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Supporting Audience Awareness in Multimodal Text Creation

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Every semester I notice students struggling to imagine real audiences for their writing. Students favor an abstract audience, and supporting them in developing **audience awareness** is often a challenge in my teaching of first-year writing. This challenge is often amplified when students consider their actual audience—me—and the feedback loop presented by my response to their writing. Not unreasonably, a student rhetorically gestures to their respondent, who is an audience of one: their writing teacher. Ironically, the near-ubiquity of virtual, digital, and multimodal text creation (especially in the continued response to COVID-19 and remote learning) creates an opportunity to imagine a more tactile, rhetorical audience for students to address. Students “learning to see an audience as situated . . . may be able to more effectively participate in disciplinary communities of practice” (Sweeney, 2018, p. 60). This assignment first draws from Meghan Sweeney’s study on interdisciplinary transfer of writing. Additionally, the assignment aims to support students in expanding their view of an audience as having different, situated, and rhetorical needs, *and* engages with metacognitive approaches to multimodal text creation, based on Sweeney’s reading of Taczak and Robertson (2017).

Following Taczak and Robertson (2017), this assignment defines metacognition as “the ability to mindfully monitor and consider why

specific choices were made in a particular writing moment, including, but not limited to the different types of knowledge(s) learned before and acquired during that particular writing moment” (pp. 215–216). The metacognitive task for students is oriented toward the audience—not just according to Sweeney’s sense of interdisciplinarity, but to readers beyond academic settings—and the rhetorical moves that might specifically appeal to those audiences using multimodal texts. To that point, this assignment defines multimodal as “how we combine multiple different ways of communicating in everyday life” (Ball et al., 2021, p. 12).

In short, the assignment asks students to consider a subject, issue, or matter that is discussed within a discourse community of their choosing. Then, they target an audience *beyond* the academy who might benefit from that knowledge and repackage (or “translate” as the assignment calls this task) the information in a multimodal text that makes specific rhetorical appeals and accessibility gestures to that audience. Getting students to think in this way, in turn, challenges teachers to respond similarly. Instructors also have a preconceived audience with their own rhetorical needs for response: our students.

Instructor response to this kind of work requires careful attention. The assignment sequence discussed below is from a first-year writing course. While issues of design, user-interface experience, and similar concepts more commonly found in upper-level technical and professional writing courses are part of the learning outcomes, the instructor’s response should guide the student toward critically analyzing rhetorical appeals and audience awareness.

I propose a project sequence that provides a thoughtful collaboration between student and instructor, one that invites audience awareness in a manner that is more readily accessible than the abstract audiences students often are writing to.

Context

This project sequence could be implemented in any first-year writing course but could be augmented for upper-level professional/technical writing courses or, with the right changes, for secondary school English and writing courses. Regardless of level, this assignment works best in the second half of a term, when students have had the chance to engage with some of the more complex concepts of the assignment.

Learning Outcomes/Goals

- Students will engage in close reading of a journal article from a peer-reviewed scholarly publication.
- Students will engage in thoughtful reflection on and application of concepts like discourse community, rhetorical analysis, and audience awareness.
- Students will devise and develop a multimodal text.
- Students will compose, review, and revise a thoughtful, first-person process narrative.
- Students will engage in thoughtful reflection on and application of concepts such as the rhetorical appeals, the rhetorical triangle, and the rhetorical situation.
- Students will engage in thoughtful reflection on and application of concepts of visual rhetoric.

Format

This teaching practice is suitable for online, hybrid, and face-to-face instruction, though it has only been tested in a face-to-face writing course.

Teacher Preparation

Teachers should have an awareness of the following questions before implementing this assignment:

- What is your level of experience with digital composing tools? How can you support students in using them?

- What technology resources are available in your classroom? in the campus library? Do your students have access to the tools necessary to undertake this project?
- What will your responses to and engagement with brainstorming look like?
- What will your responses to and engagement with digital texts look like? How will you assess creative work within your courses' grading paradigm?
- What are your students' expectations for your responses to their drafts and texts-in-progress? Is this project compatible with those expectations?

