DEFINING ADVANCED COMPOSITION

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Teachers of writing who would have no trouble describing a "typical" freshman composition course have for a long time been unable to reach a consensus about the nature and goals of advanced composition. As a result, upper-level courses in expository prose have remained virtually undefined, varying widely from instructor to instructor even within the same institution. Advanced composition is difficult to define because the students it attracts are usually more diverse than those who populate freshman composition classes. Freshmen enter their first college writing course with relatively similar backgrounds, and they leave the course to apply what they have learned in similar kinds of academic assignments—essay exams, critical papers, research reports and the like. But a senior writing course may draw students who have developed very different areas of expertise during their college years and who are preparing for careers that will demand very different kinds of writing from them. Students looking ahead to law school, to graduate school, or to careers in fields as varied as advertising, social work, and business often regard advanced composition as a final opportunity to acquire or refine writing skills that will help them better cope with the roles they will assume after graduation. To be fair to these students' expectations, advanced composition should be a course with its own content and identity, not merely another version of the writing course they had as freshmen. The question I wish to address here is this: what can an advanced composition course offer that is new to its students and that will be valuable to all of them, no matter what kinds of writing they may find themselves engaged in after graduation?

One answer to that question is suggested in a recent article on job-related writing by Janice C. Redish of the Document Design Center in Washington. Arguing that we should give a "critical place"

in college curricula to teaching the kind of expository writing done in business and professional life, Redish stresses the key role that audience plays in shaping all real-world writing. "To be successful communicators," she notes, "writers have to understand the audiences and purposes of [their] document. . . . One of the major causes of obscurity in business and government writing is that writers never address readers and do not provide any context-setting statements to tell the readers what the document is about." In Redish's view, writers in professional life often make this error because they were not taught in college how to write for specific audiences. "By the time they get to an advanced college or postgraduate level," she points out, "most students think that they have learned how to write . . . but most . . . are never trained to write for the different rhetorical situations they will face on the job" (313-14). Redish's observations, and my own experiences with freshman and advanced writing courses, lead me to propose that regardless of its particular organization or format, advanced composition should primarily be a course in understanding audience and rhetorical situation.

Of course, one could argue persuasively that audience should be the controlling idea in every *freshman* writing course. In reality, though, the range of topics covered in a contemporary freshman composition class—from invention and organization to mechanical accuracy and academic research—makes it unlikely that audience will emerge as the clear focus of such a course. Too often, in fact, it appears that audience is not a part of freshman English at all. Maxine Hairston has noted that among her advanced composition students, few report having even been introduced to the concept of audience in earlier writing courses (198). An examination of widely-used freshman composition textbooks also suggests the meager attention being given to audience at that level of instruction. Despite the New Rhetoric's emphasis on rhetorical stiuation and the growing body of research on the subject of audience,[1] a surprising number of contemporary freshman textbooks, in the tradition of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century composition teaching, persist in largely ignoring this basic issue. Among those that do treat audience, many grossly oversimplify the nature of the relationship between writer and reader.

Consider, for example, these excerpts from Dean Memering and Frank O'Hare's *The Writer's Work*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984):

> Writing that is directed at no one in particular usually fails. A keen sense of audience helps you refine your purpose, view your self, and select from your experience. You will discover that who you write to powerfully influences what and how you write. (9)

No writer or teacher of writing would disagree with those sentiments, but when the authors of this text attempt to apply their advice specifically to the writing that their student readers are about to do, we find them mired in contradictions and unsupportable generalizations:

> For most college writing, it is a good idea to imagine a composite general audience, such as the people in your composition class. You can assume that such a group will probably understand and appreciate many of the things you know and enjoy. And if you're ever in doubt as to their opinions on a particular subject, you can always ask them. (9)

Apart from the assumption that all college freshmen everywhere are basically the same, regardless of sex, race, religion, place of birth, family background, or age—surely an assumption that every teacher of freshmen would reject—the major problem here is the authors' abandonment of the "keen sense of audience" that they discussed earlier in favor of a nebulous "composite general audience." They suggest their own vague sense of audience, moreover, by proposing inexplicably that students should do most of their "college writing" as if they were writing to their classmates, even though virtually all such writing during a student's college career is of course directed at, submitted to, and evaluated by instructors, not peers.

