



---

Theses and Dissertations

---

2023-06-26

# Reaching Readers Beyond the Screens: Understanding How and Why Student Writers Compose for Audiences of Self-Sponsored Digital Writing

Emily Elizabeth Brown  
*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Brown, Emily Elizabeth, "Reaching Readers Beyond the Screens: Understanding How and Why Student Writers Compose for Audiences of Self-Sponsored Digital Writing" (2023). *Theses and Dissertations*. 10024.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/10024>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

Reaching Readers Beyond the Screens: Understanding How and Why Student Writers Compose  
for Audiences of Self-Sponsored Digital Writing

Emily Elizabeth Brown

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Jon Ostenson, Chair  
Amy Williams  
Deborah Dean

Department of English  
Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2023 Emily Elizabeth Brown

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

### Reaching Readers Beyond the Screens: Understanding How and Why Student Writers Compose for Audiences of Self-Sponsored Digital Writing

Emily Elizabeth Brown  
Department of English, BYU  
Master of Arts

In this qualitative research study, I use case studies to analyze the rhetorical understanding students have about online audiences, including how this understanding informs writerly choices, primarily in digital, self-sponsored writing. In this study I found that, while anxieties about online writing do exist, there are also many benefits for online writers that cause these anxieties to lessen. In addition, findings indicated that participants didn't always know how to correctly interpret and capitalize on audience feedback, which causes challenges, but these participants also claimed rhetorical power once they entered community spaces they cared about and better understood their purpose and roles as writers in those spaces. These findings contribute to composition pedagogy because they suggest areas for growth in the high school classroom, such as learning how to manage multiple audiences, how to best interpret feedback, and how to claim authority as young writers in unfamiliar rhetorical situations.

Keywords: self-sponsored digital writing, social media writing, online audience, imagined communities, addressed/invoked audience, presence, permeability, power

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project was a labor of love, fatigue, and endurance by many helping hands. First, I would like to thank my parents, Kent and Elizabeth Brown, for encouraging me to study my passions and always cheering me on, even when I buried myself in their basement for weekend-long writing sessions. I'm also grateful to my thesis committee—Amy Williams, Deborah Dean, and Jon Ostenson—for teaching me how to think like a scholar as I worked through revisions and improved as a writer little by little. I'm especially grateful to Amy and Jon for allowing me to assist in their university writing study, without which I would not have come in contact with the data that inspired my entire project! Finally, I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Jon Ostenson, for bearing my frantic emails, discouraged moments, sometimes tearful meetings, and dozens of questions with compassion and thoughtfulness. I could not have written this thesis without him, and more importantly, I would not have grown as an educator quite as successfully without his mentorship.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	I
ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	III
TABLE OF CONTENTS	IV
Introduction	1
Theoretical Framework	2
Theories on Audience: Addressed and Invoked	2
Toward a Sociocultural Theory of Audience	3
The Digital Turn: Online Audience and Imagined Communities	4
Methodology	7
Findings	11
The Topos of Presence	11
The Topos of Permeability	21
The Topos of Power	26
Discussion and Implications for Teaching	30
Negotiating Multiple Audiences	31
Understanding Feedback from Multiple Audiences	32
Creating Confidence Through Community	33
Conclusion	34
Works Cited	36

## Introduction

When I ask my high school students at the beginning of the school year how many of them consider themselves to be writers, very few raise their hands. This is a common phenomenon—students are more likely to offer an indifferent, “I’m not a writer” than confidently raise their hand at such a question. However, my next question gets a different response: “How many of you have posted, commented, or chatted with someone through social media this month?” Nearly every hand begrudgingly rises into the air. Whether they actually consider social media participation to “count” as writing, many teenagers are actively choosing to write—sometimes daily—on these digital platforms. So, what can we as writing teachers learn from better understanding how and why students are writing in these spaces?

Our digital world introduces students into many new writing spaces, and recent scholarship suggests that many students learn more through their out-of-school writing than academic writing if they are encouraged to think metacognitively about those experiences (Lindemann and Rosinski). As Lindenman and Rosinski remind teachers, “It is narrow-sighted for us to think we are the sole or even most influential factor in students’ rhetorical education” (35). It’s also important to note that youth are receiving no formal training before entering these online spaces. Their rhetorical understanding of online writing choices is self-taught and self-regulated—which provides an opportunity for inquiry.

Through the following case study research, I use data to observe what students understand about the benefits and challenges of online audiences, including how this understanding informs their writing choices and influences their relationship with their readers. For this study, I focused primarily on the audiences of digital, self-sponsored writing, defined as “digitally mediated writing in daily life” (Takayoshi). I also examine how these case studies add depth to current perspectives about online writing anxieties and draw conclusions about how a

student's sense of community belonging and affiliation on these digital platforms influences why they write online.

### **Theoretical Framework**

My inquiry is focused on understanding how a student writer's perception of, and relationship to, their digital audiences inform the writing choices they make online. My framework incorporates theories about addressed/invoked audiences, sociocultural theories of writing, and imagined communities through a digital lens.

#### *Theories on Audience: Addressed and Invoked*

According to extensive research on audience, writers often use their understanding of an actual audience to construct a conceptual audience in their mind, which determines the writing choices they make. Theorists dating back to Aristotle and Plato encouraged writers to consider the rhetorical situation within which they were writing in order to best understand a concrete audience, analyzing factors such as audience age, socioeconomic status, background, values, and so forth to be as persuasive and effective as possible. This has been the most common method for understanding an addressed, external audience in composition (Ede and Lunsford; Kroll; Long), including online composition. The writer-reader relationship, in an addressed audience perspective, moves in one direction and favors the experience of the reader (which, again, is perceived as an abstraction by the writer) in order to determine the effectiveness of a text (Flower and Hayes; Long).

By contrast, many have also studied the ways that writers create, or invoke, their audience, putting the writer more prominently in the driver's seat (Ede and Lunsford; Ong; Park). In this model, rather than trying to meet the needs of an external, existing audience, writers "provide cues for the reader---cues which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text" (Ede and Lunsford 160). Thus, the audience

becomes a construction of the writer. Ong notes that this is a common practice, that readers through the ages have been required to “conform themselves” to the roles given them by writers, making them members of an audience “that ‘really’ does not exist” (12). Through the perspectives of both addressed and invoked audiences, many theorists concur that writers who think metacognitively about who their audience is or what roles they wish their audience to adopt will make more effective writing choices (Ede and Lunsford; Rosinski). This theory manifests itself particularly in online writing, where the audience plays a more direct, immediate role in the writer’s composition, although Mary Reiff points out how even addressed and invoked audiences are ultimately shaped by a writer’s understanding of social conventions. She notes that creating an audience-addressed/audience-invoked dichotomy doesn’t necessarily leave space for more expansive views of audiences, like “horizontal, vertical and external audience” (417), thus beginning to address the complexity of writing for multiple audiences that has become amplified in digital writing spaces.

