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ABSTRACT

Students work most productively when they feel free to move back and forth from ignoring audience to addressing it. Students should consider audience as they begin a writing task. Then they should get away from it all and simply write. If they find an audience inhibiting, they should feel free to ignore the idea of audience altogether or alter their concept of audience. When they are ready to make a draft public, they should have enough material to work with a real public. It is then that students should be aware of the unique aspects of an oral culture and the oral nature of discourse. An awareness of this sense of an orality and its characteristics and using the unique oral aspects of a classroom as forum for written work are ways in which students can use rhetoric more effectively. A good assignment for the freshman confronted with audience analysis might be to chart his or her awareness of audience from the composition's inception to its completion. The result of such charting may reveal an evolving audience which combines the best aspects of all the audiences along the continuum. (An audience continuum chart is included.) (PRA)

# Hearing or Ignoring Audience:
# The Dilemma of the Freshman Writer





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A freshman writer faces the assignment of composing an evaluation essay for her English class. The teacher spends some time in class explaining strategies for writing such an essay, and then she tells the students to bring their topics to the next class meeting along with a detailed audience analysis. I am that teacher and one who is not certain what I really am asking for in an audience analysis. Should the students picture a real audience, such as their classmates, and what should they know about that audience? Is it just what anyone might know about a group of people seen maybe twice a week for three weeks? Or should they conjure up an imaginary audience--maybe what they conceive of as "average" freshmen? Or how about an ideal audience, just the kind of freshmen they would most like to associate with? Or, maybe they should simply write for themselves. Finally, many of them would like to forget that any audience exists at all; they're having a hard enough time just cranking out words on the subject at hand.

So what I get at that next class meeting are topics but no detailed audience analysis or one for some nebulous or generic audience which might exist anywhere or nowhere. From all the writers, I receive a solemn promise of a more detailed analysis of audience after the first draft. (But

the analysis was supposed to help create that draft.) One student writes her evaluation on the evils of premarital sex for her church elders (but she thinks it's for the college newspaper), and another nearly gives up on writing about unique fabric stores in St. Louis because she thinks her audience may be too exclusive. And it really isn't until that first draft becomes public that the students really find an audience.

So what should a teacher do--or more importantly--what should a student do to connect with an audience? Don't writers have to understand their audience before they can write at all? After all, isn't discourse social and doesn't that mean "audience"? Certainly if the writer goes back to Aristotle's Rhetoric, she finds that audience is a real social construct. Aristotle details how the rhetor can effect change in an audience by the rhetor's own character and a psychological analysis of the audience, including how they are likely to respond, even according to age groups. And recent pedagogical theorists such as Linda Flower stress "decentering," a move from what she calls "writer-based prose" to "reader-based prose." But in the last few years, some interesting shifts have occurred. In 1984, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford wrote "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy," which acknowledges a focus on the reader (audience addressed) and on the writer (audience invoked). Still later, in 1987, Robert Roth and Peter Elbow both wrote

articles about the possibilities of an alternative to audience or ignoring audience altogether.

Should the reader "decenter" and join the audience, or should the reader close her eyes and ears to the demanding presence of others? I think audience insists upon its presence, and yet it must necessarily be ignored. What I propose here is a way in which a writer can move in both directions, blocking audience from her mind and responding to audience needs. First, I would like to explore the various ways in which rhetorical theorists have approached audience: total dismissal of audience, an audience of self, the ideal audience of "best selves," the invoked audience, and the addressed audience. These various audiences might be placed along a continuum where they may occasionally overlap and mix, and also where the reader might move in either direction as she finds useful in her composing process. Then, after these various approaches to audience have been explored, I would like to suggest another dimension to audience analysis--one of oral community and silent isolation and their functions with audience.

