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Helping Writers Think Rhetorically

Some years ago I had the opportunity to participate in a statewide assessment of student writing in upper-division courses across the curriculum. Researchers collected several hundred papers written by juniors and seniors from a wide range of disciplines at six public universities. Our goal for this first-stage project was descriptive: we were to determine what kinds of papers students were being asked to write and to classify them into whatever categories seemed to emerge. What we discovered as we puzzled over many of the papers was that we should have asked for an assignment sheet to be attached to each paper.

Our confusion indicated that students were not thinking rhetorically about audience. Without the assignments, we struggled to understand what many of the papers were doing. Students tended to write directly to the teacher, whose background knowledge we didn't share. We were plopped down in the middle of a conversation to which we hadn't been introduced. As outside readers, we needed papers with effective titles that identified the subject and promised something new or challenging. We also needed introductions that explained the problem to be addressed, filled in needed background, and offered some kind of thesis statement or purpose statement to indicate the writer's intentions and to forecast the argument.

Clearly students across the disciplines were not being coached to transfer into their upper division writing the rhetorical knowledge introduced

in first-year composition. A goal of most first-year composition programs is to show students how a writer's decisions are often functions of the writer's rhetorical situation—the writer's purpose, audience, and genre. Particularly, expert writers pose the following kinds of questions about their rhetorical context:

- Who are my intended readers?

- How much do my readers already know and care about my topic? What is their stance toward my topic?

- What is my purpose for writing? What kind of change do I want to bring about in my readers' understanding of my topic? When my readers finish my paper, what do I want them to know, believe, or do?

- What genre is most appropriate for my context? What are the features and constraints of this genre? What style, level of language, and document design does this genre require?

My goal in this chapter is to suggest ways that disciplinary instructors can help students practice these rhetorical skills when they write papers in any field. Recent scholarship has shown that helping students situate their writing within a rhetorical context helps them transfer knowledge from one writing situation to another (Beaufort, 2007; Carter, 2007; Carroll, 2002). Because thinking rhetorically is such an important skill, writing theorists recommend that teachers build a rhetorical context into every writing assignment. (I offer suggestions for doing so both in this chapter and in Chapter Six.) When students learn to wrestle with questions about purpose, audience, and genre, they develop a conceptual view of writing that has lifelong usefulness in any communicative context.

Helping Students Think About Audience and Purpose

An important difference between novice and expert writers is that experts think about audience early in the writing process whereas novices don't (see Sommers's classic study, 1980). Closely related to audience is the concept of purpose. One way to think about purpose is through the writer's aim—such as to inform, to explain, to analyze, to persuade, to reflect, to entertain, and so forth. But another useful way to understand purpose is to articulate the kind of change the writer hopes to bring about in the readers' view of his or her topic. Instructors can help students understand

purpose in this way by having them do the following nutshell exercise while planning their papers:

Before reading my paper, my readers will think this way about my topic: _____.

But after reading my paper, my readers will think this different way about my topic: _____.

Here are some examples:

- Before reading my paper, my readers will think that Hamlet lives in a traditional Christian universe inherited from the Middle Ages. But after reading my paper, my readers will see that Hamlet lives in an absurdist world similar to Sartre's existentialism.

- Before reading my paper, my little brother will think that summer is hotter than winter because the earth is closer to the sun. But after reading my paper, he will see that summer is hotter than winter because the tilt of the earth's axis causes the "summer hemisphere" to receive more concentrated overhead sun rays and the "winter hemisphere" to receive more slanted, diffused sun rays.

- Before reading my paper, my readers will think that wind power is a viable alternative energy source for the United States. But after reading my paper, my readers will see that wind power can never provide more than 4 percent of the nation's electricity needs.

- Before reading my experimental report, my readers will be uncertain whether 1940s Mickey Mouse cartoons have less or more gender stereotyping than recent *SpongeBob SquarePants* cartoons. After reading my report, readers will see that *SpongeBob SquarePants* cartoons have less gender stereotyping with a statistically significant level of confidence.

Articulating purpose in this way is particularly valuable in settings calling for thesis-governed prose. When the thesis pushes against an alternative view, it creates the kind of tension encouraged by Graff and Birkenstein's (2009) template "They say/I say." Because the writer must defend a contestable thesis against a background of what others say, readers can appreciate that something is at stake in the argument. Moreover, articulating purpose in terms of changing the audience's view is an effective antidote against "and then" papers, "all about" papers, and data dumps as described in Chapter Two (pages 24–27).

