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AUDIENCE AND THE COMPOSING PROCESS

I propose to apply the notion of *audience* to the successive stages of the composing process. We know from experience both as writers and teachers that a writer without a sense of audience is hard put to produce his best prose. We also know that although we may speak abstractly of "a composing process," that process moves at different paces for different people and for the same people at different times, and it may not include for everyone the same stages in the same order. We trace this process through stages from invention to copyreading to illustrate its interior logic and to show how we believe it to work in general. We should look at the successive stages of the composition process and ask whether each stage calls for a somewhat different sense of the audience in the mind of the writer.

What has been called "egocentric speech" by Piaget and "expressive speech" by James Britton appears to be the activity that writers perform in the earliest stages of composition. In other words, the audience for our first attempts to generate something to say is, probably, ourselves. This principle is, I believe, fundamental to composition teaching. The inexperienced writer in school is too often and too quickly preoccupied with what is assumed to be the ultimate audience: usually the teacher, imagined as a critic set to correct what is about to be written. Many students have told me that even during prewriting, when they are supposed to let go and record by association everything that comes to a mind exempt from concern about form, they still feel the pedagogic eye peeking over their shoulder. The pathetic beginnings, over and over again, of the same incomplete sentence written by one of Mina Shaughnessy's students are deeply revealing not of a mind with nothing to say but rather of a mind struggling to find immediately the right words, properly ordered, in which to cast the buzzing mental activity that all

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writers experience the moment they try to express themselves. The inexperienced writer is in double jeopardy: his felt inadequacy with the written language is deepened by his self-inflicted pressure to produce at once prose that will satisfy a discerning and critical audience. No easy solution lies to hand. A minimum necessity, however, is that the writer be aware that the beginning of the writing act is tentative and quirky for everyone, veteran and neophyte alike. Otherwise the inventive faculty is stymied, and ideas are frozen in place, usually in closed recesses of the mind.

I want now to apply to each stage of the composing process the idea of *multiple audiences* as a means of reducing writing anxiety. My ideas apply mainly to teaching exposition and argument but are not irrelevant to other kinds of discourse.

Invention. Invention continues, of course, throughout the process, as the mind continually loops back into its earlier yield. Ideas are discovered, rejected, modified, even until the last comma is properly placed and the last misspelled word is corrected. We are accustomed, however, to think of invention as the initial act that generates the essential content of the composition. In activities like note-taking, conversation, daydreaming (even night dreaming), journal writing, heuristic exercises, and free-writing, the mind is acquiring or retrieving information for content. At this point, the writer usually has little more than a subject, a general purpose, and, perhaps, a tentative slant on the material. If the writer also has in mind a foreboding image of an audience that is going to disapprove of what is about to be said, potential content may simply fail to materialize. It is better, therefore, for a writer to ignore the external audience and to urge the mind to uncover everything that might be said on the subject, no matter how outrageous, apparently irrelevant, contradictory, opinionated, ignoble, inaccurate, indefensible, or downright silly. Of course it is true that some people are prevented from recognizing what they would truly think and feel by monitors like belief systems or emotional states that muffle threatening ideas. For those among our students thus blocked, we can do little in our professional capacity. For most of our students, however, we can make practical suggestions to free up the mind. Here is a set of directions appropriate to the stage at which students are brainstorming for ideas about a topic:

First, forget me and all the English teachers in your past. What you are putting on paper is for your eyes only. Your only audience is yourself. Put down everything that comes to mind. Try to discover what you really think and feel about your subject. Don't worry about making good sentences or paragraphs. Don't worry about form at all. If it helps to

imagine a listener for your ideas, imagine someone who understands your subject, shares your interests, and who probably agrees with your ideas or is at least sympathetic to your viewpoint. You might even try to imagine some of that person's reactions. They might suggest additional ideas.

Composing. When writers begin drafting a composition, they are still producing what has been called writer-based prose. Although they are still inventing, they probably begin at this point to move away from egocentric speech toward the ultimate transaction between writer and reader. Depending upon the mode and purpose of the composition, the shift in audience sense will be stronger or weaker. Argument and exposition, one would assume, oblige the writer to consider, or at least begin to consider, reader response, whereas personal and narrative writing may continue to be essentially writer-centered or subject-centered. The experienced and intellectually confident writer may welcome, even need, the imagined presence of an opposing mind to stimulate the production of ideas worthy of consideration. For many students, however, concern with the ultimate audience may still be premature, expecially if the audience is imagined as indifferent or unsympathetic to the writer's message and inclined to criticize its manner of presentation. In a first draft, therefore, students should concentrate on the development, clarity, and sequence of ideas, and not worry about reaction to content or to form and style. They might ask themselves, "Will a reader be able to follow this?" not, "Will a reader approve of my ideas and my English?"

The audience for a first draft, then, is a double audience. The writer is aware of the need to communicate clearly (to himself and to others), but not necessarily to communicate persuasively (to others) or correctly (to others). We can explain that a first draft is an opportunity for the writer to explore ideas in sequence, to continue to probe and test, to find out what might be said, to open mental doors, and to do all of this with knowledge that the communication remains essentially private, although its social consequences are beginning to enter the equation. Once again, we can make practical suggestions:

In a first draft, you are still writing basically to yourself and for yourself. You are trying to develop and connect the ideas you produced in the prewriting stage. The difference is that now you begin to consider whether a reader will understand *what you write. This does not mean that you should try to tune every statement finely, but rather that you should impose order on your prose, think about the meaning of your sentences, and use examples to illustrate or support general points. (However, if a sentence does not come right the first time, don't dawdle over it too long. You can rework it later.) Pay little attention to mechanics and usage, or to*

anything that will impede the flow of thought. A first draft is still exploratory. Write as quickly as you can. Continue to imagine that your audience is likely to approve of what you say, or to be charmed or entertained by it, exactly as it comes out of your head.

