Writing for an Audience

Inquire: The Right Audience is Everything

Overview

When the 2018 movie *Peter Rabbit* came out, children flocked to theaters with their parents in tow. During the previews that play before the movie, however, one theater in Perth, Australia accidentally played the trailer for an R-rated horror film, leaving the children terrified and their parents upset. Normally, movie theaters will play trailers for movies that are similar to the feature presentation. This mix up was simply a matter of showing the wrong trailer for the wrong audience.

Movie theaters know that an audience that pays for a children’s movie once is likely to do it again. They also know that an audience that pays for a children’s movie is unlikely to want to see a horror movie. To advertise to the wrong audience is simply a waste of resources.

Essay writing is very similar. A good essay will identify its audience and cater its content to that specific audience.

Big Question: How can understanding my audience help me write a more effective essay?

Watch: The Importance of the Audience

Have you ever felt completely lost as you listened to someone talk about something you have never heard of? Maybe the speaker used words you didn’t know. Maybe they spoke too quickly for you to keep up, or maybe they assumed you had background knowledge that you did not have. This happens all too often when people don’t give consideration to the audience to whom they are speaking.

Sometimes, when we write essays, we don’t give consideration to our audience. Without people to read them, essays would serve no purpose. As you write an essay, it is important to identify for whom you are writing. After you’ve done this, you need to learn a little about your audience.

What type of language is most likely to appeal to them? How much background knowledge do they have? What are their values and beliefs? How do they feel about my topic? How do they feel about me?

The answers to these questions should guide the way you write any essay. If you spend too much time explaining background information to a person who is already an expert, they might become annoyed and
give up on your essay. In contrast, if you are writing for a person who is completely new to your topic, you will need to provide a lot of background information, or they will not grasp your topic.

In addition to identifying and writing for your audience, you should also appeal to your audience. According to Aristotle, this can be accomplished in three ways:

Through appeals to your credibility and expertise as a speaker, or appeals to ethos.
Through appeals to their emotions, or appeals to pathos.
Through appeals to their logic, or appeals to logos.

These three kinds of appeals ensure that your audience pays attention to your message. Appealing to your audience through ethos, pathos, or logos can help you accomplish the purpose of your essay. These appeals will help make sure that your audience trusts you and that they feel persuaded by what you write.

Read: Know Your Audience

Overview
Knowing your audience is one of the first steps in writing an effective essay. Your audience’s values and needs should impact almost every element of your writing, from your language and tone to your structure and content. Knowing and writing for your audience is fundamental to accomplishing your goals.

Identifying Your Audience
As you sit down to write an essay, you must first ask for whom you are writing. For people enrolled in composition courses, this task seems easy: essays are written for a teacher. This, however, is what is called an inauthentic audience. An inauthentic audience is one that is contrived and not representative of the real world. Essays are rarely written for one person whose main interest is how well you execute the form, even though that’s how we usually write essays in composition classes.

What you need to identify is the authentic audience for your essay. If you weren’t producing the essay in a class setting, for whom would you be writing? This is your authentic audience. You can identify this audience by asking a few questions. Which people are impacted most by your topic? Which audience needs to hear your message the most?

Once you have identified your authentic audience, you can begin writing an essay that is tailored to the needs of that specific audience.

Considering Your Audience’s Level
One of the simplest things you can do to consider your audience’s needs is to consider at what level you should write your essay. We naturally make these considerations all the time when we speak. Whether we realize it or not, we use different words, expressions, and language when we speak to different audiences. More than likely, you will talk to your parents about difficulties at work using different words and expressions than you would use if you were talking to your boss about those same issues. Furthermore, you would change your language even more if you were to discuss your job with a child.

Similarly, if you’re talking to someone who knows nothing about your topic, you should use simple words and define technical terminology. If you know, however, that your audience is knowledgeable about your subject, you can use more complex language and spend less time defining terminology.
In addition, you should also consider whether your language should be formal or informal. **Formal language** is language that is elevated, and it is most often used when the written text is produced for a professional or academic audience. Formal language does not use slang or contractions.

By contrast, **informal language** is the kind of language we most often use in social interactions such as slang, contractions, or simple word choice. Depending on the purpose of your essay and the audience for whom you are writing, you might rely on informal language in order to establish yourself as an equal to your audience or to make your text accessible to a wider audience.

You’ll notice that these lessons move in and out of informal language. The writing is generally easy to understand and employs contractions. That’s because the goal of this text is to reach a wide audience without scaring anyone away.

**Considering Your Audience’s Background Knowledge**

While your audience’s familiarity with your topic will lead you to adjust your language, it will also require you to adjust the content of your essay to meet their needs. If your audience has no familiarity with your topic, you will have to spend more time introducing them to important background information and concepts that are central to your topic.

This can be difficult, especially if you are very familiar with your topic. It’s important to remember what it is like to be completely new to your subject. You need to meet your audience where they are.

You may also need to adjust your essay’s content for other reasons. Maybe your audience is knowledgeable on the topic, but they disagree with you. In this case, you will need to be especially vigilant that you acknowledge their expertise and that you are thorough in the arguments you make. Additionally, you will likely need to be careful to support your claims with evidence and research, and you will need to be sure that the sources you use are reliable and trustworthy.

**Considering Your Audience’s Values and Beliefs**

Your audience’s values and beliefs are central to how they will interpret your essay. If you fail to consider and acknowledge how they feel about a subject, you risk the reader giving up on your essay before the end of the introductory paragraph.

