DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 796 CS 211 642

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TITLE The Proposal to a Small Group: Learning to "See Otherwise."
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audience Awareness; Class Activities; College Students; Higher Education; *Persuasive Discourse; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Value Orientations; *Writing Assignments

ABSTRACT

In most traditional introductory college composition courses students are generally advised to address the teachers or some other authoritative figure as their primary audience. To supplement this traditional approach, students should also direct their discourse to audiences who are not projected as superior critics. One paper assignment that can move students in an advanced course towards a concept of peer readership is the "proposal directed at a specified small group." Students advocate a specific action to a small, carefully defined, local group that has the power to make that proposal happen. Students must name the members of the small group, and include a short rationale analyzing the probable beliefs and values of those members, based on occupational and geographical circumstances, personal interviews, local rumor, or any other kind of evidence they deem applicable. This assignment succeeds in addressing nonthreatening readerships because it is addressed to a small group rather than to an individual, and it demands that the student choose a specific value system to characterize the attitudes and beliefs of the selected group. Although many students have trouble separating the value system of their chosen audience from the values most closely associated with the thesis and content of the paper itself, the value systems approach succeeds in moving students towards a clearer sense of reader uniqueness. The assignment also helps students initiate conversation between their composing selves and their various other selves. It teaches then the important human value of "seeing otherwise." (MM)

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THE PROPOSAL TO A SMALL GROUP: LEARNING TO "SEE OTHERWISE"

Most traditional introductory college composition courses with which I am familiar move their students from close, personal kinds of writing at the beginning of the term, such as descriptive essays and short narratives based upon a significant memory, to more impersonal modes of discourse towards the end of the term, such as the formal expository essay, the analytical essay, or perhaps the college research paper. If the issue of readership is raised at all in these late-semester assignments, students are often advised to address the class teacher or some other equally authoritative figure as their primary audience. For example, Charles Bazerman in The Informed Reader lists three potential readerships for college research papers: the teacher who assigns a paper on a topic about which he or she is well informed, the teacher who assigns a paper but has only limited familiarity with the topic, and the teacher who asks you "to imagine yourself a practicing scholar writing for a well-informed professional community" (261). Constancee Gefvert in The Confident Writer states that for research papers: "You may discover your instructor is the easiest audience to write for: you already know so much of what he or she expects" (539). That students are predisposed to accept such counsel can be evidenced by the number of times we have heard them proclaim to their friends that their main goal in their writing class is to figure out by semester's end: "what The Teacher wants."

But there are a number of difficulties with this "teacher as reader" advice, most of them arising from the implied assumption of the teacher as some sort of superior authority. As Lauer, Montague, Lunsford and Emig point out in Four Worlds of Writing, "it [is] better to choose as a primary audience your classmates...because writing for the teacher poses serious role problems" (344). My own experience suggests that regardless of where the students perceive the class instructor on the continuum from good pal to jealous Old Testament divinity, those students will almost automatically imagine that teacher as a "superior critic," a reader sharing perhaps some of their beliefs and values but markedly beyond them in terms of topic knowledge and analytical perception. Most of the students I know believe at some level that whatever "personal" angle they take, their freshman composition papers, particularly the more formal essays written late in the term, are not going to show any teacher much that that teacher hasn't seen and heard numerous times already. The instructor thus becomes a hypercritical audience, and the major goal for many students is to get through a minimum number of pages without making too many obvious mistakes for that imagined reader to get mad or sad about.

Indeed, to write to any "highly superior" reader is a sure prescription for intimidation. Any utterance seems inadequate, and after almost every sentence the writer halts, uncertain about what could possibly be good enough to say next. And yet I would argue that this kind of authoritative readership is exactly the image that many first college writing courses implant in their students by the end of the term. Few are the introductory students who manage to

maintain the writing process as an act of valid discovery throughout the semester, usually by discarding the advice to write to their teachers and instead initiating conversations between their composing "self" and various other "selves." I like to keep an eye out for such students; they tend to make excellent English majors.

