BETTER WRITING THROUGH RHETORICALLY-BASED ASSIGNMENTS

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You know the scene. It's late afternoon. The students are gone, and the hallways are quiet. You sit at your desk with a stack of papers in front of you, mustering up the courage to take the first one off the pile. It's not the anticipation of the spelling errors or misplaced modifiers or comma splices that makes you hesitate. No, it's the knowledge that most of the papers will be boring. They will be voiceless, superficial, mechanical, predictable attempts by your students to please you . . . to psyche you out . . . to give you what they think you want. Why do they do it, you ask yourself. You've discussed the importance of making their writing interesting. You've given them several topics to choose from, hoping that they'll find one they are interested in writing about. Perhaps you've even given them freer rein, telling them only that they need to write a certain *kind* of paper—narrative or comparison-contrast or persuasive—and you've left the specific subject up to them, letting them search their own experiences or interests to find something they can write about confidently. And yet, assignment after assignment, most of the papers are disappointingly dull.

You've looked for an explanation, and what you've come up with is that your students are young (and the age gap between you and them keeps growing; they seem to be getting younger every year). They're inexperienced and immature, so they don't really have a lot to say that will interest you. Or, you've decided, your students don't take their writing seriously. They write papers without taking time to think through what they're saying, putting down the

first thing that comes to mind, concerned primarily with getting finished.

I know: I'm exaggerating (a little at least, though at certain times, depending on your mood, you've probably lived through this scene). Our students aren't trying to bore us. Their intentions are usually nobler than I've suggested. But the truth is, we often don't get the kind of honest, purposeful writing we want from our students because we don't give them the kinds of writing assignments which provide them with a complete rhetorical context from which to work. We all scoff at "What I Did on My Summer Vacation," but when it's time to develop assignments for our students, we're often uncertain about where to begin.

I want to suggest that we begin by considering the rhetorical relationship among writer, reader, subject, and language that underlies all writing. Effective assignments provide writers with target readers, and knowledge about those readers helps writers decide how to present themselves and their subjects. Knowing for whom we write enables us to determine the voice we wish to assume and the language we wish to use to make our point. Part of our students' inability to write interestingly stems from their lack of a sense of audience beyond the teacher. They do not even write with the teacher-as-person in mind, for if they did, they would take our age, interests, family circumstances, and other facts they know about us into account. Instead, they write to the teacher-as-teacher: the person who has told them what good writing is, who expects a specific product—a paper with a main idea, topic sentences, support, and, depending on our personal preferences, white lined paper, margins of a certain size, or no more than a specified number of misspelled words. In other words, our students are aware of the guidelines and rules we provide them, but they overemphasize the importance of these minor details because they often view us as people whose job it is to evaluate how well they measure up to concrete standards we have established. They have superficially analyzed their audience and discovered a person who will, at some point, assign them a grade.

One way to avoid our students' limited sense of audience, and a first step toward developing rhetorically sound assignments, is to ask students to consider several potential audiences for each paper they write, to analyze the characteristics of those audiences, and to select a specific audience to whom they will direct their paper.

At the most general level, students need to recognize that they may write for an audience of peers, of superiors, or of subordinates. For example, when writing about adjustments they have had to make during the first few weeks of college, students may choose to write to others who are going through or who have recently gone through the same experience (a peer audience), or to counselors or other administrators who might have some control over the situation the author has experienced (an audience of superiors), or to seniors at their high schools who may be experiencing these adjustments in the future (an audience to whom the author is superior on the basis of experience). Each of these potential audiences has different characteristics, in this case based upon their knowledge of the adjustments the author is focusing on and, in the case of the audience of superiors, their potential for bringing about change. The selection of one of these audiences thus helps the author make decisions about the purpose or emphasis of the paper. If the author chooses to write to the seniors at her high school, she would most likely decide to inform them about the adjustments they may face if they choose to go to college and, perhaps to advise them about how best to prepare themselves to face those adjustments. If she chooses to write to a peer audience, an informative approach would not likely be appropriate. Instead, she might wish to write a call for action or an expressive piece which allows her readers to empathize with her and perhaps realize that the adjustments they have been experiencing are shared by others. In writing to those who might be able to help students make the adjustment from high school to college, the author might decide to voice her criticisms about the current situation and offer suggestions for improvement of counseling or administrative procedures. Or she may request assistance or register a complaint. Thus a general sense of one's relationship to an audience can help the author shape the content of a paper.

In addition, knowledge about an audience helps writers make decisions about language and thus about the image of themselves they create. Our students are certainly aware that the language they use when they are with friends in an informal situation is not always the language they use when they are talking with parents or other authority figures. In conversation, they are usually adept at adjusting their language according to their audience, and they need to be taught to apply that same skill when they write. Thus the student who chooses his best friend as his audience for a letter in which

he complains about his immediate supervisor at work needs to realize that he probably would write a different letter if he were to register a complaint with his supervisor's boss. And of course, exercises which require students to write about the same situation to quite different audiences help them learn about the relationship among audience, author, and language.

