What We Could Tell Advanced Student Writers about Audience

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I think it's fair to say that a sense of audience is generally assumed of advanced composition students. In first-year composition, students have learned that audience is a crucial component of a rhetorical situation, they have encountered the relationship between audience analysis and textual decisions, and they have used peer groups as an audience during the writing process. It thus seems reasonable to assume that advanced student writers can effectively "consider their audience" during composing. And while advanced students may occasionally need to be reminded of the principles and significance of audience analysis, they will generally know enough about audience to generate rhetorically adequate discourse. Advanced students' competence in audience-based concerns leaves them free to make writing a genuine "exploration of ideas, a quest for purpose, and a projection of oneself" (Kroll 183). Their competence allows their instructor to concentrate on other aspects of discourse, such as developing a persona. Right? Perhaps. In this paper I explore what we could tell advanced student writers about audience based on current principles of reading theory. Whether or not we choose to introduce students to a reading-based concept of audience depends on issues I address at the end of this article.

Audience and Meaning

We could tell advanced student writers that in any given rhetorical situation the reader may do as much to make meaning as the writer. Reading theorists agree that "reading should be thought of as a constructive rather than as a receptive process" (Haas and Flower 167). In the constructivist view,

The emphasis shifts from the structure of the text as an independent, immutable entity to structure and meaning as imposed on the text by the reader. It is assumed that although the text constrains the possible meanings readers with different knowledge, interests, and perspectives, or the same reader in different contexts, may construct quite different interpretations. (Goetz and Armbruster 214)

In short, the reader is as much an author of meaning as the writer.
Recent changes in communication models reflect this developing recognition of the reader as creator. Over time, communication theorists have all but abandoned the notion of the audience as a receiver or "decoder." Wilbur Schramm’s series of communication models effectively dramatizes the movement away from seeing the audience as decoder. His first model, which bears a striking similarity to Claude Shannon’s well-known schematic diagram of communication, pictures the audience as a decoder. His second model, however, introduces the notion that the audience, while still a decoder, shares fields of experience with the "encoder" or sender, and that these common fields of experience enable communication. Thus, in his second model Schramm acknowledges in a small but significant way the audience’s role in creating meaning. Schramm’s third model pictures communication as an interaction “with both parties encoding, interpreting, decoding, transmitting and receiving signals” (Severin and Tankard 35). Schramm’s icon representing the audience has become virtually identical to that representing the sender. The audience has ceased to be a mere “receiver” of discourse.

The reader’s power to generate meaning is not as apparent, however, in versions of the communication triangle used in some composition classes, explicitly or implicitly, to represent the rhetorical situation. As James Kinneavy points out, the communication triangle itself traditionally features four components: “a person who encodes a message, the signal (language) which carries the message, the reality to which the message refers, and the decoder (receiver of the message)” (19). Although Kinneavy acknowledges that the components are “actually much more complex” than the traditional communication triangle suggests (19), he nevertheless continues to designate the audience as the decoding component. Unfortunately, such labeling of the audience as “decoder” can foster the misimpression that the audience’s role is merely to receive and decipher the writer’s message (see Hunter 282).

To acknowledge the reader’s power to generate meaning, the communication triangle would better be characterized as a communication circle in which both writer and reader are sending and receiving messages. At the very least, the triangle would have to resemble Newcomb’s Symmetry Model, in which the reader’s orientation toward the writer and subject is as important as the writer’s orientation toward the reader and subject. A revised communication triangle based on Newcomb’s model would feature arrows pointing both toward and away from the reader and writer, thus supporting the proposition that the writer and reader are equal participants in the creation of discourse meaning.

Although audience has more or less continued to be identified as the decoding element in the communication triangle, the composition student has not necessarily remained ignorant of the reader’s encoding powers. The reader as a constructive rather than a merely receptive figure has crept into some composition texts. The constructive reader, for example, lurks behind
Young, Becker, and Pike's extensive discussion of audience in *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change*. Their emphasis on discourse as a cooperative venture between writer and reader equalizes the reader's place in the making of discourse. Similarly, their caution that writers as well as readers experience change as a result of discourse encounters implicitly enhances the reader's status. The constructive reader also appears in Linda Flower's *Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing*. Flower establishes that readers "form their own concepts," that they are "creative rather than passive, and that they make meaning using various strategies" (131-38). Readers are, potentially at least, a liberated lot in Jim Corder's *Contemporary Writing: Process and Practice*. They have their own histories and ways of perceiving, which at times can make them a recalcitrant, rebellious, or even renegade audience (42). The constructive reader is the keynote in Paul Anderson's *Technical Writing: A Reader-Centered Approach* as well. Anderson cites reading research when discussing audience and emphasizes that "instead of receiving meaning when we read, we interact with the text to create meaning." Anderson acknowledges further that "reading depends at least as much on what we bring to the page as it does on what is printed on the page" (25).

