Exigency: What Makes My Message Indispensable to My Reader

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This essay is a chapter in *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, Volume 3, a peer-reviewed open textbook series for the writing classroom.

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Parlor Press LLC, Anderson, South Carolina, USA

Cover design by Colin Charlton.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data on File

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Overview

This essay defines the word exigency and explains its value as a way of gaining and holding a reader's interest. Exigency is defined as not simply explaining why a topic matters generally, but why it should matter specifically at this time and place and for one's intended readership. Four different strategies for invoking exigency are given with specific examples from student writing, journalistic writing, and trade books to clarify each strategy. Special attention is given to remind students of their rhetorical context, the interests of their readership, their readers' predispositions towards the subject matter and thesis (sympathetic, neutral, or antagonistic), and the possibility of connecting their thesis with larger issues, concerns, or values shared by the writer and his or her readers. The chapter closes with a discussion of how rhetorical uses of exigency differ depending on the genre.

Imagine someone browsing the aisles of a bookstore for something interesting to read.* This customer has an interest, let's say, for British rock, and, more broadly, popular music of the 1960s. After a few minutes, she finds a whole row of books, with titles about the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, and the British Invasion, but she only wants to buy one. She'll have to choose among them, deciding which book grabs her interest and which deserve to be tossed aside.

To make her decision, she'll ask a question that every reader ponders when opening a book, deciphering a poem, or reading a magazine article:

"Is this text worth my time?" From an author's perspective, this question may sound sacrilegious: "Of course, it's worth your time, because I wrote it and poured over every word." But there's nothing more sacred to a reader than his or her own time (just recall the last time you had a paper with a fast approaching deadline and had to sort through a stack of library research). It's not enough to prove one's argument with irrefutable logic and overwhelming evidence; it's your responsibility to hold the reader's attention long enough for them to consider that evidence and logic. Inexperienced writers often assume that readers will have as much interest in a text's subject matter as they do, or they believe that the relevance of the text to the reader will be self-evident, but readers can be impatient, and must be convinced to read an argument before they can be persuaded to accept its thesis. It's the writer's job to clarify a text's relevance. Rhetoricians sometimes refer to this concept as a text's exigency, which may be defined as the circumstances and reasons why something matters—not only generally, but specifically at this moment, in this place, for this group of people (presumably one's readership). This essay will help you implement strategies to persuade your readers that your text is indispensable and that it cannot be put down, discarded, or be deferred until later.

Exigency in the Classroom

Now you might be thinking that the skill of evoking exigency might be essential for most writers, but not when composing school term papers. After all, you have a captive audience; the instructor must read your paper in order to grade it. She will have to read the entire text, and there's a good chance she's already interested in the subject matter. Furthermore, if your topic is chosen for you, then it's entirely possible you don't think that it's an absolutely essential or even pressing subject matter. Why bother, then, to make an argument sound enticing, especially if you may not really care about it anyway?

The answer to that question is two-fold. First, if there are twenty other students in your class writing papers over the exact same topic—or a closely related one—then you need every advantage you can get. Providing your paper with exigency will make the professor all the more eager to read it, which will improve her evaluation of it. Second, teachers will sometimes expect students to write to a more skeptical audience, someone who hypothetically could discard the paper or reject a weak argument, and they grade with this other audience in mind. The instructor will read your paper regardless of whether you provide exigent circumstances, but she

will notice the difference between a paper that merely goes through the motions and one that proclaims, "read this because it will affect your understanding of an issue of essential importance." In a sense, your teacher is assuming a different persona—pretending to be someone else, in this case a skeptical reader—and expects you to do the same. However, the skill of invoking exigency isn't simply about earning a better grade; it's about captivating your audience and reinforcing the importance of your message, inside and outside of the classroom.

Strategies for Invoking Exigency in Writing

There are at least four strategies for invoking exigent circumstances in an argument. The first strategy functions as a type of umbrella for the other three. Let's call it "exigency through the audience's agenda or concerns," which involves igniting a spark of interest between your own thesis and your reader's interests. The other three strategies are variations of this approach, and the following examples will survey how some professional and student writers invoke exigency in different ways.

These four strategies illustrate that invoking exigency is more than just using an attention grabber or gimmick. An attention grabber is simply a way of turning heads; it's a visceral move that may work only temporarily, but exigency persuades the audience that they have a stake in your argument. The attention grabber focuses on flashy style, and no matter how effective it is, the best you can hope for is artificial engagement from your reader. Exigency concerns itself with subject matter, and its successful invocation makes readers care—or at least curious—about an issue.