Revision. I take revision to be different from editing and copyreading in that in revision the emphasis falls upon the clarity, completeness, organization and impact of content, not upon style and usage. (Considerations of style and usage cannot, of course, be divorced from considerations of clarity, completeness, and impact. But as long as we are breaking the composing process down into manageable tasks, we can delay final concern with style until after the main thinking job has been completed.) During revision, the writer must become aware for the first time of an audience that needs to be persuaded in the case of argument, or more fully informed in the case of exposition, or more richly engaged in the case of narration/description. Writing at this stage becomes a genuinely social act. It becomes reader-based. The writer must consider whether his material is likely to persuade effectively, or at least to demonstrate the main points to an audience that is either uninformed or indifferent or hostile. Revision offers an opportunity to rethink the message, perhaps to concede points (and thus to learn something), and to use tactics for rhetorical impact. By the time a writer finishes revising, he should be fairly satisfied that the audience will understand not only what is being said but also why it is being said. For practical advice to the student, one might say:

Now you must forget yourself and that sympathetic listener you might have been imagining. Try to imagine a reader who is unfamiliar with your subject or who is familiar with it but probably does not share your views. The audience is no longer you but the people you want to bring around to your way of thinking. Try to imagine their arguments or their lack of information. (You may need to do some research.) What additional evidence or information is needed to make your case or to explain your subject? Are your assertions reasonable? Is your presentation logical? What is the best way to start? How should the material be organized for maximum impact? With this audience, you can take nothing for granted. Leave no gaps in the development of your subject. Give honest consideration to viewpoints that differ from yours. Perhaps you will want to modify your position.

Editing. The writer as editor of his own work concentrates on style: word choice, word placement, economy, emphasis in the sentence; in short, polished and forceful presentation of ideas. The writer as copyreader looks after mechanics and usage, and, if relevant, manuscript

form. Both audience and occasion affect the writer's stylistic choices. The writer achieves felicity of expression and appropriateness of tone by consulting on the one hand an internalized aesthetic and on the other a clear view of what the consequences of the communication are expected to be. He imagines a demanding audience, not inclined to forgive imprecision in language or mistakes in register. He realizes that style is not ornamental but central to the complete realization of content. At this point in the composing process, the advice that we give students, especially basic writers, depends upon our estimation of what they can realistically be expected to do. Students with very limited vocabularies and limited experience of the written word cannot be expected to write with stylistic distinction, but they can be made aware of the importance that discerning readers attach to well-written prose. They certainly can be made to understand that style is not mere decoration or "flowery writing," as some students put it. With adjustments to the student's level, the following advice might be given:

Now imagine that your composition will be read by someone who is sensitive to language use. Do your words mean what you intend them to mean? Do they have the right "feel"? Is there a better word to express the idea? Are you using the kind of language that suits your subject, the occasion, your purpose, your audience, and that will help the reader see things your way? Can any of your sentences be stated more concisely? Are there gaps that need to be filled to make the writing more coherent? Have you overwritten in an attempt to impress the reader?

Copyreading. Some very good writers are bad copyreaders of their own work because they literally can no longer see what they have written. No matter how many times they peruse the manuscript, they will not notice that *accomodate* is spelled with one *m*, nor will they spot the missing apostrophe. Professionals have people to do this for them. Students normally do not, so they must be trained to look specifically for errors that will distract the reader's attention from content and, what is worse, erode the reader's confidence in the writer. Most of us, even people who scoff at prescriptivists, are nonetheless careful in our own writing not to offend them. What Miss Snip or Mr. Snap taught us in the sixth grade remains internalized in our writing personalities so profoundly that even some people who do not object particularly to a split infinitive in someone else's work are reflexively incapable of producing or letting one stand in their own.

Students do not always know what is expected. They make errors that are not errors to them. Basic writers are still learning the conventions of the written language. A teacher's insistence on a certain minimum level of

correctness is tied to many considerations: the level and goals of instruction; the needs and temperament of the student; the stage of the course; the purpose of the assignment. Teachers who practice selective marking may overlook some errors while citing others in a particular composition. Our advice to students at this last stage in the process will vary, but the teacher looking for a clean paper might say:

Imagine now that your reader cannot stand errors like [complete your own checklist]. Unfair as it may sound, this reader will not give credit to your ideas unless they are written in correct English. You seek to make your writing socially acceptable *to people who believe that misspelled words and grammatical mistakes reflect careless attitudes and a lack of consideration for the reader.*

The virtue of teaching this concept of different audiences in sequence is that, above all, it puts early emphasis upon the discovery of raw material, moves then to the shaping and expression of content, and only at the end directs the composing (and perhaps composed) mind to problems of surface structure. These categories are not as neat in nature as I have presented them, but then neither is the composing process itself. The scheme is designed not to relieve the student of pressure while composing but rather to spread it out in time through a sequence of tasks, to ration it, so that all of the pressure writers feel is not felt at the outset, when the mind needs to be as freewheeling and active as possible if anything at all worth saying is to have a chance of making itself known.