Advanced digital technologies are not necessary when addressing issues of audience awareness; however, instructors should augment the multimedia/multimodal aspects of the assignment accordingly based on students' and their own access to and proficiencies with digital composition tools (e.g., my institution has classroom laptops for all students as well as tablets students can check out from the library).

Estimated Time

From start to finish, this activity will last approximately 2 weeks, including in-class workshop sessions and presentation dates (in my case, three 50-minute class sessions per week). Time spent introducing multimodal composition techniques and elements of visual design as supported by readings and scaffolded activities may vary.

Procedure

The metacognitive response element of this project sequence is for students to respond to academic writing by conveying its meaning by *augmenting*, not altering, the argument; students are also responding to their intended audiences in the content of their "translation" as well as the design methods and communication strategies they select for their text.

Finally, they are responding to themselves in the final rhetorical analysis of the “translated” text they create.

Instructor response to this writing and intellectual activity can be challenging; first-year writing courses are less concerned with design, user interface, and similar topics that might otherwise be found in a technical and professional writing course. When developing classroom norms and expectations, it is important to consider how instructors will respond and how it will affect the overall process. In my implementation of this project sequence, students do a check-in during the drafting process so that the instructor and the student can evaluate requirements, respond to feedback, and discuss support.

See Appendix A for the full assignment text. A suggested outline for the project sequence is as follows:

1. Using texts familiar to the instructor, introduce concepts of audience awareness, rhetorical analysis, and multimodality as well as elements of visual design (see Appendix B for recommended readings to assign students).
2. Determine if students will be working independently or in groups.
3. Facilitate brainstorming sessions with individuals and groups to select academic texts to translate.
4. Solicit a written check-in from project groups.
5. Schedule presentations.
6. Workshop or peer review process summaries and rhetorical analyses.
7. Provide written and oral feedback on drafts, both generative and summative.

Caveats and Alternatives

As this project sequence is heavily reliant on technology and access to digital composition tools, the classroom/institution/learning environment will need to be properly equipped for students to access necessary tools. An

alternative would be to de-emphasize the digital components of multimodal composing in favor of collaboration with visual arts instructors/students.

Similarly, instructors who are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with digital composing tools or visual design in first-year writing courses might seek additional support and resources in how these activities are scaffolded.

As this project sequence is a final project for a course, some of the core concepts are built on a semester's worth of context. Adopting the project early in the semester with a lower stakes grading scheme could be a playful way to introduce the concepts that this draft is meant to assess in summation.

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Appendix A

Assignment Text: Audience Translation, Analysis, and Reflection

We've discussed writing for the World, for School, and for You this semester. We've read, reviewed, and written a variety of genres, including summaries, op-ed pieces, academic journal articles, rhetorical analyses, and a variety of pop culture artifacts. We've talked about multimodality and considered how our audience and intended outcomes dictate the way we approach, compose, and present whatever it is we are trying to communicate.

In short, the concepts of rhetoric are everywhere, and their applications to writing and communication are endless. Since we'll be doing a lot of writing as we continue our journeys in college, and out in the world, let's try to bring it all together for a final project in two parts.

Part One: Project 4A—Audience Translation

Think of some of the topics you've encountered in the academic journal articles you read while writing Literature Reviews or Summaries. I'd bet my extra copy of *Twister* that you read about a topic or issue that is important; I'd bet you read something that would be useful to a reader, or an entire audience, who could hugely benefit from the information that is difficult to read and even more difficult to access. In this sense, Writing for School can lack the kind of openness and empathy that is one of many core tenants of the liberal arts education. So, what do we do?

For your Audience Translation, think of an issue that is important to you. It can be something you've written about previously, or something different.

1. First, select a scholarly peer-reviewed article from an academic journal using the school library resources that discuss the issue you have chosen. The article must have been published within the last seven years.
2. Next, think of a specific audience that might benefit from the conclusions drawn in that article. Think about what

that audience needs to better understand or receive that information.

3. Then, translate the text of the scholarly peer-reviewed academic journal article into a usable text that is **multimodal** in order to better appeal to that audience. For example, if we imagine an academic journal article from health sciences discussing insulin for elderly diabetic patients, we might think of a large-print pamphlet, or an infomercial with captions that better convey less-jargony language in a more usable format for the intended audience.

