The Implied Reader in Persuasive Discourse

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In *A Theory of Discourse*, James L. Kinneavy maintains that persuasion is the only form of discourse for which analyzing "real" audiences is "axiomatic" (59-61). With respect to persuasive discourse, one implication of Kinneavy's claim is that analyzing "implied" or "invoked" audiences—those audiences which exist as abstractions to be shaped within the text—is neither sufficient nor, indeed, appropriate.

The Implied Reader in Past Research

The distinction between real and implied audiences has been variously made in past research. Despite differences in terminology, Lisa Ede, Douglas Park, Ede and Andrea Lunsford, and Barry Kroll all differentiate between readers as concrete realities whom discourse must address and readers as textual constructs which actual readers must "read through" and, perhaps, adopt. Actually, this distinction between audience addressed (real) and audience invoked (implied) is a reworking of a long-standing distinction in reading theory. Walker Gibson was among the first to codify formally the difference between an actual ("armchair") reader and a purely textual ("mock") reader (265-66). Since Gibson, reader-response critics have refined our understanding of the implied reader's function in producing and interpreting written texts. Wayne Booth's "implied reader" (138), Arthur Sherbo's "inside reader" (36), and John Preston's "created reader" (2) are not identical formulations, but each represents a writer-invoked textual construct.

Past research has also posited a connection between audience constructs and genre. Arthur E. Walzer, for example, suggests that certain types of readerships are particularly appropriate for certain types of discourse. Specifically, he claims that analyzing real readers—as opposed to readers within texts—is particularly necessary in business and technical writing (156). Walzer makes no claims, however, about audience constructs used in persuasive discourse.

Other theorists implicitly assert that persuasive discourse inherently addresses real readers or listeners. The classical model of persuasion, to which Kinneavy is indebted, embodies a real audience. Aristotle recommends audience analysis for the very purpose of determining persuasive appeals which will or will not work for a particular, actual audience.
Aristotle's influence is evident today in heuristics which analyze audiences on the basis of demographic and other observable characteristics (Ede 141-42).

Unlike Aristotelian rhetoric, which assumes an adversarial relationship between speaker and listener and strives for speaker control, Rogerian argument, based on the patient-client therapy of Carl Rogers, seeks conversion through mutual acceptance and understanding. Like Aristotelian rhetoric, however, Rogerian argument still assumes a real audience. In fact, Paul Bator suggests that the Rogerian strategy, "even more than Aristotelian rhetoric," recommends that writers direct their arguments "to real audiences and solicit actual responses to their writing" (431).

This emphasis on real audiences pervades a wide range of recent theories on persuasion. Motive-goal theories, for example, assume that arguments which will move one audience to accept a message or to give the desired response will not necessarily motivate all audiences. The learning approach to persuasion finds motive and reward appeals to be receiver-specific. Both the consistency approach, which focuses on the relationship between a stimulus and the actual receiver's frames of reference, and the modern perceptual approach, which looks for "attitudinal referent structures" of its individual audience members, seek to discover the schemata informing responses of actual audiences. And the functional approach strives not only to understand the needs of its real audience, but also to identify a means of activating these needs.¹

Only Gibson sounds a discordant note in this chorus celebrating the real audience in persuasive discourse. Gibson observes, rather condescendingly, that it is the implied rather than the real reader who can be "identified most obviously in sub-literary genres crudely committed to persuasion, such as advertising and propaganda" (164-65). But, in fact, even a brief look at the business sub-genre of persuasive requests shows the implied reader to be so prevalent that we can use these documents to define techniques for invoking such readers in texts.

 Signals of the Implied Reader

Although there are many techniques for invoking implied readers, reader-response critic Gerald Prince's discussion of the "narratee" is particularly useful because it focuses on seven "signals" of the implied reader in persuasive discourse: direct references, indirect references, demonstratives, questions, negations, overjustifications, and comparisons or analogies. This schema offers a framework for recognizing the implied reader in persuasive discourse.

 Direct references attribute specific qualities to an implied reader or refer to the implied reader as "you." For example, a persuasive request which opens with "Dear Friend of Homeless Children" establishes the invoked reader as a friend among the "caring people" concerned about the homeless. Similarly, here is the inside address of a convention announcement:
You may take a train,
You may take a plane,
But if you have to walk,
You should attend just the same!