When helping students imagine an audience, therefore, I want them to imagine simultaneously the audience's initial stance toward the writer's topic. It is this stance that creates for the writer an implied purpose or role. Here are some typical kinds of audiences and initial stances that instructors can use:

Naïve audience: Here the instructor specifies a naïve audience who needs new information or a clear explanation of something. The student plays the role of expert relative to the assigned audience.

- Explain the difference between velocity and acceleration to a student who missed last week's lectures.

- Your batty uncle thinks it is unfair and stupid that passengers sitting in the same section of an airplane probably paid different prices for their tickets. As an economics student, help your uncle see why all these different prices make perfect economic sense and are not unfair.

- Your boss needs an informative report on competitors' marketing and pricing strategies for selected items that are not selling well in your stores. Do the research and write your report for the boss.

- A nine-year-old diabetic child needs to understand the glycemic index of foods. As a pediatric nurse, prepare a short talk that will explain glycemic index in language the child will understand.

Puzzled audiences with skeptical tendencies: Here writer and reader of equal status confront a shared question or problem. The writer's role is to present, through critical thinking and analysis, a "best solution" to the problem while attending to counterviews. The audience will be interested in your solution but will raise skeptical questions.

- What kind of bearings should we use in our design for a circumferentially mounted radiator fan? Write a proposal to fellow engineers uncertain about the best approach but likely to raise objections to your solution.

- Does Hamlet change in the last act? Write to classmates who are apt to be skeptical of your answer.

- You are a research assistant to a state legislator who needs to decide whether to support a new sales tax on soda and candy. Using the economic analysis tools we have learned in class, write a recommendation memo to your boss.

Resistant or hostile audiences: Here students must imagine an audience whose views of the subject are well formed and opposed to the writer's view. The writer's purpose is more clearly argumentative and persuasive.

- The design team for the circumferentially mounted radiator fan has recommended air bearings, but you believe that this decision is a mistake. Write a memo to your project manager laying out your best case against air bearings.

- Next week there will be a public hearing on whether to use taxpayer dollars to build a new sports arena for a professional basketball team in your city. Because you have been researching public financing of sports stadiums, you have been asked to present your position in a formal speech at the beginning of the hearing. Prepare your PowerPoint presentation for a five-minute speech. Try to sway those most opposed to your position.

Helping students think rhetorically about audience and purpose can lead to substantial improvements in their writing. I'll cite two recent examples from my own research with colleagues across the disciplines. In a sophomore organic chemistry course, chemists Peter J. Alaimo and Joseph Langenhan decided to eliminate traditional lab reports in order to teach students how to write authentic professional papers in chemistry (Alaimo, Bean, Langenhan, and Nichols, 2009). To do so, they replaced cookbook lab experiments with newly designed experimental problems that simulated discovery research. For all their writing assignments—aimed at teaching each of the sections of a scientific report—they specified a professional audience of practicing chemists who were interested in the assigned experimental problem but not familiar with it. Here they describe their rationale:

> *The problem with conventional lab reports is that they encourage students to think and behave like students rather than like professionals. . . . Also [students'] assumption that the audience for their reports is the instructor contributes to a novice style. In many cases this assumption is highly visible: Students [often referred] to the instructor directly in their writing (e.g., "Professor Alaimo said we should use 1 M NaOH rather than the 1.2 M NaOH that the lab manual recommended") [p. 20].*

To address this problem, Alaimo and Langenhan emphasized writing to an outside professional audience rather than the instructor. "When

students write to their instructor as audience, they see lab reports as homework, not as professional documents. In contrast, imagining professional scientists as the audience orients students to adopt the persona of expert insiders who are communicating with other expert insiders" (p. 22). Writing to a professional audience, they explain, requires students to "provide scientific context, construct well-formulated ideas, and build persuasive arguments for readers who have a professional interest in but no prior knowledge of the specific experiment" (p. 22). The authors show how imagining a professional audience led to substantial improvements in the quality of the papers.