As the previous discussion suggests, teaching students to select and analyze an audience helps them become aware of the options available not only in audience, but in authorial stance and language as well. But helping our students become aware of their audience is not the entire answer to creating a rhetorical context for an assignment. A paper about "What I Did on My Summer Vacation" written by a student for his grandparents is likely to be an improvement over a paper on that same topic written with no specific audience in mind, but effective assignments go beyond simply specifying an audience or asking the author to do so. Since we want our students to have experience with different aims or purposes for writing as well as with different modes of organization, it helps them, and us, to give our students some idea of what to say about a topic. By this I do not mean that we should provide them with content for their papers, but instead that we should suggest the situation they should place themselves in as they write. Thus I often provide an assignment like the following:

> Most of us are pretty good at doing something—tuning a car, cooking a special dish, making something. Write a paper in which you explain how to do something you know how to do well to readers who don't know how to do it.

This assignment, of course, is designed to elicit a process paper—a type of paper many composition texts discuss and many composition students are asked to write. More specifically, this assignment asks students to give instructions, not to describe how something is done (how movie film is edited) or how something works (like an internal combustion engine) or how something occurs (how a volcano erupts). Although all four types of the process paper have informative purposes, the last three suggest a different kind of relationship between writer, reader, and subject than the instructional paper which the assignment calls for. Only the instructional paper assumes that the reader will learn to *do* something as he or she reads; the other three process assignments imply that the

reader will learn *about* a process, without learning how to do anything new.

If we examine the assignment closely, we will see that it provides students with specific guidelines about the rhetorical relationship they should consider as they write. First, the writer's relationship to the subject is suggested by the first sentence, which helps students begin to think about things they do well and offers some very general suggestions of possible subjects. This sentence and the instruction to choose "something you know how to do well" tell the writer that the subject must be one he or she is familiar enough with to explain in detail, but the choice of the specific subject is left up to the writer since only the writer has insight into his or her skills and talents. The phrase "pretty good at doing something" also begins to suggest the writer will, in this instance, have an authoritative relationship with the audience for the paper. This relationship is made more clear when the writer is told to write for "readers who don't know how to do it." The expert-writing-to-the-inexperienced relationship helps the writer see the importance of paying attention to details which for the expert are taken for granted. The traditional advice to tell readers what material they will need before giving them instructions makes sense if the writer understands that without such information, readers may find themselves part-way through the process and suddenly realize that they can go no farther because they do not have an essential tool or ingredient. Similarly, writers can understand the need to include details about how to perform specific steps of the process rather than just listing those steps if they remember that their readers may never had used an oil filter wrench or threaded a sewing machine before. And thinking about what their inexperienced readers need to know will help writers organize their instructions carefully, making sure to include each step at the appropriate place and perhaps to divide a complex process into several sub-processes.

This assignment also offers students the opportunity to consider stylistic restraints and options. As experts writing to novices, they will need to define technical or specialized terms which their readers may not know. They must be aware of the utility of transitional words and phrases like "first," "next," "after you have attached . . . ," and so on. They should recognize that often shorter sentences make following instructions easier. In addition to these restraints, students can think about stylistic options which involve the nature

of the expert image they wish to project. Do they wish to sound formal and business-like, giving no-nonsense instructions? Do they prefer to sound more like a peer who happens to have specific knowledge to share? Is a humorous approach appropriate? How should the paper begin? Students will need to learn that good descriptions of a process usually begin persuasively, with an anecdote or explanation that helps the readers want to learn the procedure that the paper sets out.

It is important to realize that giving the kind of assignment I have used as an example here will not by itself lead to better writing (though simply providing a rhetorical context for a paper gives students more guidance than does an assignment which does not suggest a mode or purpose, a role for the writer, and an audience). Students will not recognize all of the implications and options such an assignment includes unless we spend time discussing the assignment with them. And inexperienced writers usually benefit from analyzing a paper written in response to the topic—one written by us or by another student. Nor must all assignments specify the same elements of the rhetorical relationship. The assignment I referred to earlier—asking students to write about the adjustments they faced in their first few weeks at college—specifies the subject, but not a specific rhetorical situation. As students become more familiar with rhetorical considerations, they can be asked to determine the purpose, audience, and authorial position they plan to take in response to such an assignment before they begin their first draft. Various heuristics, such as the tagmemic matrix and audience analysis guides suggested by Janice Lauer, et. al. in *The Four Worlds of Writing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), offer us the opportunity to teach students strategies for exploring the rhetorical possibilities of these less structured assignments.

Convincing students to treat their writing as more than exercises in "getting it right" is one of our toughest jobs as writing teachers. Careful development of assignments such as those I have suggested, assignments which require students to explore the relationship among writer, reader, subject, and language, can help us persuade our students to see themselves as people writing for a specific purpose to specific readers beyond us. We become a secondary audience for their writing, serving as editors who try to help them make rhetorical choices appropriate for their goals as authors. And we

reap the benefits of our students' increased consciousness of themselves as writers when we sit down to read their work.

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