#### *Toward a Sociocultural Theory of Audience*

As research on writing instruction evolved, scholars began to shift away from focusing solely on the writer or the reader and started focusing on the merits of viewing writing first and foremost as a social interaction between the two, which is a more effective way of understanding the dynamics present in online writing. Purveyors of this social perspective consider writing primarily as a communal form of interaction that decenters writers from the traditional egocentric mindset and positions writing primarily as part of a larger social experience and community-focused rhetorical context (Kroll; Magnifico). Kenneth Bruffee points out that all thinking and knowledge comes from social interactions and conversation (642), and Alecia Magnifico furthers this idea by claiming that the audience should be seen as a “complex conversational partner” (168), privileging the interaction between reader, writer, and the worlds



in which they both exist. This focus on interactions is particularly important to recognize in online spaces, where communities develop through interaction in digital spaces.

Although the composition field understands writing as a sociocultural phenomenon, scholars report that students still struggle to branch out from egocentrism in their writing (Kroll 179), meaning that they are still too focused on themselves as writers rather than understanding writing as a social interaction. John Trimble promises that “the big breakthrough for the novice writer...will occur at the moment he begins to comprehend the social implications of what he's doing. Far from writing in a vacuum, he is conversing, in a very real sense, with another human being ...even though that person...may be hours, or days, or even years away from him in time” (*Writing with Style*). Trimble wrote these words in 1975 and how much truer they are now as students write in global spaces like the Internet. In fact, research suggests that online writing may be the space through which students can come to embrace this collaborative nature of writing better than ever before.

### *The Digital Turn: Online Audience and Imagined Communities*

These various audience theories are both confirmed and complicated by the rise and rapid evolution of online writing platforms. Both Trimble and Reiff understood some of these factors to a certain extent (multiplicity of audience across time and space, for example), but these mediums prove there is always more to learn. These platforms present a challenging rhetorical situation that must be properly understood in order to write effectively within them, and as more and more students choose to inhabit these writing spaces, researchers warn that it's important for writing teachers to be cognizant of the accompanying challenges and affordances. For example, an audience-addressed perspective is quite familiar in online writing spaces; students are accustomed to tailoring their writing to a community of viewers whose response indicates the success of the writing. And yet, the writer may also invoke the audience's role based on what

they may need from their audience (Marwick and Boyd 115), highlighting how online writing often invites students to both address *and* invoke their audiences.

Additionally, it's through a sociocultural lens that one truly understands the possibilities of writing within online communities. Many studying in this field have applied Benedict Anderson's influential research on imagined communities—the concept that any community larger than a small town is imagined or constructed—to better understand how online communities are perceived (Anderson 6; Kavoura) and why young writers choose to join these communities. Anderson's initial research regarded nations as imagined communities; he posited that “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal, comradeship” (7), showcasing how group members with power influence the construction and ideologies of these communities.

Social media sites contain all the features of an imagined community, such as their own unique symbol usage, commonly understood language and scripts, and specific tools provided for engagement (Anderson; Kavoura). They also have requirements for membership, certain authority figures, and shared ideology (Kavoura and Bourges). And most notably, many in these groups never actually meet in person; their affiliation is largely digital. So, when students choose to participate on social media, they are enacting membership in one or more imagined communities. Magnifico also describes online writing as “an act of interpersonal communication and identity building...when a writer writes, she seeks to become a member of or maintain membership in a certain community” (175). Through membership in these imagined online communities, young writers achieve belonging and a strengthened sense of self.

Conversely, many online writers connect to their real, face to face communities of family and friends through digital media as well. But research shows that the anxieties faced by online

writers often have to do with those in their digital communities who remain unseen and largely unknown—those who comprise the imagined community (Gold et al.). Gold et al. study the anxieties of young users to fully participate in online writing, identifying several topoi for analyzing those anxieties (“Going Public”). Among other topoi, the three anxieties prevalent in my research are *presence*, *permeability*, and *power*, and they represent a useful framework through which to articulate how students make writing decisions based on online audiences. I will hearken back to these three anxieties in my case study analysis to show both the positive and negative influences of these anxieties in action.

### **The Anxiety Topoi**

The *presence* of audience reminds users that despite not seeing the reader right in front of them, there are real readers out there at all times, “the actual audience on the other side of the screen reacting and judging the performance” (Litt 333), no matter how unsolicited.

*Permeability* indicates how easily one’s writing can move once it’s out in the digital realm, perhaps causing it to reach an unforeseen audience. And finally, the topos of *power* is particularly compelling for student writers because online spaces provide opportunities for students to flatten hierarchies and become the authority in these contexts. Magnifico notes, “Rather than the usual real-world markers of authority or identity such as their age, grade, or social position, young writers who are active in these spaces are seen through the lens of what they contribute” (179-180). So, in these imagined communities, students can have more opportunities for influence than they normally would get in traditional society, which heightens anxiety to participate (Gold et al.).

As the research states, formal training about online writing is low and anxiety about online writing is high, yet students continue to write online. This research explores their purposes for writing and how in every case, their conception of and connection to their audience proves

vital to those purposes. By investigating the writing choices made on online platforms through this framework, I observe how—and why—young writers navigate common online writing anxieties about audiences by utilizing the affordances of these platforms in order to ultimately ensure belonging in these online imagined communities.

## **Methodology**

I drew my research findings from five years of data accumulated from 2019 to 2023, examining how students develop as writers through their college years. This data comes from a document-based longitudinal writing study at Brigham Young University (BYU) designed by Dr. Jon Ostenson, Dr. Amy Williams, and Jonathan Garcia, which focuses on how students are transferring their knowledge and practices from first-year writing to academic and nonacademic contexts.

In 2018, the researchers invited every student enrolled in FYW to participate in the five-year longitudinal study. Fifty-four students enrolled and were interviewed in spring 2019. In 2020, 40 returned for a second interview, 43 were interviewed in 2021, 37 in 2022, and approximately 29 in 2023. Each year, students were asked to share two writing samples, one academic and one non-academic (public or private), that they composed within a year of their annual interview. In these annual interviews, students were asked a series of questions relating to their samples and their writing development, including what their process was for each sample, who their audience was, and how they were applying writing knowledge. For example, some of the questions about audience included:

1. Who were you writing for?
2. Why were you writing?
3. What prompted you to write this sample in this way?
4. What type of response did you receive to this writing?

5. How did you feel about that response?

After the first four years of interviews were conducted, the initial research team used MAXQDA to code the data, making sure they always coded in teams of two for consistency. They started with broad categories or parent codes based on their research questions and interview protocol (focusing on categories such as genre, rhetoric, audience, etc.) and then identified subcodes or children codes from there. Some of the subcodes underneath the Audience parent code included:

1. Response to audience feedback
2. Managing audience expectations
3. Relationship to audience
4. Mindfulness of audience
5. Writing to multiple audiences

I joined this research team in 2022, and as I helped code the 2022 interviews, I began to notice interesting ways that participants talked about their audience of non-academic online writing, like social media posts, compared to academic writing. Whereas the participants often rarely mentioned their academic audiences until prompted near the end of the interview, nearly every participant who submitted social media posts brought up their audience throughout the interview. It seemed clear to me that the audience played an active, constant role in these students' writing choices and attitudes toward posting. Once I identified this as a common feature in discussing nonacademic writing, I focused my research on those whose data best represented the phenomena I observed within digital, self-sponsored writing. The digital sphere is becoming an increasingly complex and anxiety-inducing space within which to write (Gold et al.); I thought it would be useful to learn from students who have already been mindful of their

online writing choices through this study. I also chose a case study format and narrowed my study down to three students from this larger body of research, which allowed me to focus on depth rather than breadth (Yin 18) (Stake). Depth was important to my research because I wanted to observe how students make complex writing choices based on factors relating to the audience, so I planned to use several writing samples and interviews from the same few students to observe patterns in their thinking and rhetorical decisions.