Given the creative reader's appearance in a number of textbook discussions of audience, the idea that readers are constructive rather than receptive might not be totally foreign to advanced student writers. We thus might be able to discuss the encoding powers of readers without causing surprise. However, when we begin discussing how writers should cope with this constructive reader, we may have some difficulty. When textbook authors give advice to writers on handling the creative reader, they tend to offer recommendations on using linguistic and textual properties to best advantage, an approach that is still writer-centered. For example, Flower reasons that if readers make meaning by using frameworks, drawing on expectations, and chunking material, then writers should "consider their audience" by using hierarchical structures, setting up and fulfilling expectations, and chunking information in their texts. Anderson gives similar guidance to technical writers, recommending adequate detail, a persuasive sequence for that detail, topic sentences, headings, lists, indexes, and tables of contents as reader aids. Corder recommends illustrative detail as well as specific and concrete language. And Young, Becker and Pike offer classical and Rogerian patterns of argument as effective rhetorical strategies. In giving such advice, textbook authors tacitly imply that the reader, given a carefully devised text, will be taking cues from the writer. The reader, through bottom-up processing, will be guided through the text by the text itself. However, this implication runs counter to what reading researchers have found concerning reader-text relationships.
Audience and Text

We might be obliged to tell advanced student writers, therefore, that the concept of a “reader-based” text, insofar as it assumes that readers derive meaning from linguistic and semantic textual properties, is at best “severely limited” (Goetz and Armbruster 202). The putative role of reader input in interpreting texts has led most reading theorists to agree that approaches to discourse that see comprehension as a function of the reader’s ability to decipher textual language are likely to fail. In “Discourse and Linguistic Theory,” for example, Jerry Morgan and Manfred Sellner systematically explode various meaning-in-the-text approaches. Specifically, they attack M.A.K. Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan’s treatment of cohesion, Gerald Prince’s and David Rumelhart’s separate examinations of story structure or “story grammar,” and Teun van Dijk’s linguistic theory of discourse. In each case, Morgan and Sellner show that certain content assumptions made by the reader and brought to the text account for the phenomena the researchers are examining. In other words, they find that meaning is not exclusively, or even primarily, a function of linguistic or textual properties.

Morgan and Sellner would attack previously cited recommendations for “reader-based” writing on much the same grounds; that is, these recommendations assume meaning is primarily in the text. This criticism is ironic in that such recommendations have originated in the textbook writers’ research into the activity of reading. Nevertheless, missing from or deftly subordinated in these recommendations is the sense that reader expectations brought to the text (in the form of schemata or data structures) will influence and even determine how the text will be interpreted (see de Beaugrande 163).

Writers, then, must learn to appreciate the role of reader input in interpretation. Instead of depending on purely text-based strategies to produce reader-based writing, writers must learn to project accurately the various schemata that readers will bring to the text. In so doing, the writer’s aim would not be, for example, to discover how much a reader knows about the topic in order to decide which details to include or exclude in the eventual text. Such a concern with textual detail again wrongly assumes that readers derive meaning primarily from text specifics. Rather, the writer should be concerned with such issues as these:

- What schemata (including organizational frameworks) might the reader associate with the subject?
- What schemata are necessarily embedded in or appropriate to the subject?
- Does the reader possess the “appropriate” schemata?

Asking these questions is not the same as asking, “What details are in my subject and important to include for my reader?” Rather, asking these questions is acknowledging that each reader or community of readers char-
acteristically understands the subject in terms of something else—namely, a network of schemata brought to the text. Paradoxically, writers achieve reader-based prose by distancing themselves from the prose-as-text and by focusing on readers as they create meaning.

