Essay Writer as Speaker

Inquire: Establishing Credibility in Your Writing

Overview

In essay writing, the way you present yourself to your audience can go a long way in gaining the reader’s trust. It’s important to convince the audience that you are a credible source. This means establishing your expertise with the audience and using a voice and language that connects with the audience.

Big Question: How can I establish my credibility and connect with my readers?

Watch: Constructing Credibility and Connecting with the Reader

When you go to a job interview, how do you prepare? Do you buy a new outfit? Or, do you perhaps iron your most professional clothes? Do you research the company and try to prepare as best you can? It’s safe to assume that, if you really want the job, you’re going to put your best foot forward. You will probably work hard to show your future employer that you are a reliable, trustworthy, and enjoyable person.

As you write an essay, you should do something very similar. Essentially, it’s worth thinking of every essay like a job interview. Your reader will decide within the first few minutes whether they feel like you are someone they can trust with their time. By taking your time to consider the kind of ethos, or persona, you want to construct, you can work to make sure that your reader views you as reliable, trustworthy, and enjoyable.

In order to do this, you will have to put some thought into your audience’s values and needs. Do they want an expert who uses field-specific language and jargon? Or, do they want someone who is relatable, uses easy-to-understand words and phrases, and provides definitions? Do they want someone who is funny and entertaining, or someone who treats the subject with seriousness and respect?

You can meet your audience’s needs by changing a few features of your persona as a writer:

- You can change your language and tone.
- You can change your personality and voice.
- You can appeal to your own credibility or the credibility of reliable research.

By taking the time to answer these questions before you begin writing, you can make sure that your reader will take the time to read your essay. As one of the three elements of the rhetorical triangle, the ethos you present as a speaker is vitally important to the success of your essay.
As you move toward writing your own essays, it's worth considering: what kind of writers do you like to read? What kind of writers lead you to give up on an essay within the first few sentences?

Read: Finding Yourself as a Writer

Overview

In writing, it’s confusing that the writer of an essay is often referred to as its speaker. This is mostly because the roots of rhetorical analysis are in speech, not text. Whether it’s in a speech or in an essay, it is important to think about how you’re presenting yourself to your audience. Your credibility, presentation, and effective appeal to your audience will mark the difference between a successful or unsuccessful essay.

Credibility/Expertise

One of the first ways your audience will evaluate you as a speaker is based on your credibility or your expertise as a speaker. Consider how much more you would trust a doctor if you knew how long they had been practicing, how much experience they had with your specific needs, and how often they kept up with new developments in medicine and science. By contrast, imagine the nervousness you might feel if it were your doctor’s first day on the job.

There are, of course, things the new doctor could do to help build your confidence in him or her. In all likelihood, though, your initial reaction would be slight concern. The doctor would need to earn your trust in other ways.

When you write an essay, you are in a similar situation. If you can write about a topic in which you are an expert, that is fortunate. Your credentials and expertise will go a long way in gaining the trust of your audience. Sometimes, though, the essay writing process is a way that we, as writers, learn about a topic. In this case, you need to establish your credibility by referencing actual experts from the field and showing an effort to treat your subject matter with care and respect. Citing reliable evidence can show that you are a credible writer and that you respect your reader’s time.

Language

Another important aspect of how you portray yourself as a speaker is the kind of language you use. Will you decide to use formal or informal language? Will you use language that is technical and specific to your field, or will you try to explain things more simply?

Language is where we see the interconnection between your credibility as a writer and your appeal to your audience. Before you can make a decision about the kind of language you should use to earn the trust of your audience, make an assessment about your audience’s needs and values. Are they new to your topic? If so, use simpler language. Are they experts? If so, make sure not to talk down to them by using simple word choice. Do they value an expert in the field, or would they prefer to hear from someone who talks on their level? The answers to these questions can help you make a decision about what kind of ethos you should present to your audience.
Personality/Voice

Finally, when building your credibility for an essay, you need to decide what kind of personality you want to project. What is the best personality or voice for connecting with your audience and convincing them to listen to you?

This aspect of credibility-building can cause problems for writers. For example, many writers like to inject personality into their writing by using humor. Humor, however, is subjective. A funny joke to you might not play out with the audience for whom you're writing. You'll notice, again, that it is important to consider what your audience would like from you.