I chose my case studies through a careful vetting process. First, I counted a total of 13 participants who had submitted social media or other self-sponsored, digitally mediated writing at some point during the study. From there, I narrowed down to eight participants who talked in depth about their online audience and how their awareness of that audience shaped their writing choices. I eliminated one final participant, as his only submission was the first year and he never responded again, and then sent out an email to seven participants requesting further information from them in a Zoom follow-up member check interview. Out of the seven, five responded favorably and completed those interviews with me, showing their willingness to reflect on their personal writing and the role of their audience. I used these member check interviews to ask specific follow-up questions about how I was interpreting the writing choices they originally had described. Some of these questions included:

1. When you write online, it seems that there are specific people you picture as your audience. Can you tell me more about that?
2. You mentioned in past interviews that you were pleased with the response you got from your audience online. How do you know if one of your online posts is successful?

3. You mentioned several specific writing choices you made when crafting this social media post. How did you know these choices would achieve the response you wanted?

After these member check interviews, I narrowed down my case studies further, mostly due to availability of space in this paper. I perused the transcripts to find the participants that made the most connections between writing choices and their relationship with their audience. From the five member check interview participants, I ultimately chose Casey, Ethan, and Pam (pseudonyms) for my case study research.

Casey, a white female BYU alumna who graduated with a bachelor's degree in marketing in April 2022, had throughout the study submitted three promotional emails or Facebook posts that she had written about her family's start-up company, Northview Technologies (pseudonym). While her writing samples were not always posted for social media, I selected Casey as one of my case studies because the way she talked about her online work writing in her interviews led me to believe that this writing functioned similarly to social media sites in terms of audience feedback and presence. I chose Pam, a white female BYU graduate who studied family life and graduated with her bachelor's degree in April 2022, as another case study because although she only brought in one social media post, she spoke extensively in the member check interview about her social media posting, which produced a rich transcript to analyze. And finally, I picked Ethan, the grandson of Italian immigrants and a graduate of the experience design program at BYU, because he brought in a total of three social media posts pulled from his personal and band accounts. In addition, our discussions about his dual online personas for multiple audiences led to fruitful insights about his choices as a writer.

Next, I took both the original interviews and the member check interviews and applied behavior codes, such as “addressing/invoking audience,” “managing audience response,” and “utilizing features of the platform”. Additionally, purpose codes emerged: “writing to expand one’s audience”, “writing to form/maintain connections” and “writing to strengthen community belonging.” I then examined my coded segments through the lens of my theoretical framework, noticing how each participant made choices that illustrated the various online anxiety topoi defined by Gold et al.: *presence*, *permeability*, and *power*. I cross-coded the previously coded writing decisions into these three topoi and have organized my findings accordingly. Thus, although these topoi were not concepts for which I originally coded, my initial coding helped me identify relationships between student writing choices and online writing anxieties.

## Findings

### *The Topos of Presence*

Throughout the interviews and writing samples, I noticed patterns from both Casey and Ethan related to the *presence* anxiety of online audience. Speaking on this anxiety, Gold et al. note, “We find that students tend to deal with the anxiety of present audiences in three broad ways: avoiding audiences, curating audiences, and actively ignoring audiences” (“Going Public”). Thus, young writers’ *presence* anxiety can involve not fully understanding the type of rhetoric expected of them and not properly adhering to the online community values of a real audience. Although these anxieties are present for both Casey and Ethan, their unique online practices showed me how they were also using the element of *presence* as an affordance and motivation to continue writing.

Casey’s online writing for her job illustrated her complex rhetorical understanding of the present audiences available to her. She mentioned in her interviews how she used online writing frequently to promote the services of her family’s start-up company, Northview Technologies,



which helps medical organizations collect owed funds from insurance companies. In her interviews, Casey showed evidence of addressing an online audience (Litt and Hargittai; Magnifico; Marwick and Boyd) by joining dental industry groups on Facebook to research and understand their needs, which then informed how she wrote her emails and Facebook posts. Her initial online research helped Casey develop a certain writing format so her audience could receive what they expected: concise and compelling content about the company. An example of this was a Facebook post she published in 2019. Casey explained how her dad, who's a dentist, had just acquired a 3D image X-ray for his practice, and it was her job to advertise this new feature. She posted this short sentence to Facebook—one of the very first posts on her family's company page: "At Northview Technologies, we cater to a large variety of people in order to take the guesswork out of dental work."

Casey explained in this interview who she envisioned as her audience: "Dentists are like our main goal at this point because they have, you know, all the power," which she goes on to explain as power regarding their patients. She explained how "if [the patients] see how good [the product] is and how it can alleviate some of the heartache or the toothache of dental work, then maybe they'll start asking for it." Casey explained how she wanted to drive this point home by including the direct phrasing, "we cater to a large variety of people" as a way to acknowledge that this technology is ultimately for patients. This commentary indicates Casey's sophisticated conception of her audience; while her main readers are the dentists who receive her emails and social media posts, she hopes this message will also be relayed to another audience—the patients. Thus, she invoked an audience by imagining these dentists as readers who have the power to directly persuade another important audience out of Casey's reach—the patients—regarding the

benefits of 3D imaging (Ede and Lunsford; Ong). Rather than avoid or ignore an online audience, Casey instead uses rhetoric to curate information for *many* present audiences.

Although Casey's explanation of the post's composition reveals a thoughtful rhetorical analysis of her audience, the short length of the post raises some questions about the execution. If I had not asked her specifically about her intended audience, I wouldn't naturally assume she was trying to reach both dentists and patients. Her description of a "large variety of people" doesn't provide enough information to connect directly to dental patients. Ironically, her glib comment in the interview about their technology taking the "heartache and 'toothache' out of dental work" seemed more effective rhetorically than what was actually written. There were likely different choices she could have made in that post to achieve her purposes more effectively, although it's important to remember that this was one of the very first posts Casey made on this platform for this purpose.

Several years later in 2022, Casey talked about audience *presence* again in her interview, admitting that juggling multiple audiences was a notable challenge for her. This isn't just a byproduct of an online space: it's often an expected outcome to address many audiences at once (Marwick and Boyd 120). When describing the audience of her emails, she noted, "I'm writing to dental offices. So usually office managers, or the front desk are the people looking through their general emails. I would like them to go to the dentist, because that's who our main target is, you know, who's the decision maker, but I write them to kind of fit both of their interests, both as an employee and as a boss position." She explained later in the interview that she finds the balance hard because she doesn't always know who is out there reading these messages, and she has to cater to all possibilities. She commented particularly on the difficult balance writing for those who use her company's services already ("members") and those who are not yet customers

(“nonmembers”): “It gets a little challenging, because it's like, you can't just tell members, this is for you. And this is for you, nonmembers. But it's like they're [all] reading all of it. So even those that aren't necessarily in your audience will find interest in it. So that's the hard part.” While Casey demonstrates awareness of this *presence* phenomenon for her email service, she also seems stressed by the rhetorical responsibility, as Gold et al. suggest is common. And although she has likely had more experience since her short Facebook post in 2019, that post suggests there is room to strengthen the effectiveness of the produced rhetoric in order to meet the complex needs of a multi-faceted online audience.