Audience and Peer Readers

Peer readers are often used in composition classrooms to enable such a focus on the reader's process of making meaning during text negotiation. Unfortunately, the peer group experience is not uniformly successful or always grounded on sound reading theory principles. We might have to tell advanced writers, then, that a peer audience in a composition class is sometimes but a pale representation of discourse communities at large. Student writers may often feel, for example, that peer readers can be readily accommodated by a change in phrasing or stylistic gambit and that they can with impunity shun any critical advice peer readers offer. Thomas Newkirk has found that peer readers are characteristically easy to please, especially if they can identify with the writer's subject or ideas (310). Moreover, Diana George asserts that student writers, for their part, are typically suspicious of their peers' advice and freely ignore peer group injunctions when revising (322). The result in such cases is that peer readers in composition classes tend to look for ways they can identify with what writers have to say and tend to make comments that do not require the writer to make substantive changes in their discourse. This, in turn, reinforces student writers' tendency to see themselves as in charge of not only what they have to say, but also of how they are to say it.

Discourse communities are far more powerful than this image suggests. First, the community and not the individual writer controls the discourse. Discourse communities remove the individual autonomous writer from center stage and replace him or her with a socially constituted system defined by "the characteristics of all other writers and writings in systems" (Cooper 367-68).

Second, it is unwise, if not perilous, for the writer to ignore community injunctions. Discourse communities are there for the writer to write within, not to or for. The writer demonstrates membership in a community through the use of its conventions. Discourse communities define themselves through conventions or paradigms, which can take various forms, including documentation practices, "in-house style format guides, and group or disciplinary injunctions such as 'do not use the first person'" (Freed and Broadhead 157). These paradigms are part of the network of schemata that readers bring to the text and that validate the writer's community membership. It is possible, of course, for writer and reader alike to belong to more than one discourse community (see Coles and Wall 313).

Third, discourse communities are not necessarily easy to please. These communities not only define themselves through paradigms that constrain
the writer’s use of linguistic and textual properties, but also through paradigms that determine semantic content. In this regard, Walzer suggests that writers can discover the significance of their data by communicating with members of various discourse communities (155). More dramatically, Bruffee asserts that what writers have to say actually originates within the discourse community to which they belong (784).

Reading theory provides insight into how discourse communities control what a writer has to say. The power of discourse communities to generate a writer’s content is analogous to the power of an audience to construct a writer’s text according to its interests, attitudes and purposes. The influence of reader interest and attitude on the interpretation and structure of discourse has been repeatedly demonstrated by reading researchers. Using ambiguous passages, researchers have found, for example, that with a passage that could describe either a card game or a musical quartet rehearsal, music students were far more likely to construct the quartet interpretation than were other students (Goetz and Armbruster 215). Reader attitudes have also been found to have a profound effect on comprehension. Researchers have convincingly shown that

Individuals with a strong stand on issues that they are ego-involved with will interpret statements about that issue differently than individuals without a stand on the issue. For example, the former typically see statements the latter judged to be neutral as being favorable to the stand opposite theirs. Statements that are moderately acceptable are assimilated to their position and judged more favorable to it than is actually the case. (Spiro 255)

In light of these findings, Spiro concludes, “Once again, the cognitive impact of prose comprehension incorporates an aspect contributed by the comprehender and not from the text itself” (255).

A reader’s purposes also influence how he or she constructs meaning. Louise Rosenblatt has identified two broad purposes that might inform a reader’s reading: efferent (when the aim is to bring something away from the text) and aesthetic (when the aim is to be involved in the text). One purpose is information seeking; the other, experience seeking. The key term here is “seeking.” Readers actively seek information (or experience) relevant to their current needs or goals. According to David Rumelhart, this seeking process goes hand-in-hand with the interpretation process, mentioned above in terms of schemata brought to the text (51). If a reader’s expectations determine what the reader sees in the text, the reader’s purpose tells the reader where to look for it. Interestingly, if a reader does not find what he or she is looking for, the reader will commonly import additional meaning or detail to the text (Rumelhart 35-37). Moreover, text-presented entries are commonly altered “to produce a better match” with the reader’s world-knowledge and, indeed, these entries become “indistinguishable in the reader’s mind” from his or her inferences and “spreading activations” (de
Beaugrande 232-33). In short, the reader makes the text. Writers would do well, therefore, to ask such questions as these:

- What are my reader's interests and attitudes?
- How are these interests and attitudes likely to alter what the text presents?
- What are my reader's purposes in reading my text?
- How will these purposes influence the reader's use of the text?

Such questions would complement other questions designed to identify the reader's discourse community and its attendant constraints. They would remind the writer that it is the reader who “consummates” the discourse act (see Augustine and Winterowd 135).