Voice also includes the types of examples you use. Do you want to reference popular culture, or would that push your audience away?

Becoming a Credible Writer for Your Audience

It may seem like a lot of work to change how you present yourself for each audience, and it is. Overall, though, it is an important concept to consider as you write essays. Audiences constantly make judgements about the content they hear, watch, and read. They might decide that the content is too childish, too technical, or too condescending for them to enjoy.

We do this in casual and subconscious ways all the time. Take, for example, the fact that some Americans are more likely to view those with southern accents as being dimwitted. A person may have a PhD, but if they have a southern drawl, studies show people are likely to underestimate their intelligence, simply because they use words and phrases like y'all and fixin' to.

You might also dismiss someone’s intelligence if the jokes they make are childish.

The same thing happens in writing; the expertise, language, and personality of your writing lead your audience to make snap judgements about you that can be difficult to overcome. It is for this reason that you must consider these elements before you sit down to write an essay.

Reflect Poll: What Appeals to You as a Reader?

What kind of writer is most likely to cause you to stop reading?

- an untrustworthy writer
- an unentertaining writer
- a difficult to understand writer
- a writer who oversimplifies a topic

Expand: Using Image and Voice to Appeal in Advertising

Overview

Advertising and media appeal to us continually in our everyday lives, particularly through visual rhetoric. Media and advertisements employ all forms of rhetorical appeals in order to convince consumers to buy their products. In visual rhetoric, companies take great care to present themselves in a way that will connect effectively with their audience.
Presenting an Image and Voice that Appeal

Every day, we encounter people and businesses who present themselves in a certain way to appeal to us as consumers. Frequently, we encounter these attempts in the media. Consider, for example, the difference between commercials for women’s products and men’s products.

If you have a brand of soap that sells one product line for women and one product line for men, they are likely to use different fonts, images, and actors to sell those products. More often, commercials for women will include light, bright colors and cursive fonts. The company will present itself as well-versed in the concerns of women.

The same company when selling a men’s product line, however, will likely use darker colors historically associated with masculinity. It may also use more serious block fonts, and the content of the commercials will work to present the company as a provider of masculine products that enhance the pleasure of the user.

Credibility and Context

As outlined above with the male audience/female audience example, the image one constructs is entirely dependent on the audience for whom the text is created. Additionally, the context in which a text is published can have a profound impact on what kind of credibility and image the speaker needs to project.

The change in cigarette advertisements over time shows just how deeply context can impact a speaker’s credibility. In the 1930s and 1940s, several studies began to link concerns about lung cancer with the growing popularity of cigarettes. As the public began to latch on to these concerns, cigarette companies needed to establish greater credibility with their audiences.

As lung cancer studies became more and more prevalent, cigarette companies began including doctor testimonies in their advertisements.

In this advertisement for Riverhead Gold tobacco, the company claims that the product contains “less nicotine,” and is “therefore healthier.” The use of the word therefore signals a conclusion to be drawn from the first half of the sentence. While there is clearly no study cited (and modern laws would prevent this kind of advertising), you can see that Riverhead Gold wanted to retain its customer base by claiming that the product “protects heart nerves” and offers “no cough.”

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A Purdue Owl source giving detailed information on visual rhetoric
- Link to resource: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/visual_rhetoric/visual_rhetoric/index.html

An image providing material to analyze from a visual rhetoric perspective
- Link to resource: https://repository.duke.edu/dc/adaccess/BH0913

A site providing additional detail about the celebrity used in the Philip Morris ad referenced above, providing more content for analyzing visual rhetoric
Lesson Glossary

ethos: your credibility and authority as a writer; how you present yourself to an audience

visual rhetoric: rhetorical appeals made through visuals, such as print or commercial advertisements

Check Your Knowledge

1. Visual rhetoric can include things like font and color schemes.
   a. True
   b. False
2. If you are not an expert on a topic, you should not write about it, because you are not credible.
   a. True
   b. False
3. Sometimes, factors outside of our control, like accents, impact how our audience views our credibility.
   a. True
   b. False

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

Citations

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