Casey's experiences with the live, synchronous audience that can provide immediate feedback again showcased both the challenges and affordances of online writing. As noted, Casey's email blasts resemble social media posts by their *presence*—she is sending out these messages for a large audience, and she can often receive direct feedback via MailChimp data. Casey explained in her 2021 interview how this works: “You send out an email, and then it tells you what percent opened it out of your subscribers, and who clicked on it, and who unsubscribed.” This kind of data works like audience responses on social media and has been useful to Casey as it informs her writing choices for future emails. Speaking of the MailChimp data, Casey noted in her 2021 interview, “There's definitely satisfaction when I see a high percentage—it's just like, wow, I did that and it's so much better.” While this immediate feedback increased Casey's confidence, it still isn't specific enough to help her know exactly what's working rhetorically.

In 2021, Casey offered further insights that shows how she tries to make writing choices based on audience needs, despite the lack of specific feedback. She brought in an email writing

sample in 2021 (in the figure below), advertising her family’s insurance business (real company name redacted):

**Hello,**

Just like any profession, it is extremely important to continually learn and adapt. Dental insurance is no different. If an insurance coordinator does not update their knowledge, then it doesn't really matter how many years of experience they have.

This would be like using a **flip phone** while everyone else is using the newest **iPhone**. It's hard to keep up. It isn't as fast and doesn't have the same capabilities.

[REDACTED] can better serve you because we strive to have the newest information on dental insurance, dental codes, and even the dental financial environment. You will benefit by seeing an increase in claim processing, which means *less write-offs* and *more revenue*.

*Fig. 1. Work promotional email. Casey\_2021*

When asked about specific writing choices, Casey noted how she picks her email subject lines with care, often invoking a “quippy” and “entertaining” tone in order to gain more viewers. She mentioned learning in a sales class that people only open their emails if it’s for a required task, like work, or if the subject line catches their attention. Her subject line was “Don't be a flip phone,” and the inspiration came from an article about the importance of staying up with technology in business to stay relevant to your customers—like ditching the flip phone for a smartphone. She used this as an analogy for companies that aren’t up to date on their insurance claims, choosing the familiar imagery of a flip phone to spark reader curiosity. Casey’s rhetorical understanding, based on external audience information, allowed her to make purposeful writing choices, but the feedback she receives on the actual platform doesn’t give her more information beyond how many people read the email. The data does not report if viewers enjoyed the post or wished for different content, which hints at Casey’s stated stress involving multiple audiences—

she's likely not receiving the feedback she needs to know how to properly respond to the *presence* of her many audiences.

Casey's engagement with her writing tasks also contrasts with Gold et al.'s concern that young writers anxious about the presence of online audiences will experience "rhetorical disengagement" ("Going Public") when they write online. Admittedly, her situation is unique because Casey is writing for work purposes, so she is literally paid to find out how to use online rhetoric effectively. This increases her engagement and also lessens her overall anxiety for several reasons, one of them being the fact that she's representing her family company and not herself online. However, Casey's methods for addressing and invoking her audience are worthwhile strategies that could transfer to other writing contexts. Despite her challenges, Casey's willingness to embrace and rely on her audience rather than give in to the anxiety of *presence* helped her improve her rhetorical understanding of her task, and her confidence when she noticed positive audience feedback encouraged her to continue writing in these spaces. This complicates Gold et al.'s research on online anxieties by showing how *presence* can also work as a motivating factor for young writers.

Ethan also displayed a willingness to embrace the *presence* of his online audience. He and his band frequently use social media to promote themselves; in four of the five years Ethan participated in the study, he brought in social media posts: 2020 and 2021 were from his band's separate Instagram account, and the 2022 and 2023 samples were from his personal Instagram account. Each year, Ethan was asked about his social media usage, and each year his answer about time spent increased: in 2019, he mentioned posting "maybe once a month" and by 2022, he was posting "probably at least weekly." Ethan's Instagram platform awareness, honed from

years of experience, helped him address and invoke his audience and therefore mitigated the effects of the *presence* anxiety (Gold et al.).

In 2021, he sent in a social media post from his band's Instagram account celebrating a music festival they attended. To maintain participant privacy, I can't show the full post, but it begins with Ethan sharing some news: "Soo about last night... We are SO excited and BLESSED to share that we WON the title of "Favorite Band Overall!" Later in the post, he lists the bands that attended, thanks the venue for hosting, and finishes with "This is still only the beginning, and we can't wait to keep making great music with you all," followed by over ten hashtags. In his interview that year, he mentioned the strategies he incorporated to reach his desired audience, such as tagging relevant accounts (guitar brands, venues, sponsors, etc.) and utilizing hashtags. Tagging other accounts linked Ethan's post to those pages, and hashtags connected his post to other potential online musical communities, allowing more people a chance to see his post. He added hashtags such as "#SupportLocalMusic, and #IndieBand," so anyone who searched these hashtags through Instagram would be able to see this post.

By adding multiple labels to each post that link him to other bands and companies, Ethan leveraged the features of the platform in order to specifically attract certain audiences to see his post. This is an example of "cueing the reader" about what role they need to adopt in responding to the writing (Ede and Lunsford). In this case, Ethan's cues showed that he expects his audience to be his band's fanbase as well as lovers of music. These choices result in an interesting synthesis of both addressing and invoking an audience by controlling which online spaces his content is directed toward and signaling to the reader their roles as part of his band's online community (Ede and Lunsford). Interestingly, rather than curating his audience for the purpose of limiting and managing readership (as Gold et al. discuss), Ethan curates an audience of music-

lovers for the purpose of *increasing* viewership and growing his followers. His choices speak to a different concern about social media posts not fully addressed by Gold et al.—with the immense volume of online content, it could be easy for one’s post to become lost or buried on a social media newsfeed, so Ethan’s hashtags and account user tagging better ensures that his post *will* be read by these specific groups.

On his personal account, Ethan uses his understanding of online writing to purposefully address multiple, specific audience members. In 2022, he submitted an Instagram post that shared kind remarks about his family members as a way to participate in his church’s Light the World campaign, a worldwide Christmas initiative focused on spreading good and promoted by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. The post is shown below in Figure 2 (family names redacted):

Just wanted to  
[#LightTheWorld](#) by sharing some  
 love for the fam here 🤗🤗

Three things I love about everyone in  
 this picture...

