

Ideas for Teaching Audience and Purpose in Foundations Written Communication Courses (e.g., ENG 100, ELI 100)

These ideas grew out of the December 4, 2008 colloquium that presented the results of the spring 2008 assessment of one student learning outcome:

Students can compose a text that seeks to achieve a specific purpose and responds to an identifiable audience.

Our thanks go out to those who participated and shared their stories and suggestions.

Assignments and Activities

1. Identify/Characterize the audience and purpose.

- A. **Pre-write for audience.** Ask students as part of their pre-writing activities to state their intended audience and to describe the primary characteristics of that audience. Remind them to keep their intended audience's characteristics in mind as they compose and revise their written text.
- B. **Pre-write for purpose.** As part of pre-writing activities, ask students to describe their purpose—what do they want the audience to understand, feel, and/or do? This activity can help students move beyond “writing for the grade.”
- C. **Use groups to develop “rules of thumb.”** Ask small groups of students to analyze a particular audience and then develop “rules of thumb” that a writer should follow when addressing that audience.
- D. **Assign writing for which you are *not* the primary audience.** Include at least one writing assignment for which the intended audience is not the course instructor.

2. Analyze texts to explore issues related to audience and purpose.

- A. **Compare three arguments.** Ask students to analyze the characteristics of three arguments that were written for three different audiences. Analysis could include the following: types of evidence, types of appeals, word choice, tone, format. Students then draw conclusions on the effectiveness of the arguments based on their analyses.
- B. **Use YouTube or film clips.** Ask students to analyze and compare the rhetorical situations found in YouTube clips or film clips. Using clips with similar content but different intended audiences and/or purposes may be most effective.
- C. **Analyze a student's “constructed” audience.** After students complete a creative piece, discuss what audience is “constructed” by the piece. In addition, engage students with questions such as these: How might audience X react? How might audience Y react? Why?

3. Take multiple perspectives.

- A. **Use peers as the intended audience.** Feedback from an audience—even a peer audience—can lead the writer to make effective changes in content, organization, language.
- B. **Use role playing.** Ask students to play a role as they respond to a peer’s writing. For example, if the general audience is the people of O‘ahu, ask each student to respond to the writer from a different point of view: ethnic group on O‘ahu, geographical location on O‘ahu, age group, gender, occupation, socio-economic class, etc. As they role play, students explain the audience characteristics that lead to their response.
- C. **Have students write on the same topic for progressively sophisticated audiences.** Students choose a single topic and write multiple texts that address various audiences and/or purposes. Each text “ups the ante” by addressing a more sophisticated audience. For example, the audience could move from non-specialists to specialists and the purpose could move from presenting information to presenting a synthesis or well-reasoned argument.
- D. **Have students write texts that achieve the same purpose but are written for different audiences.** Example: Students write two texts that explain a complex concept; one text is written to middle school students, the other to peer scholars. By selecting a non-specialist and a specialist audience, students practice interpreting specialist knowledge for non-specialists.
- E. **Have students write texts aimed at the same audience but achieve a different purpose.** Example: Students write two texts to their professor: one text is an email thank you for attending a department party and the other is an email request for a letter of recommendation.

Tips/Good Practices

1. **Encourage rhetorical thinking.** Design assignments that encourage rhetorical thought:
 - Build tools or procedures into the assignment that require students to address issues of audience and purpose.
 - Avoid ambiguous assignments. [See pp. 83-96 in John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas*]
2. **Prompt identification with the intended readers.** Help students get into the reader’s shoes. Role playing can be an effective activity, promoting understanding of audience characteristics.
3. **Stress audiences other than yourself.** Help students overcome the idea that the audience is the teacher.

4. **Determine students' incoming levels.** Recognize students' entering knowledge and skill related to their awareness of audience and purpose. Start where the students are in terms of skill and expertise. (Collect "diagnostic" writing during the first week.)
5. **Stoke engagement.** Boost student motivation and encourage engagement by
 - Allowing students to choose their audience and purpose.
 - Creating assignments that are "real world" or meaningful to students.
 - Helping students have a personal stake in the writing. Example: use a strong emotion such as hatred to inspire purpose, and in the revising stages attend to audience concerns.
6. **Create a supporting environment.** A safe, comfortable classroom environment supports a discussion of different audience characteristics, role playing, and sensitive purposes. Faculty members capable of using humor may use it to relieve tense situations. For classroom environment strategies, see the [Center for Teaching Excellence's publications](#) [website] such as [A Climate of Respect: A Handbook for Teaching at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa](#) [PDF].
7. **Use performative moments.** Live performance to an audience by the writer helps make the notion of audience real, concrete.
8. **Stress decision making while writing.** Help students understand that writers have choices and that audience and purpose shape writers' decisions.
9. **Help students see the reasons for assignments.** Create meaningful assignments and help student realize assignments are more than "just for the grade."
10. **Have students answer "why" questions.** For example: Why should the audience care about my text? Why is one word choice better or worse than another given my purpose and audience?