Exigency through the Audience's Agenda or Concerns

To demonstrate that your paper has exigency, you first need to determine why you're writing. The immediate answer to this question might be, "because it's part of my grade," and though this response is technically correct, it will not inspire stellar writing. Instead, one of the best ways to answer this question is to assume a different persona. Think of a persona as a mask that you can put on or take off as a writer. It's a "think of yourself as" rhetorical move. You might think of yourself as a student in one paper, a scholar involved in an ongoing literary discussion in another, or an employee proposing a detailed solution to a corporate problem in another. Once you begin to consider your persona—and your reader's persona—you can start to form an opinion about why your paper would be important. Imagine

that you were assigned to write a research proposal where you had to identify a problem on the campus that you attend and develop a solution to that problem. Your audience for this proposal would be whatever individual or group could effect the change you propose. So for example, if you were proposing different library hours, then your audience might be the dean of the library.

In the preceding assignment, you would need to begin thinking about how you, as a writer, could relate to your readers in order to take hold of their attention. That means asking some of the following questions:

- What type of persona do I have as a writer? What is it that I care about?
- What type of persona do my readers have? What do they value or find especially interesting? What common assumptions do they have, and do I share any of them? Do I believe any of their assumptions are false? What agenda do they have? What motivates them?
- What pressing, essential, or surprising issue may I, as a writer, share with my readers?

If we were to take the preceding prompt as an example, then you would be tasked with defining a campus dilemma and creating a workable solution that meets the needs of everyone involved—or at least as much as possible. You're writing to someone who could presumably solve the problem, if only she knew how. However, you still need to define a pressing issue and show how it demands your reader's attention. Let's say you decided to write instead about the lack of healthy food choices on campus (this student example is hypothetical; the other examples of student writing in this chapter are authentic). Your preliminary thesis sentence may look something like this: "The office of the dean of students should work with the Food Services Department to provide students with more healthy alternatives to the numerous fast food restaurants established on campus." That thesis sentence is clear enough, and a sympathetic reader might even already agree with you in principle: "Sure, I'm in favor of options; who isn't, especially if they're healthy." But simply because your readers agree with your thesis doesn't guarantee that they will be persuaded that something actually has to be done to effect change or even that they should read the rest of the argument. They might think, "But this is not a pressing issue, and furthermore, it's not my problem. It should be a long-term goal, so I'll wait to take a closer look at this proposal."

To capture your reader's attention, you should surround that thesis sentence with exigent circumstances that explain why this is an issue that mat-

ters here, now, and especially for your reader. This involves understanding and empathizing with them, so that you can connect their values with your agenda. Go through and methodically answer each of the questions above, perhaps building a table. Focus especially on finding out what matters to your reader on a daily basis, how they define their relationship to the topic you're writing about.

Table 1

Questions	**Answers**
What is my audience's persona?	The dean of students.
What is my persona?	A student (not simply a student-writer) who is concerned about an issue on campus.
What is my agenda?	In this case, I want to provide healthy food alternatives. I need to convince those with a position of power to assist me.
What values or concerns do my readers have?	After researching the job description for the dean, I found out the dean has a mission statement. The mission statement has yielded a connection, which will require explanation but will at least hold the readers' attention.

That way when you introduce your topic, you can meet them at their level, from their mindset. For instance, look at the chart above (see table 1).

Now that the persona of both the writers and readers has been thoroughly examined, the introduction can be written with an eye towards invoking exigency. The paragraph below represents how the thesis above may be merged with the additional contextual information in order to invoke exigency:

> The office of the dean of students at this university claims in its mission statement that it promotes a vibrant learning environment in part by "[collaborating] with institutional partners to address the needs of the student body" (*Dean of Students Office*). Furthermore, the dean wants to "support student learning" in part by "[reducing] barriers to student success" (*Dean of Students Office*). I applaud the dean's interest in how the entire campus experience can contribute to a student's ability to succeed and learn, but not enough has been done to provide students with nutritious options. Secondary schools across the country are beginning to provide ju-

> nior high and high school kids with healthy meals, and researchers have well established a link between proper nutrition and learning potential. It's time for higher education to do the same. Therefore, I propose that the office of the dean of students work with the food services department to provide students with more healthy alternatives to the numerous fast food restaurants established on campus. I am convinced that the following proposal will live up to this university's excellent reputation of improving the daily lives of its students.