A second example, from Walter Sullivan and George Core's *Writing from the Inside* (New York: Norton, 1983):

> Remember that whatever you write is written for someone, and your consideration of your audience helps to determine your tone. The effect of the intended audience on what we write and what we say is obvious on a fundamental level. If you are invited to speak to the graduating class of Thomas Jefferson Junior High School on the topic "Rock Groups I Have Seen," you probably will not need to know much about the theory of music. Descriptions of groups you have heard and concerts you have attended will be enough, and these can be offered in the language of junior-high students. . . . If you took

your subject to an audience at the Julliard School of Music, you might want to fit rock into the history of popular music, and you had better know the difference between a flatted fifth and a minor seventh. (10-11).

For most, if not all, college freshmen, the effect of these improbable examples of rhetorical situations is precisely the reverse of what the authors intend: rather than making the concept of the rhetorical situation real, they make it unreal by placing it entirely outside the likely experience of their readers. As in the first example, these writers about rhetoric seem to lack a clear understanding of their own audience.

If such textbooks offer an indication of the way writing is actually being taught at the freshman level across the country today, then it is not surprising that, as Redish observed, advanced students and recent college graduates find audience a new and difficult concept to master. What students do not learn about audience in their freshman composition class, after all, they are not likely to learn from the writing they do in their other college classes either, since academic writing tends to emphasize conventions of form and to minimize the role of the reader. The audience of almost all academic writing—regardless of discipline—is, directly or indirectly, the instructor, and the purpose of such writing is almost always preestablished by the assignment. We should not wonder, then, that students who spend four years mastering academic prose may be ill prepared for the adjustment to real-world communication and its demand for sensitivity to audience.

My own experience with advanced composition students confirms this assessment of their unfamiliarity with the concept of audience. The excerpts below, written by juniors and seniors in one of my recent upper-level persuasive writing classes, illustrate how problematic audience can be even for competent advanced students. The text for this particular course was Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike's *Rhetoric: Discovery and Change* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), and the course closely followed the tagmemic theory for which Young, Becker, and Pike are known. Tagmemic rhetoric emphasizes the unique and limited perspectives of each writer and reader. It stresses that a writer can communicate productively with a reader only if both share some common feature or features, and it implies that to write effective we must discover ways of establishing and using such shared features. It is, in short,

a strongly audience-oriented theory of writing. Even after several weeks of work along these lines, however, I found my students having enormous difficulty understanding their audiences and adopting writing strategies appropriate to different rhetorical situations. In each of the papers from which the following two excerpts are taken, for example, the writer's task was to examine a conflict in which he or she was involved and then to make cooperation with a potentially hostile reader possible by trying above all to reduce the reader's sense of threat:

> [Writer's problem: her suitemate has a live-in male friend, despite university policies prohibiting such an arrangement and the inconvenience created for the other women in the suite.] . . . I'm almost sure that those of us who pay the rent in this suite are more upset by this situation than is John, who lives here rent free. Technically, John can be considered a trespasser on this campus, since he is not a student here; therefore, serious consequences could occur for him. I wouldn't like to see you or him in trouble as you are my friend. . . .
>
> It would be a lot easier for John to move out voluntarily than for Housing to catch on and force him out or possibly evict you.

* * *

> [Writer's problem: he lives on a street occasionally blocked by double parking of a city-operated bus for the handicapped.]
> To: Cerebral Palsy Center
>
> What triggered this letter is not the fact that I am an impatient individual who continually gets frustrated when the street is blocked, but rather a look which I received from you one day when I asked you why patrons of your center park in the bus zone. . . . Your response was that I lacked all consideration for handicapped people. . . .
>
> Your center is located in an old uptown neighborhood which is residentially zoned. It is quite possible that if a friendly relationship is not established with your neighbors, it could result in the removal of your center from their neighborhood. Further, the transportation of your members is being put into jeopardy every time The Lift, a bus exclusively used by the handicapped, draws attention to itself by generating complaints. A bus system which already suffers from financial problems

> is surely going to be tempted to cut back on gratuitous services that generate complaints.

Far from reducing threat, both of these writers seem to employ threat as their primary persuasive tactic, apparently because they are unable to understand what their readers will perceive as threatening. (The second writer's difficulty in conceptualizing his audience—in distinguishing between individuals and institutions—is revealed by his use of the second-person pronoun in a letter addressed impersonally to the Cerebral Palsy Center.) The assignment was a rather difficult one, but these papers, written by intelligent upperclassmen, are striking failures in dealing with audience. The problem here is analogous to the difficulties that many basic writers face in trying to master the unfamiliar medium of written communication. These advanced students, similarly, lack experience writing for real audiences, and in trying to approximate what they think such writing should look like, they make flagrant but understandable errors.