After all the years of writing teachers stressing attention to audience, Peter Elbow, in "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience," recommends that the writer shut the audience out of his mind occasionally. Elbow suggests that the writer "must try to emphasize audience awareness <u>sometimes</u>" (66), but he recommends that a "useful rule of thumb is to start by putting the readers in

mind and carry on as long as things go well" (66). If difficulties arise, he recommends putting readers out of mind and writing either to no audience, to self, or to an inviting audience.

Robert Roth, whose article "The Evolving Audience: Alternatives to Audience Accommodation" appeared the month after Elbow's article, finds that successful student writers maintain a rather flexible idea of audience. These writers "gradually revise their audience representations until audience definitions more consistent with their own needs emerge . . . . [and] their newly-created readers resemble themselves" (50). Both Elbow and Roth believe that, although a writer probably starts with some notion of audience, the more successful writers need isolation as part of their composing process to transform this audience into their own imaginative creation, or, as Elbow suggests, upon occasion, forget that even "self" is audience ("freewriting to no one, for the sake of self but not to self" (63)). Elbow describes one writer as saying, "To hell with whether they like it or not. I've got to say this the way I want to say it" (55). This necessary kind of composition may be free writing or even writing with the computer screen turned on low, but the point is for the writer to "emit" without the encumbering baggage of critics self or other.

Roth doesn't suggest a total absence of audience, but in his study of successful writers, he finds that some simply wrote to themselves. Other successful writers, Roth

discovered, found it necessary "to keep their audience definitions rather indefinite: flexible, multi-dimensioned, and variable" (51). For these writers, an audience of "best selves" eventually emerged in their consciousness. This audience means "projecting an ideal reader out there who is in essence one's best self" (50). Elbow calls this audience an "inviting" audience.

Ede and Lunsford's audience invoked may be such an ideal audience but seems to move closer to a "real" audience. An invoked audience is still a fictionalized, invented audience but not necessarily an inviting or ideal one. One of Roth's successful writers said she "challenged herself to examine her own position in the light of possible opposing viewpoints" (51), so she imagined an audience with a "lowest reader" and a "highest reader," readers with different points of view.

But eventually, if writing is ever to become public, an actual audience must be considered. Ede and Lunsford describe audience addressed and audience invoked in a way that a writer might bridge the gap of addressing no specific audience and addressing a real one. They suggest that "speakers confront a problem very similar to that of writers: lacking intimate knowledge of their audience, which comprises not a collectivity but a disparate, and possibly even divided, group of individuals, speakers, like writers, must construct in their imaginations 'an audience cast in some sort of role'" (161). The writer has probably already

constructed this imaginary audience role as part of her "desert island" writing, but now she needs to test it against a real audience. As Ede and Lunsford suggest, she will "both analyze and invent audience . . . . In so doing, she [will] invite her audience to see themselves as she saw them" (163). So at the other end of the continuum from the ignored audience is a real addressed audience with which the writer must eventually communicate. Yet the possibility exists that all the other audiences which the writer has previously envisioned and the final "real" audience can combine. The writer makes final concessions to "real" readers, and the writer attempts to convince the real reader that he is also like the imagined one.

At this point I want to add the second dimension to the audience continuum--that of silent isolation and oral community. Very different approaches to composition are experienced by a writer, in isolated silence, putting pen to paper, and by that same writer reading her work to a discourse community like her Freshman English class. In recent years, many scholars have taken a great deal of interest in the differences between oral and written discourse, and historically, in the changes which occurred in a culture such as Hellenic Greece when writing began to take precedence over oral discourse. Walter Ong's Orality and Literacy and the works of others such as Havelock and Lentz have closely examined the differences between oral and written discourse, focusing particularly on the shift in

Greek culture from oral-based discourse to written discourse. I think that understanding the differences between orality and literacy and the strengths of each, along with a knowledge of what Havelock calls "the 'dynamic tension' between the concrete world view of orality and the abstract thought of literacy" (Lentz 5-6) provides a way of approaching the freshman writer's dilemma concerning awareness/dismissal of audience.