1) You're an awesome example of  
 dedication and motivation to pursue  
 the things you're passionate about  
 100

2) You know how to make people  
 laugh and have a good time

3) Your fashion sense helps me look  
 good too 😊

Bonus: You're the best drummer I've  
 ever heard 🥁

Mom:

1) You're the greatest example of  
 Christlike love for others - even total  
 strangers 🙏

2) You've never been afraid to be  
 ambitious or bold 🙌

3) You are a great listener and are  
 extremely patient (especially to put  
 up with a LOT of annoyance from a  
 house full of boys)

Dad:

1) You always have a DIY attitude  
 and are willing to work hard to get  
 jobs done and learn new things 🔧

2) You are always willing to sacrifice  
 your time to help me or anyone else  
 who is in need, no matter what you  
 have going on ⌚

3) You exemplify humble forgiveness  
 towards those who wrong you and  
 are willing to ask for it from others  
 too 🙏

1) You are ALWAYS down to play  
 street hockey with me 🏒

2) You are ALWAYS excited to see  
 me (or literally anyone)

3) You are a good girl and love treats  
 as much as I do 🐶

*Fig. 2. Instagram post. Ethan\_2022*

Although his audience was technically his entire Facebook friend list, Ethan's writing choices showed that he was conceptualizing specific audience members as he wrote in order to make it personal and meaningful (Marwick and Boyd). He mentioned that the post was intended for his family in the hopes that they would see and respond, but he also explained in his interview that he purposely led with the words "Light the World" because "I have a lot of people who follow me that aren't associated with [the church], that I thought it would be good to kind of lead with it and make sure [it's] something they'd see whether or not they clicked to see the rest of the comment." Here, Ethan demonstrates platform awareness (he knows that users can typically see the first few lines of any post on their newsfeed) and uses that knowledge to juggle multiple audiences.



Ethan also described style choices he made on this 2022 family post that showed his knowledge of the platform as a way to invoke an audience response. In this post, he uses several emojis that correspond to the descriptions of each family member. According to Ethan, emojis can enhance clarity: “Sometimes you say something, and someone takes it totally the wrong way because you just can't hear them saying it. And so, I think emojis can help with that. If it's something that could come across, like, rude but it's supposed to be like a joke, then throwing in like a laughing emoji helps to make that seem like how you intended it to seem.” His commitment to message clarity through emojis shows he is both addressing an audience by imagining how they might respond and *invoking* an audience by guiding them to the “appropriate” response through visual cues. Ethan’s actions show that platform awareness goes beyond knowing what kinds of things to post where—it also includes understanding the affordances of the platform (such as hashtags or emojis) and knowing how to leverage them rhetorically. Such an awareness can only come from time spent in these various imagined communities, which can lead to greater understanding of (and therefore less anxiety about) online audiences.

Another variable affecting Ethan’s writing choices was his online community. His interviews and textual samples indicate that his secure relationship with the online audience for his personal account alleviated audience anxieties, which indicates that one’s “real” communities of family and friends can help writers ease into larger imagined online communities. When explaining in the 2022 interview why he chose to post about his family for the church initiative, he shared, “It was something that I knew I could do for Light the World that would like, make a positive impact on others, but also my family. They were the ones who commented right away... [it was] my mom and dad and brother who, like, really appreciated it.” Ethan’s family’s public

gratitude was an anticipated outcome that motivated the post, positioning this writing as a sociocultural interaction between “conversational partners” (Magnifico) and also possibly representing a way to “avoid” the *presence* of negative audience feedback online by sticking to safe, welcomed topics (Gold et al.). This again shows how writers negotiate larger imagined online communities by addressing posts to their “real” communities. When the interviewer noted that this post received over 200 likes (one of his most-liked posts), Ethan reflected: “I think people are craving positive content right now...when they see something good, they're like, really excited about it.” The live audience feedback from his online community helped Ethan determine the impact of his writing and motivated him to write something that would connect with them. Thus, the bonds of his imagined community helped inspire his rhetorical choices, despite potential anxieties about *presence*.

Both Ethan’s and Casey’s purposes for writing as well as their understanding of their imagined communities allowed them to utilize the platforms to gain more readers, taking advantage of the *presence* of audience rather than merely tolerating it or trying to work around it. This complicates Gold et al.’s theories on *presence* by showing how young writers can feel this anxiety while also using the *presence* feature as an affordance to *increase* their audience. And while both Casey and Ethan expressed awareness of this rhetorical challenge, and evidence shows that they could still improve the execution of their rhetorical choices, they also expressed a desire to keep writing in these spaces to capitalize on online audience *presence*.

### *The Topos of Permeability*

Another way that online writing is positioned as both a hindrance and a benefit to young writers is through Gold et al.’s writing feature, *permeability*, where one’s online writing can spread and reach unforeseen audiences. For example, in his 2022 interview, Ethan shared how his main purpose when writing for his band online is to encourage public interaction with an

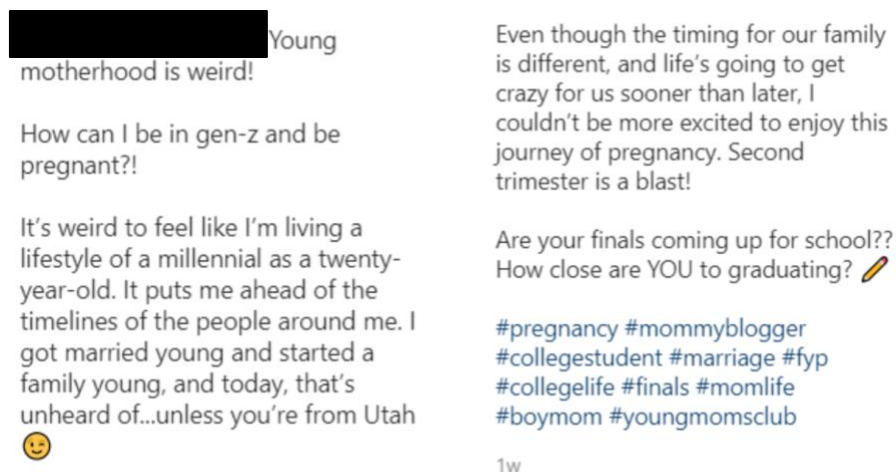
“active audience” and thereby gain more followers for the band. Pam also mentions experiencing the live, sometimes unexpected audience dynamic in her online mommy blogging community. Both Ethan’s and Pam’s text samples and interviews explore issues facing young online writers that caused Gold et al. to pen the following question regarding *permeability*: “How do we help students respond to the new rhetorical situations that may arise when their writing reaches unexpected audiences?” Through their interviews, I observed how both Pam and Ethan curate their audiences as a way to navigate the anxiety of *permeability*.

In his 2022 interview, Ethan explained how his band uses *permeability* to their advantage: “We talk a lot about how to make social media posts be interactive, and how you want to always try and tie in an action item of some sort...with our posts, we’ll often try and think like, what sort of question can we ask to get people to start a conversation in the comments.” This audience response Ethan is hoping for not only strengthens the connection between his band and his anticipated audience, but their tagging and sharing extends Ethan’s scope of influence to a very specific group of outsiders. This dynamic also evokes a collaborative sociocultural approach to writing (Kroll; Magnifico): Ethan writes the initial words, and the online community adopts them as their own and spreads those words along in a collaborative process. However, he still remains somewhat in control of what kind of outside audience views his message; his curation based on hashtags and account tagging enable him to utilize *permeability* without succumbing to anxiety about it.

