

Comp Quickreads

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Purpose, Audience, Genre

Thinking about Audience

Imagine you are going to send an email describing your activities over the last twelve months to six recipients: your best friend, your brother, your mother, your eighty-five year old English aunt, the chair of your department, and the director of a prestigious grant foundation. Would you send the same message to each recipient? Would you include the same activities? Would you describe them in the same way? Would you use the same language and style in each?

Thinking about Genre

In introductory writing classes instructors might not even be aware that their assignments call for knowledge or even mastery of a genre: the college essay, which is itself a genre. The college essay is usually an argument supported by certain permissible kinds of evidence with an introduction articulating a thesis, body paragraphs developing and supporting that thesis, and a conclusion summarizing the argument and/or suggesting the next step in the process. Some of us are probably also not aware that some "common rules" about writing are conventions of specific genres and not universal. For example, most writers are taught to avoid the passive voice, but this convention is mostly associated with genres like the college essay. Scientific procedural writing, for example, requires the use of the passive voice.

The rhetorical turn in writing instruction has placed renewed emphasis on rhetoric and the rhetorical situation or context of writing. When students write, they participate in a community of readers and writers engaged in thinking, reading, discussing and writing about shared issues, ideas, and concepts. To be effective in this community, the writer must learn to be aware of the rhetorical situation. What do I want to accomplish with my writing? To whom am I appealing and what are their needs? What expectations of the audience must I satisfy or risk going unheard? These questions focus the writer's attention on purpose, audience, and genre.

Purpose

The purpose of any piece of writing can be determined by the writer asking the simple question: "What am I trying to accomplish with this piece of writing?" The question might be simple, but the answer isn't always. For example, a social worker writes an observation report to describe something. The purpose might be thought of as "describing X." What the social worker wants to "accomplish," however, is less obvious. The case worker might be trying to warn superiors about a potentially dangerous situation. In short, purpose involves understanding our own motives in writing.

Similarly, students must think beyond the mechanical particulars of the writing assignment. Wanting an 'A' has probably never helped anyone write a paper. One place to begin is to consider the instructor's purpose in making the assignment. What does the instructor want me to learn? What kind of knowledge does the instructor want me to demonstrate? Furthermore, students might consider what "effect" they want to produce on their readers.

Audience

As experienced writers know, we must always imagine our audience. Even when we are writing with a specific reader in mind, that "reader" is really more our imagined version of that person than an actual person. Students are often very reluctant to imagine their audience, and often mistakenly assume that the instructor is their audience. A better place to start would be to assume that the audience is everyone in the class, some of whom will share the writer's beliefs and ideas, and some of whom will not; some of whom will be as familiar with the text or with certain ideas, and some of whom will not.

Some assignments might specify hypothetical readers that students are supposed to address. Who are these readers? What do they know about the topic? What do they need to know? What are they likely to believe about this topic? Thinking about questions such as these will help a writer imagine and effectively appeal to his or her audience.

Genre

To speak of the "genre" of a piece of writing is to identify a set of conventions that should be followed. Knowing the genre of the writing and therefore knowing the associated conventions of the form can greatly simplify the writer's task.

As with purpose and audience, the genre of a piece of writing is sometimes very specific, and this is especially true in certain disciplines. A lab report in engineering must adhere to a very specific set of format and content rules, as must one in biology, though to a slightly different set of rules. Helping students recognize the different genres of writing and their associated conventions is key to helping them become effective and independent writers.