The absence of audience is the real difference that came about when Greece began to change from a basically oral culture to one where writing was important. Ong writes that "Plato's philosophically analytic thought . . . including his critique of writing, was possible only because of the effects that writing was beginning to have on mental processes" (80). Ong later comments that ironically, "I am writing a book which I hope will be read by hundreds of thousands of people, so I must be isolated from everyone" (101).

Bringing along the distractions of potential audience can be very inhibiting. In order to find a way into a piece of writing, the writer must frequently remove herself from the "participatory, empathetic" (Ong 55) idea of audience which oral cultures (including Aristotle) envision. I see this part of the composing process as one where the writer is "maker," not mover or persuader. I don't want to call this sense of isolation a "stage" so much as it is an identification

of the writer with the piece of writing, not just with an audience. If orality is identified as talking to other people and receiving responses from them, this part of composing is the silent, isolated part.

In an oral culture, such as that of Aristotle, what I have suggested would probably seem very strange, but the smaller, more homogeneous community was easier to write/speak for/to than are communities today, and also the notion of the individual dealing with abstract ideas in isolation was not yet conceived. This ability to work alone, to conceptualize, evolve, and imagine is encouraged by forgetting about real audience, and it can have a real liberating effect on any writer, proficient or not. I guess the closest equivalent to this in Hellenic oral culture might be the hermit going off in the hills alone.

When I suggest that aspects of orality may be useful to freshman writers, after they have spent some time writing on a topic in isolation, what I mean by orality is expression communicated by speech rather than writing (although oral expression incorporated in writing can invigorate it). Although the characteristics of orality which Ong describes basically refer to a culture which is unfamiliar with writing at all, I think that many of these traits, when recognized and exploited as part of a composition program, can take the isolated written ideas of the student and connect them with a real reading public. The result, ideally, would be the kind of rhetoric Aristotle espouses.

For Aristotle, truth is a pursuit in rigorous, logical

> fashion of the ever-changing connections between the abstractions we think we know and the evidence our senses provide . . . . Aristotle synthesizes the world of the oral culture's maxims and practical knowledge with the logical rigor of writing's consciousness of abstraction.
>
> (Lentz 173)

One characteristic of orally-based thought and expression is that it is "agonistically toned" (Ong 43). When the student writes alone, she disengages herself from the field of human struggle. "Orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle" (44), according to Ong. One way of using the knowledge of this important aspect of oral culture in the Freshman English classroom is to encourage students to read their own work aloud to small groups in class. Their listeners need to be encouraged to question or challenge what is being read so that the writer can accommodate those challenges in subsequent drafts.

An oral culture is "empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced" (Ong 45). When a student reads her own work aloud, she finds it difficult to distance herself from it. Frequently, a student, when reading aloud to a group, will amend the composition, explain it, defend it, apologize for it, but most of all she will participate in her own text in a way that she can avoid when she merely submits the paper to the teacher. The feedback of such an oral presentation shows the writer what the audience thinks

of her work, and writers, knowing they will read orally, write with a response more clearly in mind.

Deborah Tannen, in Spoken and Written Language, relates an incident of a woman being asked to tell about a conversation she had had. Later, she was asked to write it down, and in doing so, Tannen observed, she used more "features of syntactic complexity which Chafe [another oral theorist] calls 'involvement' and which he found in casual conversation: details, imageability, direct quotation, repetition of sounds, words, and phrases" (14). All these features of oral communication tend to enter into a student's written discourse if she expresses her work orally, either at an earlier pre-writing stage or in reading a draft. And they are all features teachers many times find missing or unexploited in writing which is never considered as an extension of an earlier oral presentation.

