

TEACHING AUDIENCE ANALYSIS TO THE TECHNICAL STUDENT

M. B. Debs
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
Troy, NY

L. V. Brillhart
Triton College
River Grove, IL

SUMMARY

Recent research and publications have supported the significant role that audience plays, both in delineating the composition model and in defining particular types of discourse. Audience analysis is an inherent and essential component of technical communication. In this paper, we discuss several techniques for teaching audience analysis that have proven successful in a course for engineering students.

INTRODUCTION

Cicero - an early proponent of audience analysis - suggested that an introduction should render the audience attentive, receptive, and docile. Rather than rendering the audience docile, we choose to rile a little.

We begin by admitting that sometimes (only sometimes) we feel sorry for students. On the one hand, we ask them to write better - and we measure that "better" by the syntactic maturity of their writing - the length of their T-units and the extent of their vocabularies. On the other hand, we ask them to write better, and we measure that "better" by the readability of their writing - using measures that reward short sentences and words of few syllables.¹ For the student who endures in writing, this must be confusing.

By the same token, some of us teach audience awareness, some of us teach audience analysis or audience adaptation or reader accommodation - or we teach no audience at all. This too might be confusing.

Recent research and publications by Miller, Kinneavy, and Flower and Hayes, and others have supported the significant role that audience plays, both in delineating the composition model and in defining particular types of discourse.² An awareness of audience is - or should be - an inherent component

of any communication situation. In the field of technical communication, the study of audience has evolved into a kind of specialization - a specialization which is becoming increasingly abstracted from its roots and its purpose.

At this point, it is important to note that audience analysis and audience awareness are not synonymous nor equivalent terms, although many people tend to use them as such. Being aware of an audience is necessary for any kind of writing that can be called transactional. Audience analysis is the task of defining who is the audience for a particular piece of writing and determining those characteristics of the audience which will constrain the writer and affect the reception of the message. When an engineer writes a letter, he is aware of an audience because he is writing the letter to be read. When he writes that letter directly to his boss, he is aware of a particular audience. When he begins to think of his boss's reaction to the letter, her frame of reference, her preference for arrangement, her predisposition to the subject, the engineer is engaging in the process of audience analysis. That analysis certainly ensures audience awareness, and when it becomes part of that awareness, it establishes further constraints on the writing - affecting choice of organization, invention, style, revision, and format presentation throughout the writing process.

Much of the current literature on the composing process suggests that an awareness of audience may be one of several possible valid distinctions between the "unskilled" and the "skilled" writer. According to Nystrand, for example, learning to write may be seen as an experiment in which the writer "inquires less into the nature of the topic and more into the nature of the reader's reactions to marks on a page."³ We suspect that for the experienced writer a large portion of the time spent in recursive activity in writing is focused on incorporating audience analysis. Shaughnessy, Kroll, Britton and others indicate that this is not the case for the student writer.⁴ While the experienced writer capitalizes on the internalization of audience, the student writers usually does not, nor do they have the experience, understanding, or tools to do so. The inexperienced professional or technical writer may also find it difficult to internalize an appropriate audience for any given situation.

DEVELOPMENT OF TECHNIQUES

In 1976, Triton College designed a course which combined an introduction to engineering course and a freshman rhetoric course. Students are introduced to both the engineering profession and its communication techniques. Since that time, the course has been team-taught by an engineering instructor and an English instructor. Subsequently, many of these techniques

were used with seniors enrolled in a Technical and Professional Communications course at R.P.I. Our experience with these students indicates that learning techniques of audience analysis can assist students in achieving a mature style - a style that shows the tension produced when a text is written to be read and understood.

Techniques of audience analysis help the student to internalize an audience, to adopt the role of the reader. If the audience is indeed always a fiction, then analysis provides ways in which the abstract and general concept of audience can be made more concrete. With the tools of audience analysis, students learn to define the rhetorical situation. Rather than facing an assignment as if it were some great guessing game with the odds agin' them, they recognize that certain audiences dictate certain constraints. Students who recognize, for example, that a given technical format is a convention which has evolved because of its appropriateness to the subject, to the audience, and to the purpose, are more likely to use and adapt the formats than be paralyzed by them. For the technical student, the audience is the consumer, and market analysis makes sense in producing even a written product.

This characterizes the way we approached teaching audience analysis. We wanted students to

1. be aware of an audience,
2. analyze the audience, and
3. accommodate the audience.

That objective is the foundation of each assignment in the course. Consequently, we chose not to use a "cookbook" approach. Handing a sheet of paper with questions on age and education and technical background of the audience did not seem to be enough. As we continued working with this concept, however, we were able to employ a number of techniques.