Whereas our chemistry project focused on writing to professionals, a second project, led by finance professor David Carrithers, asked students to write to a lay audience—in this case a small business owner with no background in finance or quantitative analysis. Carrithers asked students to analyze the owner's finance problem (requiring professional expertise) and then to write a memo to the owner recommending a course of action (Carrithers and Bean, 2008; Carrithers, Bean, and Ling, 2008). Carrithers specified a lay audience not only because finance professionals often work with nonexpert clients but also because addressing a lay audience forces students to avoid finance jargon—a constraint that requires an extra dimension of critical thinking. Here is his reasoning (Carrithers and Bean, 2008):

> *At first glance, finance faculty might consider overuse of jargon to be primarily a rhetorical problem resulting from insufficient focus on audience. But we believe it may also indicate an underlying critical thinking problem. When students use financial jargon, including abbreviations, [illustrated in a previous example], it may indicate that they are not comfortable in their knowledge of the concept—especially when they provide no explanation of the tool or how it is employed in the analysis. Students, we surmise, tend to find comfort in jargon. They can memorize the terms and thus feel that they sound like finance professionals without fully understanding the concepts they represent. However, it takes considerable control of the concepts to be able to explain them to a nonexpert audience. Besides revealing weak communication skills, use of jargon may thus be evidence of a fundamental inability to use financial concepts in unfamiliar settings [p. 19].*

What we discovered in the initial phases of our finance project is that students were surprisingly resistant to writing to a lay audience. With few exceptions, despite the assignment's admonition to address an owner who

had no insider knowledge of finance, students wrote directly to the teacher. Students loaded their memos with finance jargon and even attached pages of Excel spreadsheets that would make sense only to a finance expert. We interviewed a representative sampling of students to discover why they didn't adapt their message to the assigned audience. Their reasons were instructive:

- They didn't think the instructor was serious about writing to a lay audience. They didn't see the assignment as an authentic, open-ended problem requiring an argument; rather they thought the assignment was simply a "story problem" to be solved algorithmically to find a right answer.

- They didn't think they would sound professional unless they used jargon; they felt they would be dumbing down their knowledge if they took the lay audience requirement seriously.

- They didn't realize the importance of walking in the shoes of business owners who needed bottom-line advice for making a decision but didn't need to know the analytical steps that yielded the information. Until prompted by our interview questions, they didn't realize that the owner—unlike the instructor—would be confused by the finance jargon and Excel spreadsheets. They also didn't realize that they often buried (or didn't supply at all) the actual information that the owner needed.

- They didn't see the relevance of a previous course in business writing, which stressed analysis of audience and purpose as the first step in producing a memo. Students didn't transfer knowledge from the business writing course to the finance course, apparently because they regarded the curriculum as a sequence of isolated courses with little connection to each other.

These findings support the frequently encountered observation that students write to the teacher even when they have been assigned a "real world" audience. As Anne Beaufort (2007) puts it in her own study of students' gradual acquisition of rhetorical knowledge, "School takes precedence; it is more immediate, so the more distant target audience cannot be fully imagined" (p. 132). However, Beaufort shows how students make progress, sometimes quickly, when teachers stress the importance of imagining the needs of the reader. Our own research supports Beaufort's conclusion.

EXHIBIT 3.1

Sample Questions to Spur Rhetorical Thinking

Question to Ask	Purpose or Value of This Question
What is my level of expertise relative to my assigned audience? (Note: A student may be a novice relative to the instructor but an expert relative to someone else.)	Helps writer determine an appropriate level of vocabulary and syntax as well as amount of background and development needed.
How do I want to change my readers' view of my topic?	Helps writer establish a contestable thesis in conversation with alternative views.
How much does my audience already know about the problem/issue I am addressing? How much do they care about it?	Helps writer compose an effective introduction. The less an audience already knows about the writer's subject, the more the writer must provide background and context. To motivate the audience to care, the writer needs to make the problem vivid and to show why addressing the problem matters.
What's the "news" in my paper? What constitutes old information and new information for my audience?	Helps writer connect new information to old information. Readers need to know the "news" quickly—usually in the title or subject line and certainly early in the introduction. But the news makes sense only when linked to the reader's previous knowledge and interests (old information).
How resistant is my audience to my thesis?	Helps the writer accommodate resistant readers. Resistant audiences need assurance that the writer has thought about and respects alternative views; they'll expect the writer to anticipate possible objections and respond to them.
How busy is my audience?	Helps writer think about reader's environment. Busy audiences often prefer concise documents with easy-to-scan structures and meanings up front.

Helping students think rhetorically teaches concepts with great explanatory power. Exhibit 3.1 gives examples of the kinds of questions that instructors can encourage students to pose about any disciplinary writing assignment.

