



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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THINKING ABOUT AUDIENCE: AN EXERCISE IN RHETORIC

An exercise I use in every composition class, from remedial writing to 300-level courses, has helped my students become more aware of the rhetorical choices they have to make when writing for different audiences. I use the exercise in classes where I teach rhetoric formally and in classes where the exercise stands alone—to illustrate the idea that the choices we make as writers are shaped by the different ways we have to understand and write for an audience.

The exercise is simple and focuses on persuasion. The task is for students to propose a student organization, based on a common interest that they want to share with other students. Students must first brainstorm to come up with a basis for the group, a shared interest in anything from creative writing to bowling to building robots. Then they have to address three different audiences: fellow students, the Student Association, and the university's president. Addressing these three audiences requires different formats for presentation, levels of formality, word choices, and language use. The purpose, however, remains the same: get each audience to support your proposed group.

In order to address the first audience (other students), my students must brainstorm information about their proposed group's mission and details—e.g., when and where the group will meet. For this audience many groups create a poster or pamphlet that they either draw or generate by computer if the class is held in a technology-enhanced classroom. They realize quickly that the tone of such a document has to be inviting and personal. Often students use rhetorical questions for this audience. Diction is relaxed; and within the constraints of a short document, every word must count. The goal is to invite other students to support the proposed club by generating interest in attendance and participation.

For the second audience, the school's Student Association (student governing body), students must construct a document that serves as a proposal from which they will present orally the reasons that the Student Association should fund and support their

proposed organization. The diction level for this document is higher, and students must make different use of rhetorical appeals—e.g., relying more on ethos (an appeal to ethics) and logos (an appeal to logic) than pathos (an appeal to emotion). Students generate outlines that they then present, filling in the “blanks” orally or scripting an entire written presentation. The goal for this second audience is to persuade, but the differences endemic to this audience require very different rhetorical approaches. Students find they must present justification for their proposed club and show how the club will benefit the student body.

The third audience is the university president, who must give his approval for the club/group to become a reality. Students must write a letter that justifies the club's purpose and points out explicitly how the club will benefit the campus-at-large. This third audience is similar in some ways to the second, but students recognize that a university president will have different concerns that need to be addressed. They include information about how having such a club can be a potential recruitment tool and how the presence of such a club on campus might help student retention. Writing a letter helps students think about the formal conventions of such a document, so students must think about block and modified-block form and how to organize the document so that it gives enough, but not too much, background before it gets to the point of asking for the president's official endorsement.

So in one exercise students realize that writing for an audience means anticipating that audience's needs and desires, and addressing them effectively. To construct documents for three different audiences, they have to do three rhetorical analyses and generate information to enable them to generate traits about each audience that make it unique. Taking that information about each audience to the actual construction of documents that are brief and can be completed, discussed, and briefly written about in one class session gives students a way to apply what they have learned about audience in a concrete manner.

When groups have finished all three documents, they present them to the class, talking through the process they went through and the choices they made.



We talk as a group about the use of rhetorical appeals, appropriateness of tone, word choice, grammar, and anything else that students want to discuss. The exercise culminates with a free-write in which students respond to the exercise in light of what they learned about the relationship between writer and audience.

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ENCOURAGEMENT AND SUPPORT: INCREASING PERSISTENCE AND SUCCESS

We often find our most powerful form of validation is the simple act of being heard and engaged in our thoughts. As someone who does not much care for standing up and giving speeches, I opted to write a paper on listening in my college speech course, rather than the normal topics, such as the critical parts of a well-written speech. It appeared to me that without analyzing the crucial act of listening performed by our audiences, the speech itself would be meaningless. Efforts to create educational outcomes in higher education follow this line of thinking, shifting focus from the delivery to the attainment of knowledge.

Studies have demonstrated that student encouragement and support increase attainment of knowledge. We have seen that it is important to create an encouraging environment or community of learning at every level of the institution. It is not enough to focus on instruction alone. Student services also must provide support that builds confidence, enthusiasm, and interest.

To encourage is “to give somebody hope or confidence” or “to motivate someone to take a course of action or continue doing something.” We all have witnessed the engaged student who stays after class to discuss thoughts and ideas further. This engagement is a proven indicator of success.

Not only are students more successful when they receive encouragement and support, but everyone needs it on a daily basis for success and longevity. We also need feedback on areas we need to improve; but hope, motivation, and confidence in a work setting lead to better outcomes and production.

Encouraging participation and involvement in the learning experience is critical to a healthy learning environment. Inclusive programs that allow academic collaboration and constructive relationships among various populations—from students to instructors to maintenance workers—encourage success.

So next time you are walking through the halls or sitting down to listen to your colleague, remember that the circle of success and persistence will grow exponentially if we all take an interest in each other’s thoughts and knowledge, and encourage and support each other along the way.

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