Although Ethan keeps his two accounts separate (personal and musician), he shared a time when he conflated the two and received positive feedback, which is a direct representation of the effects of *permeability*. In 2022, he posted a personal photo of himself and his bandmate graduating from BYU on the band’s Instagram account, and he received more likes and

responses on that picture than any other picture on the band page. He noted in this 2022 interview, “It’s fun to see what people that you see in one space are doing and other spaces of their life to bring like a more real-life element to the band—it’s just saying like, Hey, we’re people and we graduated!” Ethan’s experience and subsequent reflection of the experience made me wonder: if his band received the most likes from a post unrelated to the band, could he capitalize on this? Gold et al. suggest: “Permeability raises the likelihood that a message crafted for one audience in response to one rhetorical situation will be consumed by another audience outside the original context, generating an entirely new and unanticipated rhetorical situation that invites—or demands—further response.” Whether or not this was totally unexpected, Ethan’s post about his personal life seemed to garner a response that suggests personal content is popular not just on his personal account but also on his band’s account. Since I hadn’t yet established this *topoi* in my theoretical framework when I interviewed him, I was unable to ask follow-up questions about this, but this suggests that the potential for *permeability* has yet to be fully understood and utilized by young writers.

Much like Ethan, Pam’s purposes for social media revolved around gaining as many followers as possible; she fully embraced the *permeability* feature by curating her audience as well. Her 2021 sample was the first article draft that she first posted to Instagram about being a young stay-at-home mom. The post features a picture of her posing in front of the mirror with her baby bump, and the long caption begins and ends like this:



*Fig. 3 Instagram post. Pam\_2021*

In her 2021 interview, Pam demonstrated her knowledge of the online audience's expectations for motherhood posts through a variety of thoughtful writing choices. First, she acknowledged the effectiveness of her opener: "'How can I be Gen-Z and be pregnant?' is kind of a big [opener], you know, that's like, 'Wait, what? She's Gen-Z and married and pregnant? That's weird.' And so that's the grabber." Here, Pam is addressing her audience by quoting a hypothetical, but accurate mom reader based on her understanding of how they might respond. This shows that she anticipated her audience's reaction to a 20-year-old pregnant woman and used this understanding to formulate the audience's likely response to create a hook.

Additionally, Pam posted questions to encourage "more content interaction" as a way to direct and maintain control over potential conversations. Her questions were about school: "Are your finals coming up for school?? How close are YOU to graduating?" She mentioned previously in an interview how content creators are motivated by sharing their own experiences, so by including some questions at the end about school, Pam invoked a certain community of mothers–young students–and signaling the role she expects from them–i.e. responding in the comments with their own perspectives (Ede and Lunsford). Finally, she mentioned adding

hashtags at the end of her post to garner more views and followers, which also signal to readers what her connections to the community are— “#mommyblogger #collegestudent #marriage, etc.—and invite further engagement from moms that belong to those same communities. This represents an instance where Pam addresses a certain subset of mothers through her writing, encouraging the spread of her writing by careful curation.

When discussing potential revisions, Pam made an observation about her audience’s needs that showed she was considering the benefits of *permeability* rather than dwelling on anxieties. As shown in Figure 5 above, Pam wrote in her post: “I got married young and started a family young, and today, that’s unheard of...unless you’re from Utah ;)” When she addressed this portion of the post in her interview, she reflected, “I feel like I could have gone into more detail about what it's like in Utah...It's not as much information for people who are outsiders to, you know, BYU.” Here, Pam addressed her audience by considering their background knowledge and how that may influence their reading of her post. While she invoked an audience that would understand the culture of having a peculiarly high percentage of young mothers in Utah, her revision comments led me to believe that she actually intended to reach a wider audience, regardless of if they understood Utah motherhood dynamics. She seemed cognizant of the effect her word choice has on the audience’s role in reading the text itself, and this reflection indicates her desire to address a wider variety of mothers in the future.

Furthermore, while Gold et al. describe the spreading of online writing to unexpected contexts, Pam’s experience extended *permeability* to the physical world. In her member check interview, she mentioned that after having her baby, she struggled with feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. However, as she continued to post online about her experiences, young mothers in her neighborhood read her posts and started reaching out, which led to in-person friendships

and bonding experiences. She explained, “There’s so many more women here that also have babies that...I was able to connect with further after like, having those writing experiences...I was able to kind of unpack [my] anxieties.” This live feedback component of her social media writing allowed Pam to find friendship on- and offline, illustrating the sociocultural theory that imagined communities can help writers experience greater belonging and connection when they write online (Magnifico 176). This also shows how Pam used the *permeability* of online writing to form those connections in a way she may not have been able to otherwise. The way that young writers are using the unique spread of digital writing, as illustrated by both Ethan and Pam, confirm Gold et al.’s theories about students being rhetorically unprepared for unexpected audiences but also expand their ideas to show how writers are adapting and often even welcoming the affordances of such audience diversity.

### *The Topos of Power*

Finally, many of Pam’s experiences with social media also reflect Gold et al.’s description of the *power* anxiety—feeling anxious about having unprecedented authority in online spaces that remove traditional power dynamics, such as in the classroom, and hold space for anyone to become the writing expert. However, she also describes moments when she used the affordances of the platform to lean into her own writing authority, again extending past Gold et al.’s explanations of these features as mere anxieties to be overcome. Magnifico notes the great impact of young writers “being seen by an audience of other members as knowledgeable participants and, eventually, as experts” (174), and Gold et al. pose these questions for teachers that acknowledge how uncomfortable this role can be for students: “How do we help [students] negotiate ethos where traditional criteria for evaluating expertise seem inadequate and where uncertainty over how to present oneself in unfamiliar rhetorical situations may forestall public engagement?”

Pam experienced the unfamiliar rhetorical situation described by Gold et al. when she first entered online discourse by writing about political topics. Initially, Pam felt passionate about engaging in political discourse. She explained, “I wanted...to like, defend what I felt to be true, especially, particularly when I think that in this current day and age, there's a lot of political ideologies out there that are causing more harm than good.” However, as she wrote and observed the writings of others, Pam witnessed the hostility of the political online writing community, and it caused her to question if she wanted to continue this direction. She asked herself, “What kind of person do I want to be online?” Ultimately, Pam reached a moment of realization she described in her 2022 interview as a “mirror put up to my face” as she recognized that she didn’t want to become like the contentious political rhetors. She noted, “I learned that that [type of rhetoric online] doesn't attract the people that you want. And that only makes you look more unattractive by approaching people that way online.”

While her comments speak to online identity reflection (Pam noticing how this type of discourse negatively influenced who she was becoming), this also shows that Pam was concerned about the rhetorical challenges facing her in that specific online imagined community and chose to leave, thus confirming Gold et al.'s findings about young writers who avoid the audience *presence*. In this case, Pam chose to remove herself altogether from those deliberative rhetoric spaces to avoid argumentative discourse and the audience that it attracts. Now, this isn’t a character judgment on Pam; online political rants are traditionally unproductive and employ hate-filled rhetoric, so it’s only natural to want to avoid them. However, it causes me to rephrase Gold et al.’s question about negotiating one’s rhetorical power as an online writer: Can there be something worthwhile in helping young writers present themselves in unfamiliar rhetorical situations so they can learn not to shy away from public engagement?