Helping Students Think About Genre

Besides purpose and audience, another important rhetorical concept is genre. The term *genre* refers to recurring types of writing identifiable by distinctive features of structure, style, document design, approach to

subject matter, or other markers. Genres usually arise from recurring cultural occasions or situations with their own recognizable patterns. Certain cultural contexts or situations might invite a writer to, say, compose a syllabus, a text message, a letter to the editor, or a scholarly article (all examples of genres) or to purchase a birthday card or a bumper sticker (genres that let you say your piece without having to put your own pen to paper). Any given genre has prototypical members that exemplify the most common features of the genre as well as outlier or borderline members that push the limits of the genre, playing creatively with its features. Some genres, such as the APA research report, are governed by strictly prescribed rules set forth in an organization's publication manual. Other genres are more diffuse or open to a wide range of structures and style (popular magazine articles, blogs, the personal essay). Exhibit 3.2 shows some typical examples of genres.

The concept of genre is often confusing to students. One way I try to explain genre is to create an analogy between genres and dress codes. Just as some social occasions create writing genres, I explain, other social occasions create clothing genres. I place on the board some typical social occasions such as "wedding," "job interview," "high school prom," "'70s party," or "exam week" and invite discussion of appropriate kinds of dress. I want students to see that social occasions create clothing

EXHIBIT 3.2

Examples of Genres

Personal Writing	Academic Writing	Popular Culture	Public Affairs/Civic Writing	Professional/ Workplace Writing
Letter	Scholarly article	Magazine article	Letter to the editor	Cover letter
Diary/journal	Book/chapter	Advertisement	Op-ed piece	Résumé
Reflection	Abstract	Hip hop lyrics	Advocacy website	Business memo
Autobiographical essay (literary nonfiction)	Review article	Bumper sticker	White paper	Legal brief
	Experimental report	Graffito	Political blog	Brochure
Blog	Poster	Fan website	Advocacy poster	Technical manual
Text message	Ethnography	Comic book	Magazine article on civic issue	Proposal
E-mail		Newspaper article	Policy brief	Marketing plan
Tweet		Greeting card	Documentary film	Management report
Personal essay		Trade book		Press release
Facebook page				

expectations that operate as genres—invitations to dress in a certain way along with corresponding limits or constraints. One can express individuality at a job interview by choosing a particular style and quality of necktie or handbag but not by choosing a favorite sweatshirt or pair of flip-flops. Similarly, one can express individuality in an APA research report by asking a particularly shrewd research question or developing an elegant methodology, but not by creating a fun cover page or organizing the report as a personal narrative.

To operate successfully in a written genre, students need to learn the genre's expectations, possibilities, limits, and constraints. Many of the questions that concern novice writers (such as *Can I use "I" in my paper?* or *Do I need a thesis statement in the introduction?*) are functions of the assigned genre rather than of the teacher's whims. But genres are more than a set of guidelines for formatting and style. According to recent theorists, they are forms of "social action" (Miller, 1984)—that is, they help produce the ways that certain communities think and act (Wardle, 2009; Nowacek, 2009; Beaufort, 2007; Carter, 2007; Russell and Yanez, 2003; Bawarshi, 2003; Russell, 1997; MacDonald, 1994; Swales, 1990; Bazerman, 1987, 1981; Myers, 1986a). The concept of genre creates strong reader expectations, which in turn place demands on a writer to fulfill those expectations. When one writes in a certain genre, one's structure, style, and approach to subject matter are influenced by the hundreds of previous writers who have employed that same genre. The existence of the genre invites us to generate the ideas that meet the genre's expectations. Every genre is thus an invitation. For example, the existence of the genre "grant proposal" invites us to find problems that might be solved through grant funding. The existence of the genre "letter to the editor" invites us to insert our own voices into the public arena.

It often takes years to become an expert user of a genre. Teachers in the physical and social sciences, for example, appreciate how difficult it is for a novice science student to understand the difference between the "Results" and "Discussion" sections of an experimental report, particularly to see how the Discussion section constructs an argument (usually drawing data from the Results section as evidence) that tries to answer the research question presented in the introduction, a question that in turn grows out of the literature review and the scientist's theoretical orientation. As rhetorician Charles Bazerman has shown (1988), the genre of the experimental report helped constitute the practices of modern science (see also Greg Myers, 1986b, 1985). This empirical way of thinking about the world, embodied in the genre of the research report, is

what expert insider scientists, as teachers, must pass on to their new students. Other disciplines have analogous genres that embody their discipline's ways of thinking and that students must learn in order to become disciplinary insiders. In Chapter Thirteen on teaching undergraduate research, I suggest strategies for teaching students how to write within the main genres of a discipline. But knowledge of genres is important even in introductory courses where students need to appreciate the difference between, say, an academic argument and a personal reflection, or a news story and an op-ed column.