This ditty invokes an implied reader or "you" who must attend the conference, who appreciates the writer's playful opening, and who, as a later paragraph confirms, enjoys mixing business with pleasure. The very fact that the ditty replaces the standard inside address reinforces the idea that "you" refers to an invoked rather than a real audience.

Indirect references feature the pronouns we, our, and us in invoking an implied reader. For instance, a development foundation's letter beginning with "WE HAVE A COMMON GOAL" invokes a reader who shares the foundation's desire, revealed later, to generate endowment funds. Because the opening sentence usurps both the inside address and the salutation, it clearly suggests an invoked audience rather than a real reader or even a "royal we."

Demonstratives can also indicate an implied reader. In the following excerpt from a promotional letter, the implied reader is, of course, one of "those":

Those who take advantage of government programs, available credit, and current market information to buyout their neighbors will keep on expanding.

In addition, questions originating neither with a writer's persona nor with a specified actual reader can signal an implied audience. For example, in one letter the question "What accounts for the success of The Handbook?" appears immediately after a paragraph announcing The Handbook's forthcoming second edition. This question arises from the implied reader's curiosity about the text's apparent success.

Negations, passages which counter the implied reader's objections or preconceptions, also indicate an invoked audience. For instance, consider a letter that states, "Your sponsorship gifts will only be used to meet the needs of your sponsored child." Such a statement attempts to counter an objection implicitly attributed to the implied reader: that perhaps some of the donated funds will be used for administrative or other purposes and will not directly benefit the needy child.

Similarly, overjustifications, through which the speaker openly allays the implied reader's apprehensions or prejudices, point to an invoked audience. The overjustification in the passage below is indicated by melodramatic wording:

I know that you must gasp in despair when you get a request to fill out YET ANOTHER questionnaire.

To allay the implied reader's fears, the author promises the questionnaire will be short and includes a self-addressed, stamped envelope.
Finally, comparisons or analogies can signal an implied reader. Because the second term of a comparison is usually assumed to be known better than the first, a comparison helps paint a picture of the implied reader's world. For instance, an advertisement which states that Brand A works better than Brand X implies that the audience invoked knows how Brand X works. To Prince's list of seven implied-reader signals, I would add allusions, which, like comparisons, imply something about an audience's knowledge; thus, allusions should be considered a possible "eighth signal" of the implied reader in written discourse.

The Implied Reader in Persuasive Essays

Signaled by these eight devices, the implied reader appears not only in persuasive requests but in other types of persuasive discourse as well. Persuasive essays, for example, make extensive use of the implied reader in creating a "them/us" dichotomy and a sense of implied reader approval.

The "Them/Us" Dichotomy

One way the implied reader functions in these essays is to highlight a "them/us" dichotomy between those who think as the author does and those who don't. The implied reader, of course, is among those who do. For instance, in "The Obligation to Endure," her classic argument against extensive use of insecticides, Rachel Carson constructs an implied reader to promote a dichotomy between those who recognize the danger of pesticides and those who are "largely or wholly ignorant" of their harmful effects. Carson pursues this dichotomy through a number of implied-reader signals, bracketed in the passage below:

Yet such a world is pressed upon us [indirect reference]. The crusade to create a chemically sterile, insect-free world seems to have engendered a fanatic zeal on the part of many specialists and most of the so-called control agencies. On every hand there is evidence that those [demonstrative referring to "those" other than the author and implied reader] engaged in spraying operations exercise a ruthless power. . . .

It is not my contention that chemical insecticides must never be used [negation answering implied reader's possible objection that, realistically speaking, we cannot totally do without insecticides]. I do contend that we [indirect reference] have put poisonous and biologically potent chemicals indiscriminately into the hands of persons [those other than the author and implied reader] largely or wholly ignorant of their potentials for harm. (434)

Throughout her essay, Carson uses the implied reader to establish the sensible and responsible stance of those who agree with her thesis and, correspondingly, the unreasonable and irresponsible stance of those who don't.