A consciousness of oral aspects of written discourse can also heighten students' awareness of features of speaking which are not so welcome in written discourse. James Halpern, in "Differences Between Speaking and Writing and Their Implications for Teaching," examines transcripts of recollections collected for an oral biography project and notes that a precision in writing is necessary which is not expected in speech. Editing problems of oral transcripts involve a need for parenthetical embedding, incomplete parallelism, tense switching, and unclear pronoun reference (350). Students with an awareness of which oral techniques

will invigorate their writing and which oral patterns won't work in written discourse will probably be more proficient writers. At this point, I want to emphasize that the process of finding an audience, working alone, and interacting with a real audience reoccurs and does not necessarily follow any rigid order. But usually by the time a student begins to edit for undesirable oral features of his written discourse, she is near a final draft.

Finally, oral culture is close to the "human lifeworld" (Ong 42). This "human lifeworld" is one which "assimilat[es] the alien objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings" (42). I suggest that students should strive to feel close to this "human lifeworld" by working collaboratively with other students in the classroom and conferring with the teacher as a trusted reader, not threatening examiner. Patrick Hartwell, in "Creating a Literate Environment in Freshman English: Why and How," recommends establishing "a new language base in the classroom" (12). He tries to banish teacher talk. Language should be empowering, but he claims that "American students have trouble improving their writing . . . by having to write for an invariant audience of teacher as examiner, seen as a social superior,, and hence involving a deference vocabulary and a submissive stance that prevent learning" (15). In any case, as part of this classroom audience, the teacher should be another listener/reader, even though she may well be a more informed

one. Elbow suggests that "we learn to listen better and more trustingly to ourselves through interaction with trusted others" (65).

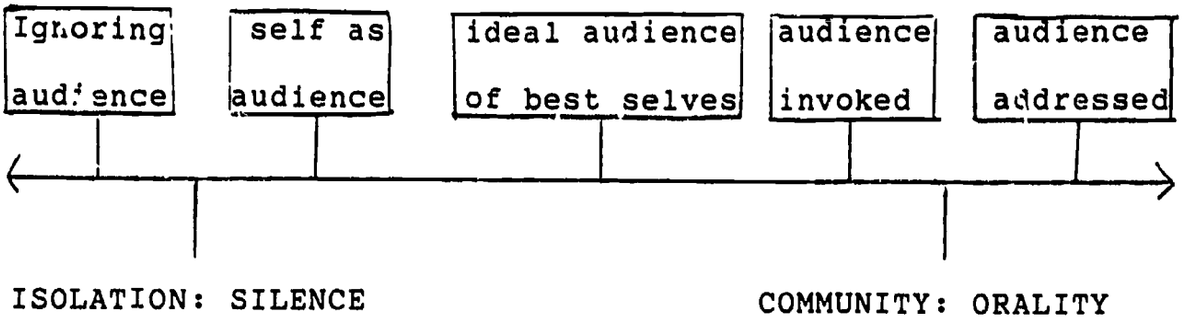


Figure 1: An Audience Continuum

What I'm suggesting here is not entirely new. Students should consider audience as they begin a writing task. Then they should get away from it all and simply write. If they find any audience inhibiting, they should feel free to ignore the idea of audience altogether or alter their concept of audience. Student writers need that time away from the public forum. When they are ready to make a draft public, they should then have enough material to work with a real public. It is then that I am suggesting that students be made aware of the unique aspects of an oral culture and the oral nature of discourse. An awareness of this sense of an orality and its characteristics and using the unique oral aspects of a classroom as forum for written work are ways in which students can use rhetoric more effectively because they will be doing what Aristotle strove to do. His

"synthesis of the strengths of orality and literacy provides the foundation for the humanistic approach to research that is a cornerstone of Western culture" (Lentz 174). Students work most productively when they feel free to move back and forth from ignoring audience to addressing it, from silence and isolation of the individual to the public forum of the Freshman English discourse community. Maybe a better assignment for the freshman confronted with the audience analysis might be for her to chart her awareness of audience from the composition's inception to its completion. The result of such charting may reveal an evolving audience which combines the best aspects of all the audiences along the continuum.

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