**Audience and Writing Instruction**

We could tell advanced student writers that the audience is by nature an encoder, that what the audience brings to the text is as important as (if not more important than) what the text itself presents. We could tell them that audiences characteristically alter what the text presents to produce a better match between what the text says and what they know. We could tell advanced student writers that the audience as a discourse community functions much like the audience as an individual reader: encoding, anticipating, altering what the text has to say. We could tell student writers all these things. But should we? Should we encourage our writers to see their audiences as the constructive readers that reading research suggests they are?

There are reasons for caution. One reason entails the apparent difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of establishing a reader-centered approach to the writer's composing process. As we have seen, textbook authors may indeed view audience in the same way that reading researchers do; however, when turning to discuss how writers could or should think about audience during composing, they tend to offer advice that counters reading theory tenets. That is, they tend to privilege either the encoding writer or the encoded text. This tendency receives overt expression when composition theorists such as Peter Elbow recommend “ignoring” audience, especially during the initial stages of composing. Indeed, the writer's right to his or her own text is a powerful idea in writing instruction. Having to develop a reader-centered approach to a writer's composing, therefore, might be analogous to having to remediate Common Error where the teacher must “keep in mind the cost to himself and the student of mastering certain forms [in our case, the constructive view of audience] and be ready to cut his losses when the investment seems no longer commensurate with the return” (Shaughnessy 122).
A second reason for caution, as several distinguished researchers have argued, is that it is impossible in any case to teach the rhetorical competence necessary to understand a concept such as that of the constructing reader. According to Augustine and Winterowd, rhetorical competence, like linguistic competence, is intuitive, acquired through years of exposure to models, mostly "imperfect" ones (143). To teach a writer to compose discourse that effects a "felicitous exchange" between writer and reader, therefore, involves more complexity and time than a composition course affords. Advanced composition teachers who adopt the position that audiences are constructive thus may find themselves in a position akin to that of E.D. Hirsch when he adopted a constructivist attitude toward "readability." Initially, Hirsch's definition of readability assumed a decoding reader. In *The Philosophy of Composition*, he examined the need for semantic closure and discourse pointers during text processing. However, as he eventually discovered, his understanding of the reader's operations was based on several questionable assumptions about reading (Dillon 1) and failed to consider reading as an "act of personal interpretation, evaluation, and affective response" (Kroll 178). Hirsch placed too much emphasis on what the writer had constructed and ignored what the reader would be constructing. Hirsch recanted this text-oriented position in "Reading, Writing, and Cultural Literacy," where he finds that the cultural information possessed by readers is more important than the stylistic quality of the text itself (142-43). In this essay, Hirsch equates writing conventions with "changing elements of cultural knowledge" (147), and he maintains that such knowledge cannot really be taught. To teach writers the cultural knowledge that would enable them to "know what other writers and readers know within literate culture" takes time, if not a lifetime (145-47). Thus, Hirsch finds himself dressed up in a new theory of reader "with no place to go." The theory precludes its own teaching.

Reading research which informs the vision of the constructing reader is admittedly in its infancy. Reading researchers Goetz and Armbruster call the existing literature investigating the psychological correlates of text structure "almost embarrassingly meager and rudimentary, given the import and complexity of the area" (201). Notwithstanding this admission, Spiro asserts that the constructivist view of reading is "unassailable" (250). For this reason, we would do well to introduce advanced student writers to a concept of audience that features the reader as creator. To do so, however, we might first have to abandon the notion of the writer as romantic hero involved in an independent quest for self-realization and truth. We might, instead, have to emphasize that all discourse, even so-called expressive discourse, is collaborative.

To assume such a stance would bring us close to the philosophy of Mikhail Bakhtin, who offers a model of reality where "there is no room for—and perhaps no conceptual possibility of—an independent unconscious" (Emerson 26). Bakhtin's work, in fact, holds considerable promise
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for composition researchers. His concept of dialogism, for example, suggests a useful perspective on writers, readers, and the composing process. Dialogism, in part, attempts to dissolve the traditional oppositions of the individual to society, of self to other, of "the specific utterance to the totality of language," and of "particular actions to the world of norms and conventions" (Morson xi). Because dialogism finds traditional oppositions such as self-versus-other untenable, it suggests that the image of the writer as an encoder separate from the reader might be equally untenable. In this regard, Bakhtin emphasizes that all discourse is a response, rather than, say, an individual "quest for purpose" or "a projection of oneself." At the same time, Bakhtin finds authorship an important, even a moral act. To be sure, the implications of Bakhtin's thought for composition theory and pedagogy defy easy synthesis. Synthesis, in fact, is not a Bakhtinian impulse. Dialogism, after all, is not dialectic. But Bakhtin, in speaking to issues of language, may offer the composition teacher a theoretical touchstone for discussing audience and its encoding role in discourse.