The inability of advanced students to adjust their writing to different rhetorical situations has implications that extend beyond their preparation for job-related writing. More surprising than my students' difficulties with audience may be the suspicions that some of them have expressed about the concept of the rhetorical situation. Because they had had little practical experience in thinking like the people they were writing to and were frustrated by their attempts to do so, they doubted that audiences could be understood in any meaningful way, and they resisted my attempts to convince them of the centrality of audience in the writing process. Moreover, as we dealt with persuasive strategies tailored to different writer-reader relationships, I realized that my students were skeptical about the power of any writer to persuade a hostile reader. Many of them, unable to understand their readers' attitudes and values, or to use those factors in shaping their own arguments, considered persuasion only an abstract exercise. They dutifully incorporated into their papers the strategies we studied, but without much conviction that they were practicing a potentially valuable skill.

I find such doubts about audience and persuasion disturbing for a number of reasons. First, they suggest that rhetoric's status at the end of the twentieth century remains dismally low. Of course, rhetorical strategies have been suspect at least since Plato. But my students' feeling that rhetoric simply doesn't work is different from Plato's ethical suspicions, and it represents a sad decline from the

confidence in rhetoric expressed by Aristotle and the prestige awarded the orator by Cicero. Second, my students' doubts about language's power to persuade suggest that they are unaware of the forces of persuasion loose in society and directly or indirectly aimed at them. Is such a condition perhaps a result of growing up with thousands of television commercials, vehicles of persuasion so much a part of daily life that we begin to overlook their craft and their impact? Whatever its cause, the specter of a new generation of educated men and women oblivious to persuasive powers exercised by a skilled few is frightening. Finally, and most important, my students' low regard for rhetoric also suggests that they lack a sense of their own potential ability to influence people and events around them through language. Students who have little faith in the power of words to advance new ideas or to identify and resolve conflicts will be poorly prepared to change the world they are about to enter.

The myth of the general reader, responsible for the approach that many of our students take to writing and for the flat prose they produce, is not easy to explode. Understanding audience entails more than formulating answers to lists of questions about the age or occupation or knowledge of one's readers; though such heuristics for audience analysis are attractively straightforward, their limitations are becoming increasingly apparent. Robert Roth's research has shown that some students' conceptions of their readers evolve gradually during the act of writing; the "rigid predefinitions of the audience" that the familiar heuristics provide, he points out, will not be helpful to student writers who "may need to discover their own audiences and to redefine them as they go along" (53). Moreover, as Russell Long has noted, these heuristics tend to lead to the sort of "noxious stereotyping" that composition teachers ordinarily and rightly condemn (223). Like Roth, Long argues that we should recognize a more dynamic relationship between writer and reader, one in which writers compose with an ongoing awareness of the kinds of readers they are implying by their decisions about diction, tone, detail, and emphasis. Arthur Walzer believes that writers of academic prose can understand the constraints of audience better by studying the conventions of written discourse within the "interpretive community" that they are addressing than by speculating about the characteristics of actual readers. Douglas Park, finally, has emphasized a writer's need to comprehend the social circumstances that bring an audience into being and the function that discourse is understood to perform within those cir-

cumstances. Thus he concludes that "the primary issue . . . for teachers of writing is not how we can help students analyze their audiences but, first, how and to what extent we can help them define situations for their writing. And to this question there are no simple answers" (486). What such recent thinking about audience makes clear is that the subject is far more complex than even the best composition textbooks suggest.

Making a case for a specific theoretical or pedagogical approach to audience is beyond the scope of this article. My purpose has been to argue, more broadly, that the content of advanced composition should be defined by our students' need to develop a sensitivity to audience and rhetorical situation. As I have tried to suggest, the rationale for making these subjects the focus of a writing course for advanced students goes beyond career preparation; it also involves basic attitudes about the efficacy of language. A course that teaches the ability to write with an informing awareness of rhetorical situation will not only assist graduating students in the kinds of on-the-job writing that they are about to confront, but more important, help enfranchise them as active participants in society, confident in the power of language and skilled in its effective use.

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NOTE

[1]For a useful survey of research on audience, see Lisa Ede's "Audience: An Introduction to Research." Among the important essays on audience published since Ede's bibliography was compiled in 1984 are those by Ede and Lunsford, Elbow, Kroll, Long, Park, Roth, Thomas, and Walzer. The articles by Long, Park, Roth, and Walzer are discussed below.

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