This passage demonstrates exigent circumstances by finding relevant research about a correlation between nutrition and learning. But, just as importantly, the student-writer researched the values and motivations of the intended audience, the dean of students. The student-writer matched language from the school's mission statement with the proposal that students should have more nutritious food options. Instead of the writer imposing an additional responsibility upon the dean's time and workload, the research proposal is framed as a way of helping the dean achieve his own goals. The tone is laudatory and encouraging: "I applaud the dean's interest" and "excellent reputation of improving the daily lives of its students." By answering the questions in table 1, the student has found a way to surprise the dean, showing him an added layer that complicates his mission of improving the learning environment.

Exigency Through a Gap in the Research

One of the most common methods for creating exigency in academic writing involves "creating a gap in the research," a well-worn phrase that most professors have heard and used numerous times. The strategy involves finding something new to say that contributes to an ongoing discussion. An academic discussion in this sense can occur over several years or even decades as each scholar conducts research and contributes knowledge to what has been previously written. After discovering a gap in knowledge, a writer must simultaneously show how his point is original but somehow still connected to what has been discussed or written by others. That might sound a bit contradictory, but it's precisely the same as walking in on an ongoing discussion. If you wanted to add to the conversation, you would first need to briefly listen to discover what the group is talking about, and then do your best to add seamlessly to the conversation, hopefully with your own fresh perspective. In everyday conversation, one might use tran-

sitional phrases like, "speaking of X" or "what you just said reminds me of Y." In academic literature, this strategy usually involves briefly reviewing what others have written and then pointing out what remaining question each of them has failed to answer. It might look something like this: "Though James Lewis has contributed X to the field and Adam Mitchell has contributed Y to our understanding of this issue, both have yet to ask how Z works."

Let's see how this approach might work in a student paper. The following paper is about the detrimental effects of media monopolies on the integrity of journalism:

> The dispute over media convergence and its effects on journalistic quality, motives, and localism has been the main focus of media professionals since the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reformed its regulations on cross-media ownership in 2003. Since 1975, newspapers have been barred from purchasing television stations in the same market, in order to prevent news monopolies. Now, with the opportunity to deliver news across many platforms in a single market, management has shifted their focus from news content to audience reach, causing many to wonder if and when a compromise to the media's main objective as "public watchdog" will be shifted to meet the goals of improving their company's bottom line. "The questions that this transformation raises are simple enough….what should be done to shape this new landscape, to help assure that the essential elements of independent, original, and credible news reporting are preserved?" (Downie, Jr. & Schudson). Without the cooperation of the government, educational institutions, and media companies, it is almost certain that American journalism will continue to lose its focus, resulting in a three-ring media circus.

This passage does an excellent job of placing the paper's topic within a larger academic conversation. The introduction connects the writer's thesis to an ongoing debate about the "dispute over media convergence and its effects on journalistic quality, motives, and localism." Words like "dispute" emphasize the ongoing debate that scholars have about how Americans can reliably get their news. She does an excellent job of fitting herself within an existing debate with phrases like "has been the main focus of media professionals" and "causing many to wonder." These references to other writers clarify the relevance of the student-writer's argument by showing how her paper responds to problems or questions others have identified. It's like say-

ing, "I've noticed you are very concerned about X; I have a thought about that subject too." If she only included those somewhat vague references to other writers, then the introduction would be weak, but the quotation from Downie, Jr. and Schudson introduces a specific pressing question that others feel must be answered. This specific question raises the urgency of her thesis. The thesis statement is no longer the student-writer's idle thoughts about a random topic; it's a specific response to an urgent question**.** In this way, using the "gap in the research strategy" provides writers with a purpose for writing and readers with an answer to, "So what?"

Exigency Through Reframing the Subject Matter

Exigency is not always invoked by explaining a gap in the current research; there are times when the best way to demonstrate a topic's importance is to redefine what the issue is about. You might think of this rhetorical strategy as "reframing" an issue. Writers reframe their subject matter by shifting our understanding of the surrounding context. In other words, it's a matter of what ideas, words, memories, or beliefs we associate an issue with.

Consider, for instance, an issue that arose in the summer of 2010 in New York City. A national controversy was spurred by plans to build an Islamic cultural center a few blocks away from where the World Trade Center Towers had been located before they were destroyed in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (Fisher). These construction plans spurred debate about whether the cultural center was symbolically appropriate and whether it was an embodiment of American values or an insult to those values. Many people questioned whether it was appropriate for the Islamic center—sometimes referred to as the Cordoba house—to be placed near the location of a horrific terroristic attack (Fisher). Since millions of Americans who opposed the Islamic Center may have felt a sense of urgency about stopping its construction, a speech in favor of the center would face a particular challenge. The speech would need to address a skeptical audience, and it would need to convey a sense of exigency about why the completed construction of the Cordoba house was indispensable for America's future (the precise opposite of the audience's perspective). New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg made such an argument and crafted exigent circumstances by redefining the context (Bloomberg). Instead of people associating the Cordoba house with "ground zero," "September 11th," or religious effrontery, he needed them to associate it with America's long history of religious tolerance.