If we emphasize the creativity of the reader to our advanced student writers, we will also have to abandon the notion that the text is the sole, even primary, repository of meaning in written discourse. We will have to add to their understanding of how discourse itself works. In so doing, we might discuss, at least in a preliminary way, the work of Augustine and Winterowd, who have studied the writer-reader transaction from a speech-act perspective. Their work posits the types of "models" of written discourse that embody the encoding power of the reader. These models not only identify the propositional intention of a textual statement, but also suggest the various possible rhetorical and "super" intentions which might be brought to that statement by writer and reader alike (132). Experience with such models enables both writer and reader to share a recognition of the deep-structure performative values which "govern writers' purposes and readers' expectations in discourse" (135).3

Finally, we will have to design our pedagogy so that it enables advanced writers to acknowledge the creative reader during the composing process. Such a design would entail an emphasis on the reading process both when discussing composing choices and when using peer groups for input and feedback. For example, instead of discussing classical and Rogerian argument as potential rhetorical strategies to be used as aids in "developing discourse designed to change the reader's image" (Young, Becker, and Pike 229), we would introduce these and other conventional patterns of arrangement as schemata extant in the discourse community and brought to the text by the member reader. Arrangement options can be classified according to the type of processing they implicitly demand of such a reader. Those that favor top-down processing are based, like classical argument, on established forms or schemata brought to the text. Schema-based options require that the reader be acquainted with various organizational structures existing "outside the
text.” These options represent socially shared strategies of response, ways of “sorting factors, sizing up situations” that have become part of the rhetorical competence of those belonging to a particular discourse community, a community that the advanced student writer is being asked to join (Coe 19).

The reader, through top-down processing, uses these frameworks brought to the text as a primary source for interpretation and evaluation (de Beaugrande 163). Arrangement options favoring bottom-up processing, on the other hand, are rooted in text-specific strategies. These text-based options tend to find their initial identity in linguistic and textual properties. For example, the sentence, “He was a compelling presence from the start, this Iowa-born farm boy who wore all black and no hat, and swept his full blond hair back away from his ruddy face,” becomes a transition primarily because of its place in the text and not because it takes a form that has been traditionally recognized as transitional by the discourse community. The reader, in theory at least, must look to such text-specific entries to negotiate the text successfully. In so doing, the reader relies to a certain extent on bottom-up processing to complete the discourse act.

This is not to say that reading is ever exclusively a top-down or a bottom-up procedure. Reading almost always involves the integration of these two processes, with top-down dominating (Spiro 255; Morgan and Sellner 181-95). What is important here is that the advanced student writer, in looking at arrangement options as involving certain types of reader processing, learn to perceive various organizational choices in terms of the reader. These organizational choices are “aids to effect meaning,” not because the writer is using them, but because the reader is.

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Notes

1. Although Kinneavy continues to identify the audience as a “decoder” in his later composition text, *Writing in the Liberal Arts Tradition* (1985), one suspects he might be simplifying his own case. As his *Theory* suggests, Kinneavy has a complex vision of audience as an element embodied in discourse itself. The implication of this embodiment to the decoding or encoding function of the reader, however, remains undeveloped.

2. Schuster addresses this very point. Interestingly, he also notes that Bakhtin’s version of the “rhetorical triangle” was a circle with “speaker, hero, and listener whirling around the circumference” (596).

3. In recommending Augustine and Winterowd’s ideas for student review, I recognize that the authors themselves think that the best use of their theory is as “an aid to the teacher’s formal understanding of the discipline more than as an immediate editing tool for the student” (143). What I am arguing for, however, is an increased awareness on the student’s part as well.
Works Cited


**ATAC Elections**

Elections for officers of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition will be held at the ATAC special interest session of the Conference on College Composition and Communication convention in March 1991. Please send nominations and self-nominations to Irene F. Gale; Department of English; University of South Florida; Tampa, FL 33620-5550. All nominees must be present at the special interest session.