Consider that you are deeply conservative and are writing for a deeply liberal audience about the topic of immigration. You can already anticipate that your audience will disagree with much of what you have to say. Your purpose in writing, however, is to convince your reader to consider what you have to say. Your audience will be very unwilling to consider your position if they feel you have not taken the time to consider their own.

When you write for a **resistant audience** — that is, an audience that disagrees with you or challenges you — you will need to spend more time acknowledging and responding to their point of view. Additionally, you will need to include reliable and trustworthy evidence that supports your position.

**Reflect Poll: What Appeals to You?**

Which audience-based appeal do you think would be most effective for you?

- An appeal based on ethos, or the writer’s credibility
Expand: Appealing to Your Audience

Overview

In rhetorical writing, it is important to do more than just consider your audience. You should also appeal specifically to their needs, values, beliefs, and emotions. Aristotle first discussed the ways to appeal to an audience in his book, *The Art of Rhetoric*. This can be accomplished through **ethos**, **pathos**, and **logos**. These are means of persuading others to believe a particular point of view. They are often used in speech writing and advertising to sway the audience.

**Ethos: Establish Your Credibility and Authority as a Writer**

Ethos refers to your credibility and authority as a writer, or how you present yourself to an audience. Depending on your audience, you might change your ethos. Do you want to be viewed as an expert academic, or do you want to be viewed as a casual friend? This will depend on your audience and your purpose.

In writing a cover letter, for example, you want to come across as a professional with work experience that is relevant to your desired employer. You will likely present yourself in this way by using language that shows your expertise.

On a campaign stop, Barack Obama — then a presidential candidate — famously asked the people of Adel, Iowa if they had been to Whole Foods recently and seen the price of arugula. At the time, there was no Whole Foods in all of Iowa. In his attempt to cast himself as relatable to an audience of farmers, Obama’s reference to Whole Foods — largely considered pretentious by his audience — made his message fall flat. His overall point was lost in the mockery that followed.

This example shows the importance of knowing your audience and using examples that appeal specifically to them. If you fail to do this, you run the risk of losing your credibility and being regarded as insincere or incompetent.

**Pathos: Appeal to the Emotions of Your Audience**

Pathos refers to the emotions of your audience. Aristotle famously felt that this was the weakest type of appeal, hence our use of the word “pathetic,” but it is undeniable that emotional appeals can be effective in rhetorical writing.

Take for example, the infomercials that run on TV after midnight. Images of sad, lonely puppies flash across the screen to the tune of Sarah McLachlan’s “Angel.” It’s almost impossible to watch this commercial without feeling a pang of sadness and an overwhelming desire to *do something to help*. This is a near perfect example of an appeal to pathos.

The commercial is almost always run in the early hours of the morning, when audiences are tired, alone, and emotionally vulnerable. The images evoke feelings of guilt that the viewer hasn’t done anything to help.
This is the power of pathos. If you can find a way to tap into your audience’s emotions, you can appeal to those emotions in order to persuade your audience to take action.

Logos: Use Logic

The final way to appeal to an audience is through logos, or the logic and structure of a text. Logos is a way of persuading an audience with reason, using facts, figures, statistics, and logical organization. If you want to fully persuade an audience, you will need to appeal to their logical side.

Even the commercial referenced above appeals to the logic of its viewers by outlining the number of animals that suffer each day. While the reference to helpless creatures suffering might appeal to the audience’s pathos, the use of statistics can appeal to the audience’s logos by showing them in numerical terms how their contribution can save an animal.

While logos is its own appeal, it can help add to the credibility of your ethos. Using reliable facts and statistics shows that you have given thought to your topic and that you have some expertise or experience with the subject matter.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A page providing additional information about appeals to ethos
- Link to resource: https://writingcommons.org/open-text/information-literacy/rhetorical-analysis/rhetorical-appeals/58-ethos

A page providing additional information about appeals to pathos
- Link to resource: https://writingcommons.org/open-text/information-literacy/rhetorical-analysis/rhetorical-appeals/59-1-pathos

A page providing additional information about appeals to logos
- Link to resource: https://writingcommons.org/open-text/information-literacy/rhetorical-analysis/rhetorical-appeals/59-3-logos

A quick video giving a visual explanation of logos, ethos, and pathos
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oUfOh_CgHQ

Lesson Glossary

inauthentic audience: a contrived or ingenuine audience

authentic audience: the audience for whom an essay is written

formal language: language that is elevated; most often used when the written text is produced for a professional or academic audience

informal language: language that is unelevated; most often used in casual interactions; it often employs contractions, slang, and simple word choice
resistant audience: an audience who disagrees with you and who will therefore require additional supporting evidence and persuasion
ethos: refers to the speaker of a text; ultimately, ethos means the identity, persona, and credibility of a speaker or writer
pathos: refers to the audience of a text; appeals to pathos are appeals to the emotions and core beliefs of a text’s audience
logos: refers to the logic and structure of a text; appeals to logos are appeals to the audience’s reasoning

Check Your Knowledge

1. Ethos, pathos, and logos are methods of appealing to your audience.
   a. True  
   b. False

2. Which kind of appeal is an appeal to your credibility as a speaker?
   a. kairos  
   b. ethos  
   c. pathos  
   d. logos

3. A resistant audience will likely require more evidence to persuade them.
   a. True  
   b. False

Answer Key: 
1. A  2. B  3. A

Citations

Lesson Content: 
Authored and curated by Cady Jackson and Rob Reynolds Ph. D. for The TEL Library. CC BY NC SA 4.0