Bloomberg catches hold of his readers' attention by reframing the issue in at least two ways. First, he connects the topic of the Cordoba house to religious freedom from the founding of New York City in the 17th century. Early in his speech he states, "Of all our precious freedoms, the most important may be the freedom to worship as we wish. And it is a freedom that, even here in a city that is rooted in Dutch tolerance, was hard-won over many years" (Bloomberg). Bloomberg then reviews how Jewish immigrants, Quakers, and Catholics all faced resistance by others in New York. By connecting the recent Islamic controversy to similar past conflicts, he can argue that "[w]e would betray our values—and play into our enemies' hands—if we were to treat Muslims differently than anyone else" (Bloomberg). Only after reframing the debate from one about civic sensibility and 9/11 to one concerning religious freedom, can the mayor explain why his message is indispensable to his listener. He skillfully waits until the middle of his speech to confidently assert, "I believe that this is an important test of the separation of church and state as we may see in our lifetime—as important a test—and it is critically important that we get it right" (Bloomberg). His argument that the government should not prohibit people from worshiping as they wish could have been made without these exigent circumstances, but their inclusion changes the tone from one of a defensive posture to a more vigorous one. This example provides at least three lessons about exigency:

1. Sometimes it's best to invoke exigency in the middle of the text or even in the conclusion.
2. Consider delaying invoking exigency when a) your reader doesn't share your underlying assumptions, b) when your reader is unaware of the ongoing academic discussion c) when it's more important to leave your readers with a lasting impression than it is to grab their attention immediately d) when your thesis is placed in the middle or the end of your paper.
3. Whether reframing an issue or finding a gap in the research, exigency often involves connecting one's thesis with the audience's values. Reframing an issue involves the additional step of suggesting that readers focus on a different set of values than they otherwise would.

Exigency Through a Radical Reinterpretation of Knowledge or Experience

Sometimes writers try to surprise their readers with a bold claim, a counterintuitive idea, or a reconsidered foundational premise. Consider the following titles of bestselling books:

- *The World is Flat: A Brief History of The Twenty-First Century*, by Thomas L. Friedman
- *Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*, by Steven Johnson
- *The Wisdom of the Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economics, Societies and Nations*, by James Surowiecki

Each of these books tries to revolutionize the way that we think about their topics. The titles are crafted to provoke a confused but intrigued response: "What does the author mean by that?" "Is there something I don't know?" Bold claims can usually command attention, but only if the importance of the idea and its degree of innovation are properly established. Even if there is a radically new way of looking at something, it may appear quotidian. If you can appear to be turning the world on its head, unveiling an unseen world, or persuading people that up is in fact down, then you will have your readers' undivided attention.

Radical Reinterpretation in Student Writing

In the following exegesis of Wendy Cope's poem "Lonely Hearts," the student-writer proffers a counterintuitive analysis of the tone of the poem. On the surface, the villanelle appears to have a light mood that speaks of unfulfilled relationships, but a darker tone surprisingly lies underneath this initial interpretation:

> Solitude. It is a fear that has crossed many a mind for ages—the idea of being alone or, worst of all, dying alone. But is this loneliness individualistic in nature? Or does it serve to represent a tragic element of the human condition: to be in a constant search of companionship, an obsession so hard-wired that we often fail to see the bonds from person to person? These are questions explored by Wendy Cope in her poem "Lonely Hearts," a villanelle written in the form of pieced-together personal ads from a newspaper. On the basic level, "Lonely Hearts" amuses and entertains, seeming to

> poke fun at those "lonely hearts" that place personal ads. But upon closer reading, the serious underpinnings of Cope's poem reveal themselves and a deeper theme emerges. Through the careful use of personal ad language, villanelle form, and ambiguity of point of view, Wendy Cope illustrates the shared loneliness of the poem's speakers that ultimately renders the poem ironic.

Can you spot how the student's introduction creates a surprise? There is a slow shift in her language from a theme of loneliness expressed with a jovial tone to one of "shared loneliness" (a term that is counterintuitive, itself) expressed with sobriety. The second half of the paragraph contains the thesis, but it's the first half that makes the thesis worth investigating. It invites readers to reconsider a poem that they have merely glossed over. It's like Alice going through the rabbit hole.

