

Comp Quickreads

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The Audience in the Text

Some Common Ways of Thinking About Audience

Aristotle: "Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself." [This formulation of ethos, pathos and logos is seen as emphasizing speaker (ethos), audience (pathos), and speech art (logos).]

Walter Ong: "The historian, the scholar or scientist, and the simple letter writer all fictionalize their audiences, casting them in a made-up role and calling on them to play the role assigned."

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford: "The most complete understanding of audience thus involves a synthesis of the perspectives we have termed audience addressed, with its focus on the reader, and audience invoked, with its focus on the writer."

Lester Faigley: "The social perspective . . . moves beyond the traditional rhetorical concern for audience, forcing researchers to consider issues such as social roles, group purposes, communal organization, ideology, and finally theories of culture."

Who are my readers? As I sit here on a Sunday afternoon thinking about the concept of audience in a composition class, I am struck anew at both the centrality and the difficulty of this idea. Do I think of my readers as Plato and Aristotle seemed to think of the rhetor's audience, as something to be mastered, susceptible listeners capable of persuasion provided I know how to persuade them? Or do I think of my readers as Blair or Campbell might have imagined them—intelligent, logical, rational, a bit skeptical but open to persuasion through effective argumentation? Or do I think of my readers as Walter Ong suggests I should, as a fiction, a mere construct of my mind created by me to serve my purposes?

Maybe I could figure out how to address my audience better if I knew more about them. Perhaps if I knew this audience that I am addressing I would better know what they wanted to read, what pleased them or displeased them, what persuaded them and what bored them. This approach focuses on the "real world," where writing has clear and obvious purposes and where readers are specific and knowable. Not surprisingly, this idea of audience is popular in business and technical writing. The entrepreneur is encouraged to think of the banker who will read the business plan and decide on a loan. The engineer is encouraged to think of the accountant who will read the project proposal and decide on funding. Both the banker and the accountant are actual people and at least in theory knowable.

Or maybe I can never know my readers because they don't exist until I invoke them. Maybe this "audience invoked" by my rhetorical choices is the only audience that exists. When the narrator in *Middlemarch* states, "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all

ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and *we* should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence" (italics added), *we* (the novel's readers) long to be part of the *we* invoked by the narrator, a community of readers full of wisdom, generosity, and humanity. We become the readers Eliot's narrator wants us to become, but we don't exist until the narrator invokes us.

But what if I don't see myself as part of the narrator's *we*? Similarly, what if my readers reject my attempts to construct them? Certainly readers are both actual physical people about whom I could learn more and constructs brought into partial being by my choices as a writer. Readers are both active as in the "audience addressed" model and passive as in the "audience invoked" model. It might be tempting to narrow our conception of audience to something manageable, and in fact as teachers we often do. Students can grasp the idea of readers—other people with other backgrounds, experiences, opinions, and ideas—because they are themselves readers struck at times by the foreignness of the texts we ask them to read. They know first-hand the experience of being not merely the "audience addressed" but the "audience unaddressed." Their confusion as readers, though, makes real the duties and responsibilities faced by any writer (including student writers) whose primary purpose is to communicate.

In short, like all rhetoric it comes down to choices. To some degree a writer chooses his or her readers, fashions them, imagines them, invokes them. But equally important is whether the writer chooses to acknowledge his or her readers, accept them, speak to them, meet them where they are in order to advance them.