

## Purpose

## Rhetorical Square

◆Every author has a purpose for writing--even if that purpose is to simply fulfill a writing assignment. A rhetorical purpose seeks to do a bit more; it seeks to persuade an audience, seeks to manipulate the way that audience thinks about the given subject. Television commercials try to persuade us to buy their products rather than their competitors', and politicians will promise us almost anything to get our vote; both try to affect our actions, try either to reinforce what we value or to get us to reconsider those values.

When we read, we need to consider the author's purpose: why did he write this piece? of what is he hoping to convince me? what does he want me to do as a result of reading what he has written? what unstated beliefs is he asking me to accept? why? how might these unstated beliefs affect me and others?

And when we write, we need to consider our purpose for doing so: what **DO** I think about the subject? and why? if I don't have strong feelings, why should I care what others think? is there reason to consider more than one point of view? why or why not? if I do have strong feelings about the subject, why are my feelings so strong? what beliefs am I assuming?

## Audience

◆Consider the earlier example of the two letters: one to a friend announcing a new job and the other, a letter of resignation to an employer. Most of us would never dream of sending the same letter we wrote our friend to our employer as well. Because the audience for each of our letters is so different--as is our relationship with each of the recipients--the letters will reflect those differences.

Businesses carefully consider the demographics of their potential customers and tailor their advertisements so that those ads target certain audiences. For instance, you'll probably never see an ad for a portable drill with a keyless chuck in Vogue magazine--not necessarily because readers of Vogue magazine would never use a portable drill, but because readers buy Vogue expecting to find other, much different kinds of advertisements, other kinds of information. The publisher of Vogue and the companies who advertise in the magazine have targeted an audience with specific interests.

Reading to discover the specific audiences that authors, publishers and businesses may have targeted can give us insight into the purpose(s) and message(s) of the text or advertisement. When we read, we need to look for clues that would reveal the intended audience: are all the examples the author uses similar in some way, or are they varied? who would be more likely to agree or disagree with the author? why? what is the author assuming that his audience will know or accept? is he using a specialized kind of language that only certain readers would understand? Remember that authors sometimes target many different audiences.

Audience awareness is often one of the most difficult accomplishments for most authors. Just as we assume our friend will understand why we are so elated in landing our new job without the necessity of us going into a detailed explanation, we often assume that the instructor, or another student from class, reading what we write will understand precisely what we mean simply by a quick reference to an appropriate example. After all, the instructor knows this material better than we do, and the other student *should* know it at least as well, so there is no need of a detailed explanation--right?!

Not only should we make good use of specific, detailed examples to support our thoughts, but we should explain precisely how or why those examples are appropriate; we should attempt to write as though we are "easily and comfortably one with [our] audience, as though [we are] members of the

academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists; [we] have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language" (Bartholomae 408). Just as advertisers must anticipate what information their audiences expect and how that audience likes that information packaged, we need to anticipate our audience(s) when we write in order to persuade our readers that we understand our subject and that our point of view is worth their consideration.

## Message

◆Some of the most common messages we hear daily are very simple: buy this; vote for me; take an umbrella when you leave your house because it might rain. Other messages are more subtle: this famous person has a milk mustache; she drinks milk, and because you 1) want to be like her and/or 2) admire her, you should drink milk as well--and doing so will, in some way, make you just like her. Simple or subtle, every author's goal is to clearly communicate her message(s)--and there may be more than one.

When we read, we need to carefully consider the author's message: what is she trying to say? why does she say this subject is important? or not important? how is she suggesting that this subject will affect me? why should I be concerned? what should I do as a result of that concern? what will happen if I do as she suggests? what will happen if I don't act?

Frequently in academic writing, the message becomes the primary focus of our efforts: what exactly do I want to say? what do I think about this subject? if I'm not sure of what I want to say or what I think, why is that the case? what would help me be more certain of my reaction to this subject? how or in what way does this subject affect others? what should or should not others do?

## Voice

◆The voice of any text is shaped by the author's purpose and the audience that the author is targeting. Doctors writing or talking to other doctors, for example, will probably use terms with which most of us are unfamiliar, but when those same doctors speak with patients, they modify their language so their patients will understand. But rhetorical voice is more than just use of a particular vocabulary. When they consult with each other and discuss an individual patient's cancer prognosis, doctors are more likely to be objective and frank in their opinions of a given course of treatment; when with the patient, however, the doctor will most likely shape her prognosis out of consideration of the patient's feelings and possible reaction.

How an author says something can be just as meaningful as what that author says. While we read, then, we need to pay special attention to the author's choice of vocabulary, the types of examples she uses, and the way she treats us, her readers. Just as the doctor's attempt to keep her language easy for us to understand can go too far and be perceived as condescending, talking down to us, authors can treat their audiences with varying degrees of respect. Did I need to add the "talking down to us" phrase to gloss the word condescending, or was it unnecessary? The answer to that question probably depends on the reader.

If we hope to successfully accomplish our purpose when we write, our task is to "assemble and mimic" the language our targeted audience expects. This doesn't mean that we should necessarily just drop in quotes or arbitrarily affect a specialized vocabulary. We assemble and mimic the language our audience expects in an effort to make our audience feel easy and comfortable with what we have to say, as though we are "members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists" (Bartholomae 408). We appropriate the academic discourse to demonstrate to our audience that we are able to consider our subject in just the same way as they might.