In "Lightning Water," Joseph Wood Krutch sets up a similar dichotomy:

Flash floods, those wildly beautiful desert hallmarks, serve as a healthy reminder
that nature on the rampage can quickly reduce to utter helplessness the careless individual or the person who naively assumes that the whole of the natural world has been "conquered." (455-56)

In this opening paragraph, Krutch establishes through direct reference an implied reader who is neither careless nor naive but appreciative of nature's beauty and power. However, Krutch later reveals the implied reader to be naive in one respect:

If we [indirect reference] would only begin to question our naive faith that road and dam builders "must know best because they are experts"; if, instead, we would only realize that the first concern of all of them [those other than the author and the implied reader] is their vested interest in their own jobs, rather than the public good, then their pointless vandalism of our countryside might be stopped. (456)

Although Krutch criticizes the implied reader here, he blunts his criticism by including himself in the "we," and he concludes his essay by placing the implied reader back in the right:

But to some of us [indirect reference] it seems that it would be better to teach people how to travel or live in the few remaining natural areas than to destroy their unique characteristics. (458)

In the end the implied reader, as part of "us," holds the wiser view.

In "The Human-Not-Quite-Human," Dorothy Sayers also uses an implied reader to construct a "them/us" dichotomy, establishing her thesis and securing her audience as one that agrees with her basic assumptions from the outset:

The first thing that strikes the careless observer is that women are unlike men. They are the "opposite sex"—(though why "opposite" I do not know; what is the "neighbouring sex"?). But the fundamental thing is that women are more like men than anything else in the world. They are human beings. Vir is male and Femina is female: but Homo is male and female. (10)

Through direct reference, Sayers establishes a difference between the implied reader and the careless observer: the implied reader is careful enough to recognize the perceptual fallacy of identifying women as the "opposite sex," and, thus, careful enough to agree with the premise that women, when it comes right down to it, are very much like men. Given this agreement, Sayers can then successfully argue for equal rights.

**Implied Reader Approval**

A second way the implied reader functions in persuasive essays is to "approve" the writer's strategies for supporting his or her point of view. For example, in "The Case Against Man," Isaac Asimov begins his argument for birth control with data no reader could deny: statistics about world population and its present rate of increase. However, to prove that
human beings cannot allow the present rate of increase to continue, Asimov must use numbers based on estimates rather than actual counts. He thus creates an implied reader who accepts these estimates, although they are "admittedly not precise, but in the rough neighborhood of truth" (403).

Rachel Carson also uses this device in arguing against the extensive use of pesticides. In so doing, she cites the lethal effects of Strontium 90 as an example (428). Certainly, few, if any, actual readers would deny the dangers of radioactive fallout. But when Carson moves on to the dangers of insecticides, she enters an area where agreement from actual readers is not as certain. At this point in her essay, she invokes an implied reader who sees that "massive chemical campaigns are only extremely expensive ways of buying time" (433). This implied reader is one who later accepts Carson's argument that the Bill of Rights would have guaranteed "that a citizen shall be secure against lethal poisons" had our forefathers foreseen the current problem (434-35). It is this implied reader who, again at the end, recognizes that pesticides threaten our "obligation to endure" as a species. In short, the implied reader empathizes with Carson's alarm and supports her use of speculative and abstract proofs.

Clearly, the implied reader highlights a "them/us" dichotomy between those who think as the reader does and those who don't, and it elicits a vote of confidence for the writer's strategies. But the implied reader also fosters a more personal identification between author and audience. James Combs, in "The Rise and Fall of Marshall McLuhan," encourages such camaraderie with his informal opening:

What are you doin', Marshall McLuhan? Remember him? He was, recall, the "oracle of the electronic age," the "spokesman of the New Communications," the "most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and Pavlov." (6)

Combs, here through direct reference, invokes an implied reader who does indeed recall McLuhan and who shares the author's memories of McLuhan's stature.