I conclude this section with one final point about genres: while some genres call for closed-form prose, others call for alternative or open forms. Let me explain.

By *closed-form prose,* I mean the kind of conventional thesis-governed, points-first prose that we typically think of as good writing. Closed-form prose typically has the following features:

- An explicit thesis statement, usually in the introduction
- Clear forecasting of the structure to follow
- Unified and coherent paragraphs introduced by topic sentences
- Clear transitions and signposts throughout (in some cases facilitated by various levels of headings)
- Coherently linked sentences aimed at maximum clarity and readability

Such structures are called "closed" because after the introduction the reader expects the argument to follow the plan announced in the introduction, with no digressions, gaps, or other organizational surprises. Because its structure and style aim for maximum clarity, the value of closed-form prose rests on the quality of the ideas it presents. The closed-form structure aims to make those ideas as clear and transparent as possible. The high school five-paragraph essay is a by-the-numbers way of teaching closed-form writing to beginning writers.

Readers expect closed-form prose in most kinds of academic writing, particularly in conference papers, journal articles, book chapters, research proposals, and so forth. It is also the expected norm in most workplace and professional writing—memos, reports, white papers, grant proposals, policy briefs, civic arguments, and other occasions that call for transparency,

clarity, and readability. Clearly success in academic and professional life depends on students' learning to produce closed-form prose.

But there are other ways also to produce "good writing." Many genres typically break the rules of closed-form prose. These genres, which I call *open form*, often celebrate playfulness, digressions, personal voice, the narrative strategies of literary nonfiction, or other characteristics that resist the smoothly mapped structure, predictability, and argumentative confidence of closed-form prose. These open-form genres often have a reflective, personal, exploratory, or inquiring stance; they often try to heighten or deepen a problem or show its human significance, rather than offer a thesis-governed solution.

One kind of open-form writing is belletristic prose. Sometimes called literary or creative nonfiction, it applies literary techniques to nonfiction subjects. Such essays, which often resist easy summary, surprise the reader (pleasurably) with digressions, gaps, and purposeful structural fissures such as flashbacks or changes of scene, causing the reader to momentarily lose bearings and then reconstruct the "plot." Some iconic examples are George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," Joan Didion's "The Santa Ana," and Annie Dillard's "Living Like a Weasel."

Another kind of open-form prose is the highly theorized academic writing associated with postmodernism or critical theory. The complex, difficult, and sometimes playful prose of writers like Jacques Derrida or Jacques Lacan seems to rebel philosophically from the logocentric structure of closed-form prose. New students encountering these styles are often confused about how they themselves are expected to write in response to them. As a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Copenhagen lamented: "If Lacan tried to hand this book in as a Ph.D. project at my university, would he even pass? Am I supposed to write *like* Lacan, or *about* him, but in a very different style?" (Rienecker and Stray Jorgensen, 2003, p. 106). Before writing his seminar paper on Lacan, this graduate student needs to determine the genre in which he or she is expected to write.

Still other kinds of open-form prose include the hypertext genres of digital culture. The reader/viewer's often maze-like, branching journey through hypertext sites or through multimodal digital artifacts is very different from the reader's linear journey down the clearly marked paths of closed-form prose.

It is important, therefore, that students appreciate where their assigned genre is situated on the continuum from closed-form to open-form prose. Likewise, teachers must choose what mix of genres they want to assign in their courses. These concerns—the strengths and limitations of different genres—are the subject of the next chapter.

Conclusion: Thinking Rhetorically as a Transferable Skill

As students move from course to course through a curriculum or from writing project to writing project in their professional lives, they must develop usefully portable skills that transfer from setting to setting. The most powerful of these skills is the ability to think rhetorically—to size up a writing situation in terms of audience, purpose, and genre—and then to make appropriate composing decisions based on this analysis. Teachers can help students develop these skills by including a rhetorical context in their writing assignments.