

Lecture 3: Audience

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Walter Ong's article "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction."

Rhetoric arose out of a desire both to discover the truth and to convince other people. In this lecture, we are going to focus on those other people, the "interpretive communities," that judge whether or not something is true or not, the people who have to be convinced by the rhetoric. The complexity of those interpretive communities, and the difficulty of figuring out how they make their judgments, is the problem of *audience*.

Know Your Audience

I have read through many, many writing handbooks (I was on the committee to choose the official one for a fairly large university), and they all say something to the effect of "know your audience and tailor your writing to that audience." At one level this is obvious and important advice, and at another it is the most banal and useless thing you can tell someone. If you tell someone to write the article or give the speech to a certain audience, and the writer does not know that audience, you have given the person no help at all. For example, when you write a college paper, your audience is obviously your professor. But the professor does not (usually) want you to say things like "well, we covered this in class, so you already know what I think of it." Likewise, when you are speaking for an audience of architects, you do not need to define a cornice or a lintel, though you might want to explain what you mean by the net present value of future receivables if that is relevant to your argument. Different audiences know different things, and you as a writer are supposed to deal with that problem by putting exactly as much—not too much and not too little—information into your speaking or writing.

You can partly address this problem by doing some research. If you are speaking at a *Lord of the Rings* convention, you probably do not need to summarize the plot of the books. If you are speaking to doctors, you almost certainly do not need to tell them what a pancreas is. On the other hand, if you are speaking to an audience of cardiologists, it might not be a bad idea to give quick explanations of any abbreviations or acronyms that you are using from liver or kidney research.

As you can no doubt see, this kind of audience analysis tends to get out of control very fast. If you give too much information, you bore or offend the people who already know it. If you give too little, you leave people confused and they stop following your argument. And the time it takes to research what your audience actually knows takes away from your writing or practicing your actual speech or doing research into the content of the speech.

The Performative Act of Writing and Speaking

So audience is a significant problem, not just for you and I, but for professional rhetoricians (politicians, advertising executives). And therefore people since the time of the Sophists have developed a variety of tricks to use in such situations. First of all, most of the time when we are speaking or writing, we actually do know what the audience knows because we are a part of that audience. In these cases, the speaker knows all the buzz words, the acronyms and, more importantly, the basic point of view of the audience. There is thus a kind of in-group solidarity created by such speech that works very well to bring about agreement, or at least careful and intelligent listening.

Good writers and speakers, artful users of rhetoric, can handle these unbelievably tricky situations because they have internalized the key observation of Walter Ong, who, in his most important article, wrote: "The writer's audience is always a fiction." Ong was working to separate the workings of writing from the workings of speech, so I do not want to go too far against the grain of his article, but I think he is right not just about writing, but also about speaking. It is certainly true that when you are speaking, you get immediate feedback in a way that you do not get when you are writing (where someone could be writing for an audience of millions, but doing it alone), but once your audience gets larger than ten or eleven people, you are having to make abstractions and simplifications there as well.

Ong argues that the writer hardly ever tries to think of his audience as composed of a certain number of discrete individuals, John Smith and Susan Jones and Freddie Davis, etc., with their specific interests. Rather, there is some kind of abstraction of the members of the audience, what they know, what they expect, and how they are likely to react. Ong says that the writer *fictionalizes* an audience in mind. And here is where the genius comes in: Ong realizes that successful writers are able to *change* their audiences by the ways in which they fictionalize them. It is the *performative* aspect of writing and speaking, though Ong does not call it that. When a writer or speaker does things effectively, the audience fictionalizes *itself* in the way the author wants it to. This is easier to show than to explain, so I am going to give you a passage from Ernest Hemingway and Ong's explanation of it:

Some successful writers use the trick of imagining a specific, individual audience for everything they write. I knew one fiction writer who said that she wrote every single story, novel, and poem with the idea that her grandmother would be reading it. If the grandmother would not have understood the reference or would have been offended, the author changed what she was writing. I do not think this works for everyone, but note all the successful children's stories that were written with one particular child or group of children in mind: *The Hobbit*, *Winnie the Pooh*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and many others. In these cases, the feedback from individual children and their construction in the author's imagination may have led to more perfectly tailored books.