Genre and Exigency: Finding the Right Fit

Each genre has its own conventions and might easily fit with one of these strategies more than others. The word genre refers to a set of rhetorical expectations that accompany a recurring type of writing, whether it be practical or artistic. For instance, in business writing, there are rhetorical expectations that are associated with positive newsletters and a separate set of expectations for business letters that give people negative news. There are rhetorical expectations for emails, text-messages, news articles, poetry, drama, and even movie trailers, to name a few genres. Genre conventions are not hard and fast rules, but they do provide guidance. For instance, I would advise matching the genres below with the strategies to their right. Keep in mind these are merely suggestions. Any of the four strategies described above could work for any of the genres below, if creatively applied.

- Job Application Materials: Definitely "exigency through the audience's agenda or concerns" applies here. It's at the heart of any résumé or job letter. What you can do for the company is the only thing a potential employer cares about.
- Literary Analysis: "Finding a gap in the research" is the most common strategy, but reframing the issue or creating a counterintuitive idea are wonderful approaches as well.
- Business Proposal: "Exigency through the audience's agenda or concerns" is the most appropriate.
- Term Paper (where the topic has been discussed in class): With an ongoing discussion to references made in class, you could use any of the final three strategies.

- Term Paper (where the topic has been written about exhaustively or where the positions people take are predictable): This is the most difficult type of paper to write about (i.e. abortion, gun control, legalization of marijuana). Use the reframing technique or the counterintuitive technique to create a fresh perspective.

These strategies are oftentimes used simultaneously, and you may have noticed that there is some overlap between them. Though they may be nebulous categorizations, they provide a useful tool for providing a sense of urgency to your writing. I have personally found that when I think about exigency, it helps add passion to my writing, and it gives me a voice as a writer. Without exigency, I'm an aimless soul drifting in the dark night without a sail or a strong wind. But exigency brings with it a definition of who I am in the text (my persona), who my readers are (their personas), and the common bonds that connect use together. If you use these techniques it will help to animate your writing and motivate your readers to keep reading and carefully consider your argument.

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Teacher Resources for Exigency: What Makes My Message Indispensable to My Reader by Quentin Vieregge

Overview

Discussing exigency can help students to not simply think about the "so what" of their writing, but also to consider and analyze the prompt more carefully. I've found that students go through a layered understanding of a prompt, at first understanding the basic concept and then looking more carefully at the prompt's specific requirements. But what makes their papers far more effective is if they can take ownership of the prompt—in other words, if they can consider a way of making it more than simply an assignment, but an opportunity for them to address an issue they are passionate about to a specific audience. To help them develop this sense of audience and purpose, a discussion of exigency can be beneficial. This is one reason to talk about exigency at the beginning of the writing project. The discussion about it will differ depending on how narrowly their purpose and audience is being defined by the writing prompt, but either way, the beginning of the project is the first and probably best place to discuss exigency.

It can also be helpful to discuss exigency when students are writing their introductory paragraphs, concluding paragraphs, or as they are revising their drafts to craft a more compelling argument. These three points in the composition process are what I think of as global points, where students have an opportunity to look at the writing assignment holistically. As a reader—in and out of the classroom—the introduction and conclusion are often where I find exigent moments, and I tell students this, perhaps bringing in examples for them to review and discuss. As a writer, it's often in the middle or at the end of the writing process that I can better grasp the exigency of an argument for both myself and my readers, and this can be a point of discussion in class as well.

As my chapter asserts, asking students to think in terms of author and reader personas may also help lead to discussions on exigency. Asking students to think of personas invites them to consider what agenda or values correspond with that persona and how those considerations can help writers establish connections with their readers. Finally, exigency isn't just connected to global issues like persona, audience, and purpose; it can also be thought of in terms of templates and well-worn rhetorical moves. Showing students rhetorical patterns connected to exigency, such as how writers

explain a "gap in the research," can help make it clear to students how they can articulate exigency at the sentence or passage level.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of any other strategies for invoking exigency other than those listed above?
2. Have you ever struggled to think of a purpose behind your writing for a particular paper? What did you do to resolve this problem?
3. What nonfiction texts have you read that made you feel the text's subject matter was absolutely essential to you?
4. Find and read an academic article, political speech, or magazine article that employs one of these strategies. Which strategy does it employ, and how effective is the text at invoking exigency?
5. What genres can you think of that are not mentioned in this article? In what ways do authors typically use exigency in those genres?