By contrast, Pam's willingness to engage as an authoritative voice actually increased when she pivoted from politics and entered the mommy blog sphere after having a child. She explained her decision to make the switch in her member check interview: "I guess my motivations were just, like, defend what I found as truth...which is largely my political, you know, beliefs aligned with family values, especially being a mom." She also admitted, "I feel a greater calling to defend religion than politics. It was one of those things where I was like, 'Yeah, I'm gonna catch more flies with honey,' I guess if that's how the saying goes." Here, Pam recognized her greater potential for rhetorical power when she shifted to a different imagined community in order to better achieve her ultimate purpose: spread uplifting content about her cherished beliefs regarding family and motherhood.

While she was excited about this new opportunity, Pam noticed as she began writing that mom pages on various social media sites can also be a high-pressure, fiercely competitive space to write within. She detected a great deal of posturing and surface-level image curation, as well as gatekeeping of certain parenting topics. In her member check interview, for example, she elaborated on topics that are considered "taboo" in the mommy blog realm: "Having a C-section, having breastfeeding issues—those are the things that people don't really talk about...I think they're taboo, because for a lot of people, it's not part of their brand, you know what I mean? Or like, they're trying to put out, I'd almost say this toxic positivity, like, 'Everything's perfect!' And so that was something I had to overcome early on." In fact, she mentioned that her experiences in this online community was partially what drew her to start writing: feeling the need to make it a more positive place for mothers. This commentary also shows Pam reflecting on the unspoken rules of the imagined community and noticing how those with authority in these spaces (i.e., influencers who exhibit "toxic positivity") reinforce those rules.

Pam's most impactful negotiation of expertise, according to her interviews, manifested itself through the post of another mother. In her member check interview, she related an experience where another woman posted some links and an inflammatory caption about the practice of circumcising male infants: "She's like, look at all these studies that have come out, and [she] said that this will cause, you know, like brain damage or emotional damage or will traumatize [the baby]." Pam went on to explain, "I went through and actually, like, tried to click through these links, and the links didn't work to these so-called studies that she had. And I was like, 'She's totally fear-mongering all these moms and she's guilting them and shaming them in their decisions that they made for their own family.'" Pam's reaction to this post illustrated how she interpreted this post as an attack on her own authority as a mother because she *did* choose to circumcise her child. She explained in her interview why she chose to respond: "I don't think I can really connect or understand why she's putting this out there if I'm not addressing [her] with more compassion. So, I tried to share my experience because my experience [with my son being circumcised] was really positive." Unfortunately, after this response, the original influencer retaliated by posting invalidating accusations about Pam as a mother. While she admitted to being angry, Pam recalled her experience with political posting and asked herself similar questions: "Do I want to be like this person? Or do I want to be better than that?" In our interview, Pam described ultimately dropping the argument and focusing her rhetoric elsewhere, noting, "Since then, I've adopted this identity of like, just having more compassion, and letting my comments be to connect with people, not to be divisive." Additionally, although her comment didn't have the desired effect on her audience, Pam left with a renewed sense of determination to continue using her purpose-driven writing for good.

To better understand this rhetorical choice, I turn to Gold et al.'s acknowledgement of a less-studied choice of "rhetorical non-response," where young writers make conscious kairotic decisions to not respond. Pam's situation seems to highlight this concept and enhances the idea by showing how this was not an avoidance out of fear but an intentional choice not to engage based on her authority in this online community. Here, Pam is negotiating different kinds of rhetorical power—the power of what she knows (knowledge about being a mother) vs. who she is (a display of moral identity—someone who doesn't attack people online). Ultimately, Pam uses this rhetorical moment of non-response to reclaim the power that means the most to her: maintaining her moral identity, which shows how identity and authority are one and the same to her. Although Pam ultimately chose to (again) avoid a rhetorical situation, as described by Gold et al., this anecdote also shows evidence that Pam is not being held back by a *power* anxiety but actually claiming her power and becoming more comfortable as an authoritative rhetor in this online space.

### **Discussion and Implications for Teaching**

Although this was a study of university students, beginning as first-year students, these findings regarding online audiences and how and why students choose to write for them can apply in the secondary English classroom as well. One key teaching implication is that students could benefit from class time spent analyzing the audiences of their nonacademic, online writing using the same critical thinking skills we consider for audiences in academic writing tasks. Additionally, students need to practice this in a space where the teacher isn't the audience member at all, but simply an objective facilitator who encourages good writing practices. The following findings and teaching implications consider what it might look like in the writing classroom when students receive support in understanding how their digital audiences inform their writing choices in nonacademic writing spaces.

*Negotiating Multiple Audiences*

Through my research, each participant demonstrated how these potential spaces for online audience anxieties (Gold et al.) also represent opportunities for student motivation. I noticed that anxieties increased when participants observed multiple audiences within an online community, but lessened when writers better understood these imagined communities and their online platforms. Ethan showed his understanding of the platform by utilizing hashtags and account tagging for his posts for his band, which increased account viewership. Casey sent out messages simultaneously meant for dentists, office staff, and occasionally the patients themselves, but her interviews suggest that it was still a great source of anxiety for her, and she wasn't always sure if she was successful. Pam reflected on how she should have explained her post about young moms in Utah more so she could be more inclusive of her other readers. This juggling of multiple audiences proved to be challenging but also motivating for these students.

In the classroom, students need chances not just to write for multiple audiences but to mindfully think about what each audience might need from their writing. If we can help students see the audience in a more complex way (Gold et al.; Reiff), it can lead to more complex thinking. Teachers could start by helping students analyze mentor texts, like an email sent out by the principal to the school community. They could list all the expected audiences for this email (parents, students, other faculty members) as well as list potentially unexpected audience members (friends or teachers from a different school, for example). Next, students could perform a close reading of the email to determine how the principal addressed or invoked each audience and how the message might be perceived by the unforeseen audience members. Using these same techniques, teachers could then give time in class for students to complete this same analysis and reflection for a sample of their own personal, online writing. To assess understanding, teachers could let the students lead out in a discussion about audience awareness

and what factors influence which audience members get addressed more, comparing and contrasting academic emails with personal posts. This activity could also spark a useful inquiry about the role of the audience in many genres of writing. Although it's worth noting that my case study participants were experienced college students reflecting on their writing after participating in a writing study for four years, Pam and Casey's interview reflections show that students are capable of considering audience-centered revision when asked the right questions about personal writing.

### *Understanding Feedback from Multiple Audiences*

In addition, each of my research participants used the live, interactive audience feature of online platforms, but they didn't always know how to rhetorically interpret and capitalize on this kind of feedback. Ethan, for example, noticed that a personal graduation post on his band's account gained the most likes of any other post, and, while he did predict possible reasons why, he didn't extend beyond that for rhetorical implications—such as considering the possibility of using personal content for future posts. In addition, Casey knew that her email recipients were more likely to read shorter promotional emails with attention-grabbing subject lines, but she didn't seem to recognize that the constraints of her email genre didn't allow her to know if her readers were even enjoying these short messages. So, although young writers are improving in platform awareness, they may not yet fully know how to interpret the nuance of audience feedback in these spaces and then make appropriate follow-up writing choices based on that feedback.