This problem with authoritative readers usually continues in writing classes subsequent to the initial composition course, which often have as a stated objective to help students "progress" from "clear writing" to "effective writing." In practice this usually means helping students learn to catch the interest of disinterested--and perhaps bored--readers whose agendas are clearly different from their own; in short, "real life" readerships like the ones those students will encounter in the business, organizational and professional worlds outside of college. And too often these readers are presented as "bosses," "division heads," "critical supervisors." Whatever one might think of this clarity/effectiveness dichotomy, if my above observations about readers as perceived authorities have been accurate, then one implied goal of advanced writing courses might be to move students in the direction of honest discourse directed to truly "other" audiences who are <u>not</u> "projected superior critics" of some kind.

Two types of writing that by their nature involve the need for writer clarity about audience beliefs, opinions and values are "argumentation" and "persuasion," and thus it is not surprising that these modes of discourse are often stressed in advanced writing courses. One of the earliest rhetorical theoreticians, Aristotle, taught that any speaker or writer wishing to argue effectively needed to employ "propriety" (which he defined as: "an adaptation to the style of a particular audience") as well as clarity, dignity, and mechanical correctness. The most noted Roman theoretician of effective discourse, Cicero, expanded Aristotle's notion of propriety in his early work, the <u>Brutus</u>, to distinguish two types of styles based upon audience: "the grand, connected with moving the audience by emotion, and the plain, connected with teaching the audience by intellectual persuasion" (Kinneavy, 276-77). Although Cicero later modified and expanded this early bifurcated model, it became standard academic practice from Roman times on to reduce instruction in argument and persuasion to the teaching of 1) how to employ style as dazzling or impressive ornamentation, and 2) the uses and misuses of almost "reader-proof" syllogisms. Under these rhetorical interpretations readers came to be treated as either a collection of emotional pawns or as a single, almost infallible logic machine, rather than as truly human, and potentially interesting, peers with specific sets of values, goals and needs. Recent theoreticians such as Chaim Perelman in <u>The New Rhetoric</u> have attempted to break away from these artificial models by insisting on the need for an applied component in order for argumentative discourse to reach and affect intended real-life audiences.

One paper assignment I use that includes the kind of applied component that can move students towards a concept of peer readership is the Proposal directed at a specified small group. I ask students in my Contemporary Research and Argument class, an advanced writing course taught to students from a variety of disciplines, to advocate a specific action

(in almost any topic area) to a small, carefully defined, local group that has the power to make that proposal happen. The students must not only name the members of the Board, Committee, or whatever small group that they are addressing, but they must also include a short rationale analyzing the probable beliefs and values of those members, based upon occupational and geographical circumstances, personal interviews, local rumor, or any other kind of evidence they deem applicable. Students have written these proposals for audiences ranging from particular committees on campus to home-town school boards, advocating everything from more liberal visitation hours to stricter high school security policies. This assignment, different in both structure and intent from the proposal assignments usually taught in business or technical writing courses, has proven quite popular with my students, especially with some who have achieved only "moderate" success in their other writing performances. Its appeal probably arises from the fact that the proposal's "applied" component seems more like what they came to college to learn to do, and perhaps because pop-psych analyses of local power groups is inherently intriguing, especially when you're not getting graded by an "overly knowledgeable" reader such as a Psychology professor.

For my own purposes, which involve moving the students towards addressing nonthreatening "other" readerships, the Proposal succeeds because of two key elements: it is addressed to a small group rather than to an individual, and it demands that the student choose a specific value system to characterize the attitudes and beliefs of the group he or she has selected. While I do cover the usual topic-oriented writing stategies that proposals demand, such as the presentations of situation needs, the plan itself, its feasibility, and its comparative advantages, it is the audience-oriented writing stategies of this assignment that seem to me to account for its success.

By its very nature, a group readership that is both small and well defined is much more difficult to imagine as an authoritative, critical audience than is a single individual, such as the class teacher, whose human limitations are usually n t very clearly perceived. As the students discover and then write down their group members' names, occupations, and so on, they get a good sense of each reader's uniqueness. In order to "define" the members of their small group audience, they must tell both who those people are and who they are not; they must picture both reader competencies and reader limitations. The result is that imagined readership that Perelman labeled "the particular audience"; neither a massive aggregate of all knowledgeable people in the world nor any single, critical expert ready to pounce, but rather six or seven different human beings whose attention and approval must be sought. It is finally not one "boss"--no matter how expert--but a defined set of individuals who must be convinced if the proposal is to be enacted. As a result, while the writer still must guard against fundamental mistakes about topic information--always a key requisite--he or she need not attempt the subtle, complex types of elaborate argument that a single "superior" reader might seem to demand. By composition time the students find themselves writing more to colleagues than to distant authorities, thus learning an important lesson about

establishing "human" readerships that they can carry to their postcollegiate writing experiences.