Your first job is to read a difficult text at an advanced level. Use your own rhetorical analysis strategies to determine the author's purpose and intended audience (going beyond the audience of academic peers). You'll have to recall what Melzer (2020) says about *discourse community* to further penetrate the barriers of access, and you'll need to perform your own audience analysis and think of what methods of rhetorical appeal (Carroll, 2010; Faigley, 2017) and what modes of communication (Gaigach, 2017) are most effective. Then you'll have to get creative and actually make something.

To be even more direct: you are taking writing for School and translating it for the World.

Project 4A Requirements

- Selection of an appropriate peer-reviewed article from an academic journal that is no more than seven years old
- Thoughtful reflection on and application of concepts including discourse community, rhetorical analysis, and audience awareness
- The development of a multimodal text that has *at least* two modes of communicating (visual, aural, gestural, spatial)
- A well-planned and rehearsed presentation of your multimodal text to the class

As each group or individual will take on different projects, length requirements will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Part Two: Project 4B—Process and Rhetorical Analysis Summaries

However noble our aims to address the World from our vantage point at School may be, we must also synthesize our abilities to write for ourselves. In the second part of Project Two, you'll write two distinct summaries for closure: a process summary or narrative explaining what you did and why you did it in Project 4A and a rhetorical analysis that summarizes the deep thinking that motivated your response to the exigence of the selected topic or issue.

These summaries are due two weeks after your presentations, so be sure to take extensive notes throughout the duration of the project!

Project 4B—Process Summary Requirements

A first-person narrative of how you/your group:

- Selected the topic and article
- Engaged with the intended audience
- Brainstormed and developed the multimodal text
- Planned the presentation
- Thoughtfully revised and free of careless errors
- Typed in 12-point Times New Roman font with regular margins
- 2–3 full double-spaced pages

Project 4B—Rhetorical Analysis Summary Requirements

- Thoughtful reflection on and application of concepts including rhetorical appeals, the rhetorical triangle, and the rhetorical situation (Boyd, 2011; Carroll, 2010; Faigley, 2017)

- Discussion of audience awareness and exigence specifically (going beyond the obvious assignment)
- Thoughtful reflection on and application of concepts of visual rhetoric, including a specific discussion of the visual elements of design/style from Cohn (2020)
- Typed in 12-point Times New Roman font with regular margins
- 2–4 double-spaced pages

This assignment is described as two separate parts, but as long as you fulfill the minimum requirements of each, you may choose to compose this as a single four- to seven-page document.

Appendix B

Recommended Texts for Supporting Instruction of Concepts

These articles all come from open-source textbooks I have used in first-year writing courses, both in support of students' learning toward the broader goals of FYW courses and in the specific scaffolding of this project. There are many similar resources available that engage with the core concepts of this project—audience awareness, rhetorical analysis, multimodality, visual analysis and design, and discourse community—and instructors are encouraged to consider these readings as suggestions for their own use, as opposed to the definitive student-facing writing on these subjects.

- Rhetorical analysis: Caroll (2010). This article presents a basic overview of rhetorical analysis, the rhetorical situation, and rhetorical appeals in an approachable fashion. It could anchor a more substantial discussion on rhetoric and its applications for analysis, reading, and writing, or provide a foundation for engaging with the later concepts in this project sequence.
- Elements of visual design: Cohn (2020). This article introduces basic concepts of visual analysis and provides several excellent in-class activities to aid the instruction of the elements of visual design, including *line*, *color*, *shape*, *size*, *space*, *value*, and *texture*, all of which students at least need to be aware of in their compositions for this project.
- Multimodality: Gagich (2017). This brief reference entry comes from an open-source textbook and defines multimodality and serves as an accessible foundation students can build upon to understand texts in multimodal ways.
- Discourse communities: Melzer (2020). Similarly definitional, this article offers a detailed but approachable understanding of *discourse communities*, including John Swales's linguistic aspects of discourse communities, and provides a

map for how students can understand their academic lives as organized into various discourse communities. For this project sequence, Melzer expands the ideas of specific rhetorical needs for specific audiences.

- Audience awareness: Moxley (n.d.). This brief reference entry defines *audience* and *audience awareness*, providing a foundation for students to begin engaging with the abstract issues of addressing audiences' needs in their multimodal text creation.