

Egocentricity

For undeveloped speakers, the way speech comes out seems to be the only way the ideas could have been cast into language. Indeed, they don't really distinguish thought from speech at all and attribute to words a kind of magical absoluteness. Unable to envision alternatives, they cannot appreciate what is artful and cannot know how some utterance that does not work could have been better.

To be egocentric is to assume too much. Egocentricity is the main cause of communication difficulties in comprehending and composing. People assume at first that minds match, that other people see the world as they do, think about it the same way, mean the same thing when they use the same words, and fill in the gaps of language as they do. Thinking that something couldn't be any other way is the very essence of egocentricity. Writers are sure that what they write can be taken only one way, and readers are sure they understand the text in the only way it can be understood. The assumptions, furthermore, are hidden. People don't know what it is they don't know. They overcome egocentricity only very slowly, and so it is developmental, a lifelong process requiring much verbal and social experience to discover that minds do not match as specifically as we thought but rather have to be matched in many particulars.

Examples of egocentricity in reading are omitting cues to meaning, skewing the selection of points or details, "reading in" what is not there, and failing to get in the author's point of view to follow his or her intent. Examples in writing are missing punctuation, "poor transitions," "illogicality," "lack of focus," "incoherence," overexplaining or underexplaining, and "weak organization." In other words, take almost any serious problem that teachers agree occurs universally in comprehension and composition and you will find, if you examine it closely, that it is caused by unawareness of one's limited point of view. One way to put the matter is that successful readers must be able to role-play the author if they are to comprehend what the author is trying to say and how he or she is going about it. Conversely, authors must role-play ("allow for") their audience.

Egocentricity is the smallest of several concentric circles that fence in our individual minds. We are also ethnocentric—inclined to view life from within a set of ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic assumptions that are hard for us to see because, like our private assumptions, they are taken for granted. We can "be subjective" collectively, sharing with some people a mental set not shared by people outside our group. Individuals differ in their thought and perception and values partly just as a result of being born into

different groups. Every culture and every language are biased. Although some aspects of all languages are universal, the assumptions built into each language are not the same for all, and often the differences can be startling.

We are also geocentric, sexcentric, and so on. Most of humanity's breakthroughs in thinking are *removals* of ideas—unthinking something that was not so or was partial. As children grow they become increasingly aware of cognitive options in how things can be thought about. More and more they unthink ideas they took for granted. This is the real meaning of *open minded*. It does not deprive thinkers of a position. The key, again, is awareness. They know where they stand. This awareness not only liberates their minds, it makes it possible for them to use language judiciously.

Growth Sequence 4: Toward increasing awareness that meaning resides in minds, not in words, and that different people may see the same things differently, verbalize the same ideas differently, and interpret the same words differently.