After building writer-reader identification throughout his essay, Combs elicits further intimacy as he speculates about how new media will affect his own life and that of his implied reader:

Sooner than we [indirect reference] think there will be devices which project, say, a play into your [direct reference] living room. Holonic figures will act out the play save one part, which you [direct reference] will play in relation to these projected figures. If you always had a hankering to play (fittingly enough) Prospero, now you'll have your chance, in the privacy of your own living room. Indeed, some media futurists think pretty soon you'll be able to project your own subjective fantasies onto a screen or into your own living room. (Now that'll put the pornographers out of business!) (8)

Through his switch from indirect to direct reference, his use of asides, and his apparent knowledge of the implied reader's predilections, Combs suggests a highly confidential writer-reader relationship.
Moreover, Combs and his reader share more than confidences; they share a social consciousness which spawns this implied reader's question and informs Combs's concluding response:

But what kind of society can we expect when people are preoccupied with acting out their own private fantasies? We can only speculate. But Marshall McLuhan would be pleased that we will be doing so, since we will be looking again at the power of media to shape our lives. (8)

This shared social sense permits the writer and reader to go beyond simple delight in the new media's potential subjective benefits; both writer and reader can recognize the need to examine its influence critically. In short, the writer and reader share a 1960s ethos.

An interesting variation of such writer-reader identification occurs in Marya Mannes's "Packaged Deception." Unlike Combs, Mannes wants to remain distinct from the reader, at least initially. Her use of "I" and of her personal situation as writer and housewife encourages writer-reader separation in the opening paragraph:

I am a writer and a housewife. As a writer I sell words and ideas. They are not packaged. The buyer can see exactly what they are and pay what he thinks they are worth. As a housewife I buy what is sold to me. It is packaged. I buy it on faith. That is why, these days, the word consumer is sometimes spelled s-u-c-k-e-r. (403)

Here, the "buyer," or reader, is the wise consumer, and the housewife, or writer, is the sucker.

Mannes's second paragraph still shows her to be distinct from the reader, but she is joined by others, by millions in fact, "who wonder why so much money drains out of the foodbag and the handbag every week, and who then forget about it" (403). By her third paragraph, though, Mannes is ready to invite the reader to join the crowd:

Now, I have always believed that the majority of people were too good to be smart. Ever since we bartered a beaver pelt for ten eggs, we have assumed that the eggs were fresh and the pelt was supple, for how else can decent business be transacted? (404)

Here, Mannes establishes the essential decency of being naive and then immediately invokes an implied reader who is also "too good to be smart," who is, like the author, a sucker. Because to be a sucker is to occupy the moral high ground, Mannes can then ironically invoke an implied reader who is "congenitally dumb" for holding such ridiculous assumptions as "packages of different sizes contain different amounts" (406). Mannes exonerates her reader toward the essay's close by asking why suckers fall prey to sellers:

Why? Because you're dumb? Because you're gullible? Because you're careless? Some of us are all of these. But most of us are simply too busy or too tired or too
harassed to take a computer, a slide rule, and an M.I.T. graduate to market and figure out what we're buying. And the makers of the goods we buy know this.

Through her satire, Mannes shows that the sellers' thoroughgoing deceit, not the implied reader's stupidity, is really to blame. If the sellers were to share the ethos of the writer and the implied reader, there would be no problem.

The Implied Reader's Function

The implied reader's function in these persuasive essays may appear somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the implied reader promotes an essentially Aristotelian, adversarial (them/us) view of argument; on the other, the implied reader encourages writer and reader to identify in an essentially Rogerian way. Further, while the them/us dichotomy suggests an adversarial argumentative posture, in this case, rather than counterpoising writer and reader, it binds them together as an "us" opposed to some outside "them." Thus, embedded within the Aristotelian adversarial scheme is a Rogerian gambit which posits shared assumptions between writer and reader. In addition, while this writer and audience identification is clearly Rogerian in nature, the Rogerian strategy itself introduces yet another paradox. The basic premise of psychotherapy, even Carl Rogers's client-centered therapy, is that the client, under the therapist's direction, will change. Thus, underlying the Rogerian strategy is an "understanding" which is, in essence, adversarial and Aristotelian in spirit.²

Despite the paradoxes, however, these essayists' use of the implied reader proves not to be contradictory at all but, rather, very much in keeping with Kenneth Burke's ideas concerning persuasion. In A Rhetoric of Motives, Burke acknowledges an adversarial aspect of persuasion; the basic function of rhetoric, he states, is "the use of words by human agents to form attitudes or to induce actions in other human agents" (41). However, he also notes the conciliatory nature of rhetoric, which, he says, "remains the mode of appeal for bridging conditions of estrangement 'natural' to society as we know it" (211-12). According to Burke, the primary means for effecting such a bridge is identification, which occurs when "con-substantiality" is shown to exist in one of three communication contexts:

• communication addressed to audiences in the first person and revealing an internal debate within the self
• communication addressed to audiences in the second person, where there is an established "you"
• communication addressed to audiences in the third person, where members of a group work to persuade themselves without the intervention of an outside critic. (Holland 26)

The implied reader can encourage identification in Burke's sense in any of these contexts.
First-Person Internal Debate
Within this communication context, the first person is a plural "we," consisting of the implied reader and the writer. The internal debate occurs when the implied reader raises questions, has objections or preconceptions, or harbors apprehensions or prejudices which the author must answer, counter, or allay. Such is the case, for example, when the implied reader in Combs's essay evidently becomes concerned with the self-centeredness informing the projections of what the new media will be like. To counter this concern, the writer must show the social aspect of the speculations. Textually, the writer establishes the first person through indirect reference, and the debate is established through questions, negations, and overjustifications. The plural self engendered by the implied reader constitutes a unique form of identification between audience and author.

Second-Person Personalized Address
The implied reader also provides a definite "you," addressed and defined through direct reference and often developed through comparison, analogy, or allusion. Within this context, identification results from the writer's clear demonstration of knowledge about the implied reader's preferences and personality, and from the writer's indication through this knowledge of "con-substantiality," if not intimacy. Such is the case in Combs's essay: the writer knows enough about the implied reader to predict the nature of his or her subjective fantasies.

Third-Person Group Consensus
The implied reader as a device also effects identification when reader and writer together begin among those with the "right" character and end among those with the "right" beliefs. Krutch and his implied reader, for instance, start among those careful individuals who recognize that the natural world cannot be totally conquered, and they end among those who believe that the creeks of the desert Southwest should not be dammed or otherwise engineered out of existence. The fact that writer and implied reader share the same attitude makes them members of the same group; thus, during the course of the argument, they work together to explore the validity of their beliefs and discover the truth of the situation. In fact, writer and implied reader so often emerge as such a team in the persuasive essays I've discussed that third person often signifies those who do not believe in the writer and reader's position: the "them" opposed to the "us." Clearly, while the spirit of Burkean third-person consensus is present, the consensus itself often occurs within the context of a first-person plural debate during which identification is achieved.

Implications
Several theoretical and pedagogical implications attend the implied reader's presence and function in persuasive essays:
If implied readers are important to persuasive discourse, then theorists should re-examine the assumption that suasory communication involves, almost exclusively, real audiences. Teachers should show students how to use both real and implied audiences in argumentative writing and how to invoke implied readers when appropriate. Researchers should explore how the implied reader works as an audience construct in persuasive discourse and how, in general, this reader relates to the ubiquitous real reader in theory and in practice.

It may be that the implied reader does much more than enable Burkean identification. For example, the implied reader may, in some cases, function very much like Park's "general audience" or Roth's "unknown others." Also, writers may find it valuable to invoke such generalized readers before addressing them; such convergence or evolution in the imaging of audiences has already been the subject of research (Roth, "Evolving"). In addition, the implied reader may in some instances serve as the writer's "other self." For example, Donald Murray sees the other self as a reader who monitors a writer's composing decisions:

> The self speaks, the other self listens and responds. The self proposes, the other self considers. The self makes, the other self evaluates. The two selves collaborate: a problem is spotted, discussed, defined; solutions are proposed, rejected, suggested, attempted, tested, discarded, accepted. (140)

Certainly, an analogy can be made between the type of internal debate that Murray claims underpins the composing process and the internal debate that often informs the development of an argumentative stance. Through the implied reader, then, the writer's internal debate becomes dramatized. As an objective correlative of the other self, the implied reader may thus enable the writer to work out new meaning much as Peter Elbow claims the isolated self helps the writer explore thoughts, stance, and voice. In short, it may be that as an audience construct the implied reader serves a number of functions important to persuasive discourse.

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**Notes**

1. I am using Annette N. Shelby's classification of current theories of persuasion, but she herself does not discuss audience in her article.

2. I wish to thank my colleague Virginia Allen for this observation about the adversarial nature of psychotherapy.
Works Cited


