of the local paper and others, role-played by the teacher and fellow students. Thus, students learn to create pictures of their target audiences from the outset of their writing processes. They can learn to flesh out those pictures by filling in the contexts of their audiences' private and public universes, especially their strongest interests, concerns, and needs. They can then clarify through talk-write the goals and subgoals that they wish to achieve with each audience.

Throughout their working lives in the computerized information age, students will have to be skilled at writing for multiple audiences, e.g. reports to superiors in their companies, letters to potential customers, clients, school boards, boards of directors, and a whole range of other specialized audiences. Recent research has shown that successful businessmen are quite skilled in assuming several persona for several audiences: customers, managers, audiences, in the company of equal rank but unequal backgrounds, subordinates with varying levels of education, skill, and authority. Audiences who are not well educated must be clearly instructed but not offended by writing that seems condescending. Only through practice can students begin to realize that writing strategies change with each new audience, and each new rhetorical purpose.

Also, such goals and subgoals often shift as writers work their way through the thinking-writing process. Thus, researcher Carol Berkenkotter writes that an anthropologist, a research subject, starts out with the goals of simply explaining her specialty to an audience of high school students, and in the course of writing, decides to "interest these kids in anthropology" (Carol Berkenkotter, "Understanding a Writer's Awareness of Audience," College Composition and Communication 23 (1981: 391).

Audience analysis will also serve a heuristic function for our students as it does for the anthropologist. For example, as our students sketch out a picture of a specific target audience, a growing list of specific questions will come to the surface, some of them key questions for which this target audience will demand answers if they are to be convinced. These questions can then be jotted down before they are forgotten, with the purpose of anticipating and answering them in the course of their writing. If, for example, image-conscious high school administrators, fearful of bad publicity, are to be convinced that they should not allow a rock concert at the school, that overriding concern would have to be addressed first. Otherwise, it would be a waste of time to address other problems involved in the project such as making a profit, securing a group that would appeal to students, etc. In other words, audience problems have to be dealt with in the writing process in the order of their importance to the target audience, not the writer.

Research has shown that for the skilled writer, audience concerns, in the order of their importance to their target audiences are key considerations in developing a hierarchy of writing goals and subgoals that will most effectively achieve the purposes of the writing. For example, sometimes convincing a particular audience that a problem actually exists is the primary goal to which all others are subordinate e.g., we really do need a teen center or another outdoor basketball court. The primary goal is unique to each specific audience situation; goals may be diverse as winning the reader's confidence, anticipating and answering difficult objections and questions, grabbing indifferent readers' attention so they won't stop reading, or convincing the reader of the relevance and importance of the subject to his or her life. These are basic audience problems that student writers almost never think about, but which are essential to success in real world writing.

After this kind of in-depth audience work, our students are prepared to learn many useful strategies from anthology selections that they read from editorials, and other "special pleading" articles. These selections can be analyzed and gleaned for new, usable audience strategies in tandem with the analysis of evolving student drafts. Audience goal and strategy analysis done by a whole class, a discussion group, or in a conference motivate individuals to try new strategies in their evolving papers—especially if they know that their experi-

ments will be recognized and rewarded. On the other hand, if our students do not practice audience analysis and audience strategies, they probably will have serious difficulties with their transactional writing after the simple and unique communication contexts of ordinary school writing have disappeared forever.