Asking students to define group attitudes and beliefs also aids them in this process of learning to address unique, but not threatening, readers. To assist the students in this description, I introduce them early in the assignment to the psychological idea of group value systems, a concept increasingly used in contemporary composition theory to get at what Harold D. Lasswell in The Language of Politics called the reader's "things believed, things legislated, and things admired" (Kinneavy 280). For this assignment I use a modified version of Rieke and Sillars' "American Value Systems" (Argumentation and the Decision Making Process). These authors suggest an overriding set of common "American values," that is, what U.S. readers in general will respond to as inherently "good" or "bad" things. They also list six different value subsets, such as a "Puritan/Pioneer Ethic" and an "Enlightenment Value System," that certain American groups tend to ascribe to by nature of their social inheritances and cultural environments. Early in the proposal writing process I ask my students to write a short rationale for choosing one of these six specific value systems (which I present in slightly modified and simplified versions) to fit the small group that they have named and defined. And in the paper itself I ask the students to underline at least seven terms or short phrases specifically chosen to appeal to this one value system.

There are certainly difficulties involved in using this values system apparatus for a proposal. For one thing, at the start of the assignment many students are convinced that they will never find enough detailed information about individual members of their group to justify applying any particular value system label. Moreover, having just studied the dangers of stereotyping in the previous unit, they are suspicious of all group labeling. Also, many students have trouble separating the value system of their chosen audience from the values most closely associated with the thesis and content of the paper itself. For example, they want to market computer systems "progressively" ("Join the wave of the future," "Be on the cutting edge of technology," "Don't get left behind") to all readerships, even conservative rural school boards whose continually declining enrollments have made them suspicious of everything invented after the Korean War. And finally there are often stylistical costs; many of the less polished writers work in their seven terms and phrases with all the linguistic subtlety of Robert Preston in The Music Man.

But despite these difficulties, the value systems approach does succeed in moving the students towards a clearer sense of reader uniqueness. Once the tentative nature of this labeling process is understood, most of the class usually manages to come up with some kind of value systems rationale that both satisfies their personal critical standards and helps them define what specific opinions they most need to change or confirm if their proposal is to be effective. This goal becomes obvious if their proposed audience is split into clear factions, say the conservative vs. the progressive elements of a local school board or the individualistic vs. the community-centered members of a particular volunteer agency. In such cases the students must decide which audience is more important to court for their proposal to gain majority

approval. But even when the small group they choose to write toward seems relatively homogeneous, their agony about which value system will most help their cause with that designated audience mirrors the precise kinds of audience choices they will have to make in their writing projects after college. Do I write to the company's profit-minded sales personnel or its more visionary marketing staff? How do I convince Roger and Annette over in Engineering without alienating Susan, Bob and Frank in Design? In the end their final choice is far less important than the act of choosing itself; their commitment to a particular bias in this assignment leads them to a more general recognition and acceptance of individual audience uniqueness, and it gets them past the simplistic and paralyzing notion of reader as authority figure.

Most of my students realize even as they are planning and writing their proposals that they they will retain very little of Rieke and Sillars' value system terminology once the course is over. But they also come to recognize that accepting differences in their readers' attitudes is not the same thing as accepting an inferior status for themselves as writers. To the extext that they can learn to picture their readers as human equals instead of parent/teacher authority projections, I believe to that extent they will become much more effective and persuasive writers in the years ahead. I find it significant that nine or ten of the sixty or so students from my last three Research and Argument classes have rewritten and successfully presented their proposals after the course was finished without the least encouragement from this instructor, leading to changes ranging from increased pay for some local lifeguards to a more liberal escort policy for visitors at Briar Cliff. And I would argue that in the end, an internalized recognition of reader differences leads to greater awareness of self identity; after all, who each of us is, is in part defined by who we are not. In that sense this proposal assignment helps all of my students initiate conversations between their composing selves and their various other selves. It teaches them the important human value of "seeing otherwise."

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