“In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels.”

Ong points out that Hemingway came up with a brilliant trick in the way he uses the definite article “the” and the demonstrative pronoun “that”:

“The late summer of that year,” the reader begins. What year? The reader gathers that there is no need to say. “Across the river.” What river? The reader apparently is supposed to know. “And the plain.” What plain? “*The* plain”—remember? “To the mountains.” What mountains? Do I have to tell you? Of course not. *The* mountains—*those* mountains we know. We have somehow been there together. Who? You, my reader, and I. The reader—every reader—is being cast in the role of a close companion of the writer. (Ong, 13)

Hemingway, by the specific tiny words he chooses, makes his reader assume that the reader and the writer have shared knowledge and shared experiences. He *makes* his reader into something different.

You may object that this is literature, not rhetoric, but the same techniques apply. Mark Antony is trying to do the same thing (or, actually, Shakespeare is doing it through the character of Antony, in the play *Julius Caesar*) when he says “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.” He is *rhetorically* implying that you in the audience are a friend of his, a countryman of his, and a member of the same city. If you were in the audience (obviously if this had been an actual speech), two of the three (Romans, countrymen) would already have applied, and the very structure of the speech would have pressured you, by its structure, to assume that you were a friend also.

Here our beginning recognition of writing and speech as “speech-acts” is helpful. You are not just taking little units of information from inside your head and putting them in your audience’s heads. You are changing things. You say things that are *locutions* but they have *illocutionary* force (what you *want* the audience to think or do) and *perlocutionary* effects (what ends up happening to the audience). It is a dynamic situation, and the speaker or writer can take advantage of this by performing certain speech-acts, such as *greeting*, *promising*, or *displaying*.

Discourse Conventions

In both speech and writing, the sorts of speech-acts that are allowed and, to go back to our original discussion in this lecture, the amount of information that a speaker or writer needs to communicate, are governed by *Discourse Conventions*. Discourse here means the flow of words, and those conventions are the rules that have arisen around different discourses.

The most important job for a writer or speaker is to learn the discourse conventions of his or her audience. This does *not* mean investigating everything that the audience might know. Rather, it means looking at the sorts of speeches and writings that the audience might be familiar with in different situations. Just to give a quick example, no national American politician, regardless of party, can get away with *not* saying “God Bless America.” To European audiences,

this is deeply creepy, as deeply creepy as American audiences find it when politicians in the Islamic world say things like “peace be upon him” each time Mohammed’s name is mentioned—and in fact when someone like a British cabinet member says the whole “peace be upon him” thing, it likewise seems deeply creepy to Americans. But this is just a convention. John Kerry wasn’t proclaiming a religious republic by saying “God Bless America” at the end of his speech. He was using a discourse convention to appeal to a wide variety of listeners. He knew his audience *expected* that phrase and so he used it. His *illocutionary* purpose was to say “I’m one of you,” and his *perlocutionary* effect was probably something like “John Kerry is a regular old politician” or “John Kerry isn’t hostile to religion” or “John Kerry is traditionally patriotic” (though for some in the television audience it was likely “John Kerry is a huge phony”).

The important point is that the interpretive community sets the rules, the discourse conventions, through some kind of complex, evolutionary process that nobody yet completely understands. But within that framework, the writer or the speaker has the ability to change the audience, to shift the interpretive community. So you not only need to *know* your audience (as all handbooks of writing and speaking say), you have to *make* your audience.

And then you have to make your audience believe what you are trying to tell them. In the next lecture, we will discuss the ways that the *structure* of an argument, the way ideas are put together, the way information is communicated, works to move an audience where you want that audience to move.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is audience a significant problem for professional rhetoricians?
2. Why is it so important for writers and speakers to learn the discourse conventions of their audience?

Suggested Reading

Ong, Walter. "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction." *PMLA* 90, January 1975: 9–21. (Journal of the Modern Language Association of America.)

Other Books of Interest

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Kirsch, Gesa, and Duane H. Roen. *A Sense of Audience in Written Communication*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990.