To address this gap in understanding, teachers could help students not only write for multiple audiences, but also provide opportunities for students to rhetorically analyze feedback from many readers and then learn to make subsequent thoughtful revisions based on that feedback. For example, teachers might give students chances to analyze feedback given to online

mentor texts, such as comments written about online news articles. Teachers might pose questions such as: “If you were the author of this article and had to make a response to these comments, what would you say? How might you incorporate this feedback?” Then, as another opportunity for comparison, allow time for students to analyze and interpret feedback from their own online compositions, including time to reflect on how they might respond to such feedback moving forward. Next, allow time for written reflection to questions like: “How would you compare these two exercises? How did your response to feedback change when it was about your own personal writing?” This reflection and analysis about audience feedback may help students learn just as much about themselves as writers as it can about their audience as readers, which will likely aid them in navigating feedback.

#### *Creating Confidence Through Community*

Finally, I noticed that Pam was able to overcome anxieties about negotiating writer authority in the mommy blog space and claim power on her terms when she remembered her primary motivation: to help young mothers feel seen and supported. Her commitment to the ideals of the group in which she belonged enabled her to stand up to a contentious influencer through her writing and claim her rhetorical space within the online community of young mothers. However, Pam chose to avoid altogether the community of political posters because she noticed troubling conventions from this particular community, such as constantly attacking the other political side, and she didn’t want to become more like this community. Rather than negotiate her own authority in that space (she acknowledges in her interview that she is passionate and knowledgeable about politics, so she could likely write in this space with confidence), Pam chose to remove herself. This reflects both a common fear of contention from young writers when engaging in deliberative rhetoric online, as well as a moment of “rhetorical

non-response” since Pam made a conscious choice not to engage because she didn’t believe it would lead to productive outcomes.

In class, students can strengthen their own authority as writers when they view themselves as experts in a community of writers. Teachers might consider creating a grade-wide writing unit where students pick from debatable school-related topics, and their audience becomes every student in their grade. This could simulate online communities where students frequent and have expertise, such as gamer forums or TikTok communities dedicated to sports teams. In a similar compare and contrast format, students could reflect on how their knowledge of the school topic, as well as their relationship to those in that writing community, either strengthened or lessened their confidence as writers, and then they could complete the same reflection about their roles in self-sponsored online communities. By creating opportunities for student writers to navigate challenging rhetorical situations in a collaborative space, teachers may better help them learn to overcome audience anxiety and increase their confidence as writers who can access their own rhetorical power.

## **Conclusion**

Magnifico notes, “When examined from the sociocultural perspective, communication with an audience is a central component of how expert writers learn to write” (178). Student writers best achieve the “breakthrough” moments of learning that Trimble describes when they understand the sociocultural, community dynamics of writing (*Writing with Style*), and research confirms that students are experiencing such dynamics more and more in nonacademic, online spaces (Gold et al.). While my findings confirmed the existence of audience-related factors that cause writing anxiety in online communities, as Gold et al. and Magnifico suggest, they also extended the work of others by highlighting how these same factors can become motivational for young writers. Rather than writing despite the challenges, these students *embraced* these

challenges to compose online for a variety of reasons: to promote content, spread ideas they cared about, access writer authority, and ultimately to connect with online communities. The results from these case studies also make clear that teachers can and should facilitate opportunities in the classroom for students to rhetorically consider the impact of audience on their personal online writing. As a high school teacher, I'm excited to further this research in my own classroom by encouraging students to reflect on and analyze their personal writing, particularly in online spaces, throughout the year. In fact, these teaching implications are just a few of many we can glean from examining students' digitally self-sponsored writing that will help alleviate young writer anxiety and facilitate the development of intentional, confident, community-conscious writers in *and* out of the classroom.



## Works Cited

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 2006.
- Ede, Lisa, and Andrea Lunsford. "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1984, p. 155, <https://doi.org/10.2307/358093>.
- Elbow, Peter. "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience." *College English*, vol. 49, no. 1, National Council of Teachers of English, 1987, pp. 50–69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/377789>.
- Gold, David, Jathan Day, and Adrienne E. Raw. "Who's Afraid of Facebook? A Survey of Students' Online Writing Practices." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2020, pp. 4-30. ProQuest, <https://byu.idm.oclc.org/login/?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/whos-afraid-facebook-survey-students-online/docview/2445997473/se-2>.
- Gold, David, Merideth Garcia, and Anna Knutson. "Going Public in an Age of Digital Anxiety: How Students Negotiate the Topoi of Online Writing Environments." *Composition Forum*, vol. 41, Spring 2019, <http://compositionforum.com/issue/41/going-public.php>.
- Kavoura, Androniki. "Social Media, Online Imagined Communities and Communication Research." *Library Review*, vol. 63, no. 6/7, 2014, pp. 490–504, <https://doi.org/10.1108/lr-06-2014-0076>.
- Kavoura, Androniki, and Maria Teresa Borges. "Understanding Online Communities on Social Networks via the Notion of Imagined Communities: The Case of TripAdvisor." *International Journal of Web Based Communities*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2016, p. 238, <https://doi.org/10.1504/ijwbc.2016.077759>.

- Kroll, Barry M. "Writing for Readers: Three Perspectives on Audience." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 35, no. 2, National Council of Teachers of English, 1984, pp. 172–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/358094>.
- Lindenman, Heather, and Paula Rosinski. "Writing Outside of Class: The Untapped Potential of Students' Non-Academic Writing." *Writing Program Administration*, vol. 44, no. 1, Fall 2020, pp. 17+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A665137725/AONE?u=byuprovo&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=671df609](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A665137725/AONE?u=byuprovo&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=671df609).
- Litt, Eden. "Knock, Knock. Who's There? The Imagined Audience." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2012, pp. 330–345, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2012.705195>.
- Litt, Eden, and Eszter Hargittai. "The Imagined Audience on Social Network Sites." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2016, p. 205630511663348, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116633482>.
- Long, Russell C. "Writer-Audience Relationships: Analysis or Invention?" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 31, no. 2, National Council of Teachers of English, 1980, pp. 221–26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/356377>.
- Magnifico, Alecia Marie. "Writing for Whom? Cognition, Motivation, and a Writer's Audience." *Educational Psychologist*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2010, pp. 167–184, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2010.493470>.
- Marwick, Alice E., and Danah Boyd. "I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience." *New Media & Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2010, pp. 114–133, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313>.

- Meyer, Bonnie J. "Reading Research and the Composition Teacher: The Importance of Plans." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1982, p. 37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/357843>.
- Ong, Walter J. "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction." *PMLA*, vol. 90, no. 1, Modern Language Association, 1975, pp. 9–21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/461344>.
- Park, Douglas B. "The Meanings of 'Audience.'" *College English*, vol. 44, no. 3, National Council of Teachers of English, 1982, pp. 247–57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/377012>.
- Reiff, Mary Jo. "Rereading 'Invoked' and 'Addressed' Readers Through a Social Lens: Toward a Recognition of Multiple Audiences." *JAC*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1996, pp. 407–24. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866090>.
- Rosinski, Paula. "Chapter 9. Students' Perceptions of the Transfer of Rhetorical Knowledge between Digital Self-Sponsored Writing and Academic Writing: The Importance of Authentic Contexts and Reflection." *Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer*, 2016, pp. 247–271, <https://doi.org/10.37514/per-b.2016.0797.2.09>.
- Stake, Robert E. *The Art of Case Study Research*. Sage Publications, 1995.
- Trimble, John R. *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*. Prentice Hall, 2011.
- Yin, Robert Kuo-zuir. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Sage, 1994.