PROCEDURES

First, we attempt to demonstrate that there is a reader and that the reader always has certain expectations. Many students, for example, have never considered the predictability of the English language. As soon as a writer puts the word "The" on a piece of paper, the writer is restricted as to what word or type of word he can put after. In a similar way, the reader, who has come to rely on predictability for efficient reading, also anticipates a certain type of word to follow. Grammar and usage can also be discussed as part of this predictability. We found that an effective parallel can be drawn between this and the student's interaction with a computer. As a reader, the computer is often demanding and rigid in its expectations; if it does not get what the system is programmed to expect, it will stop and print an error message, in many cases noting that it

had received something other than what had been expected.

Secondly, as evaluators, we changed our approach. In a team-taught course, the student must deal with two readers - the expert in content and the expert in writing. For many students, the trick to learning how to write is learning how to write to an English instructor - a frequently maligned, often misunderstood, stereotypical creature who is seen as having little relationship to the real world. In a technical writing course, students should learn immediately that they have an audience of at least two: the defined audience and the English teacher (or critical editor). Every assignment a student writes should be labelled with a defined audience, such as the supervisor, concerned layperson, or an expert in the field. The instructor, practicing a little disassociating, participates in the fiction by responding in a dual role: as the fictive reader (What? This doesn't follow!) and as the expert in writing (The organization here would improve if you used transitions.).

Another way to prove that readers do have expectations and to allow students to discover ways of accommodating readers is simply to turn the class into "real readers." During the semester selections from student writing can be clozed (every fifth word deleted) and distributed to the class. The students then attempt to predict which words would accurately fill in the blanks; these results can then be compared to the original. Instructors should also develop in-class exercises which require students to write a process paper or set of instructions on subjects of equal complexity and expertise. Mini-erector sets, Lincoln logs, and simple processes have been used successfully for this type of exercise. The student writes a description of how to build something; during the next class, the students exchange descriptions and attempt to recreate the original design, deliberately misinterpreting when possible.

Finally, the true complexity of writing to an audience is most accurately established with the technical report assignment. Reader accommodation is especially crucial to a good formal report which addresses a variety of readers who have discrete and, sometimes, conflicting concerns. An engineer's report may address peers; project supervisors; sales, manufacturing, accounting, and management divisions; experts and laypersons. The writer must analyze which sections will interest which readers and then strike a balance in the writing among the various readers. For this assignment, we require that students

1. Identify all potential or significant readers;
2. Determine their positions and attitudes relative to the writer;
3. Decide the effects the sections of the report should have on each audience;

4. Choose (and make a case for) specific strategies and appeals.

This process is repeated for the oral presentations.

CONCLUSIONS

When we think of audience analysis, we typically think of the type of analysis that considers the audience's technical knowledge, education level, reading level, interest, and motivation. These are useful bits of information only in so far as they help to make the audience seem more concrete and as they can be translated into specific techniques and approaches within the writing. From this knowledge, students can extract the necessary information to effectively communicate with the audience.

Earlier we mentioned that audience analysis has become a specialization abstracted from its roots and its purpose. As teachers of the technical student, we need to ensure that analysis contributes to the writing process - and does not reduce it. We need to avoid a tendency to analyze audiences in terms of level, noted by Miller, "as though we are concerned with how tall they have to be to look out of our window."⁵

Finding methods which will truly analyze the relationship between the reader and the writer is not an easy task. The methods are not laid out in any prescriptions, cookbooks, or word processing systems. It is essential, however, for the teacher to recognize that the techniques of audience analysis construct an internalized audience for the student writer, and that the process can be taught, through demonstration, discovery, analogy, and analysis.

REFERENCES

¹To my knowledge, this dilemma was first noted in S. Michael Halloran and Merrill D. Whitburn, "Ciceronian Rhetoric and the Rise of Science: The Plain Style Reconsidered," paper at the MLA Conference, December 1980.

²See for example: Carolyn R. Miller, "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing," College English 40, 6, February 1979, 610-617; James L. Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse, NY: W.W.Norton & Co., 1971; L.S. Flower and J.R. Hayes, A Process Model of Composition, Technical Report No. 1, Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University, Document Design Project, 1979.

³Martin Nystrand, "Using Readability Research to Investigate Writing," Research in the Teaching of English 13, 3, October 1979, p.238.

⁴M. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations, NY: Oxford Press, 1977; B. Kroll, "Cognitive Egocentrism and the Problem of

Audience Awareness in Written Discourse," Research in the Teaching of English 12, 3, October 1978, 262-281; J. Britton, et. al., The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18), London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1977.

⁵Miller, pp. 614-615.