

THE IMPORTANCE OF AUDIENCE AND RESPONSE IN WRITING

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There are lots of good ways to map the universe of writing: by genres (e.g., poetry, fiction, nonfiction); by modes (e.g., narration, description, argument); by elements in the writing process (e.g., generating, revising, copy-editing); by parts of rhetoric (e.g., invention, arrangement, style); by purposes (e.g., persuading, informing, entertaining); or even by topics or themes (e.g., science writing, religious writing, technical writing). However we do it, I see a useful theme: writing is not just one thing or activity or experience. Writing poetry does not feel like writing nonfiction prose--nor freewriting like revising, nor science writing like diary writing.

But I find it most helpful to map the universe of writing in terms of *audience* and *response*. Audience and response are the most "writerly" dimensions of writing, and the most important for teaching. I have come to use the following map or model of audiences and responses as the foundation of my teaching and my thinking about the writing process. The four horizontal dimensions indicate four *kinds of audience* we write for. The three vertical dimensions indicate three *kinds of response* those readers might give.

	SHARING, BUT NO RESPONSE	RESPONSE, BUT NO CRITICISM OR EVALUATION	CRITICISM OR EVALUATION
<i>Audience with authority, e.g., teachers, editors, employers</i>	□	□	□
<i>Audience of peers</i>	□	□	□
<i>Audience of allies</i>	□	□	□
<i>Audience of self: private writing</i>	□	□	□

The twelve boxes indicate the twelve intersections between audience and response: twelve sites of writing. Just as our experience is likely to be different depending on whether we are generating or revising, or writing poetry or writing prose nonfiction, so too our experience is likely to be different depending on whether we are writing for a teacher or for a friend or for ourself alone; or whether we are expecting criticism or just an appreciative hearing.*

From this analysis, I draw the following conclusion: As writers we prosper most if we have a wide writing experience--experience with all four audiences and all three kinds of response. Yet many students have given their writing *only* to teachers and gotten *only* evaluative responses. No wonder they have such a hard time writing and sometimes write so oddly. If students do a lot of emailing, that adds only one or two more sites--and many students don't experience email as "writing." If teachers ask for peer feedback, it is usually evaluative, so that adds just one site. If teachers ask for freewriting or journal writing, that adds another site--except that it doesn't in the case of so many teachers who *collect* freewriting and journals, sometimes even putting a few evaluative comments on them.

Notice the contrast with *speaking*. From the earliest age we have spoken to all four audiences (lots of self-talk by babies), and we often get no evaluative response--sometimes no response at all, just listening. We speak in all contexts, but writing is something most people learn only in school.

Because of this analysis I now try to plan my teaching so that students experience all the sites of writing. And I have become a cheerleader for what is most neglected: the bottom and left hand sides of the map, that is, audience of self and ally; and sharing with no response.

FOUR KINDS OF AUDIENCE

Readers with authority. When students write only to teachers they often come to experience writing not as communicating to people but as performing for a grade--an exercise in being judged or trying to get approval.

Peer readers. When students write to peer readers they get a sense of writing as it more commonly functions in the world: trying to interest others in what's on your mind.

Ally readers. An ally reader is someone cares more about the writer than the writing; who can see that we are smart even when we write something stupid; who can see that we are good even when we write something bad. If this sounds too odd, notice how most teachers naturally function as ally reader now and then when a student writes something very private and vulnerable, perhaps being in some deep difficulty: we instinctively realize that it's more important to try to help the student than the student's writing. (It's easier to read as ally when we don't have to grade.) Ally readers have been crucial for me. Interestingly, something useful happens to the writing when the writing is not the main thing. I don't think that students and other potential writers learn to be brave and direct in exploring some of their most important views--or using their own language or voice--unless they have the experience of ally readers.

Having noticed the importance of ally readers, I now invite friends to work together in pairs for peer sharing and responding. I've redefined the goal for peer work: not, "How can I get students into pairs and groups so they'll stay 'on task' and not schmooze about baseball or parties?" but rather, "How can I get students who schmooze as friends *also* to share their writing and help each other on it?" Of course I also get students to work with peers who are not friends: I often use groups of four by joining pairs together.

Audience of self: private writing. Private writing vastly increases the *amount* of writing that we can require of students. We don't have to see it. Students seldom improve much unless they write a great deal--more than we can read and respond to. Private writing helps students develop a sense of ownership and control over their writing and to turn off a mentality that permeates the experience of writing for many of them: thinking about mistakes, faults, and weaknesses. Not having to think about mistakes, they can become fluent and feel writing as comfortable and natural. Thus private writing often helps students develop stronger voices in writing--helps them take chances and try out different identities or attitudes instead of always feeling writing as a matter of having to please others.

In addition, private writing helps students with a crucial cognitive and academic ability: to pursue a train of thinking all by oneself. Unless adolescents learn the important intellectual skill of having conversations with themselves, they are completely dependent on peers for discourse and thinking. They can't pursue a train of thought or a set of feelings unless they have friends who are interested and sympathetic.

Teachers get students to do private writing in various ways: by requiring journal writing and checking it regularly but not reading it; by getting the whole class writing (at the beginning, middle or end of the hour) about some important issue up for discussion; and by requiring private exploratory drafts and process writing about one's own writing process.

THREE KINDS OF RESPONSE

Criticism or evaluation. When this is the only response students get, it often leads to problems. But if students get plenty of the other two kinds of response (and write to various audiences), then evaluative feedback is natural and useful.

Response but no criticism or evaluation. Many teachers and students don't know how to respond to a piece of writing except by giving criticism or evaluation. But it is easy to learn to answer a rich array of helpful, nonevaluative questions like these: "What does the paper say? What is the writer's point of view or stance? What is almost stated: thoughts, feelings, and assumptions--what is implied or hovering around the edges? How does the paper ask me to see the world? What kind of voice do I hear in the writing (e.g., hesitant, proud)--or how does the writer seem to relate to the reader? Describe the organizational structure. Describe all the genre and rhetorical features." One of the most useful nonevaluative responses is for readers simply to tell *their* views about the topic of the paper. Even if we disagree violently with a paper, this does not imply a negative judgment, since we often disagree with papers we think are excellent and agree with papers we think are terrible. It is a mark of respect to students to take *what* they say seriously enough to tell our thoughts about the topic--instead of just making meta-comments about how well students told their thoughts. Surely, the response that makes us want to continue to write is probably not so much mere praise as *being understood*. Students are often bored and scornful when teachers just give them A's but don't really take their ideas seriously.

Sharing but no response. There is a pleasing benefit that comes from sharing our writing, being heard, but not having to deal with any response. Sharing is what "publication" means: the words go out to readers for the sake of communication--not for the sake eliciting feedback. Sharing or publication enhances the social dimension of writing--something that is often neglected in school writing. We can share our writing on paper, but the greatest learning comes from reading our own words aloud. We can feel it in our mouth when a passage doesn't work (often correcting it on the spot with our feel for live syntax), but no one had to tell us that there was a problem. We can also *hear* problems in ours or someone else's writing--and also feel it and hear it when words work well. It's all learning and no teaching. Many writers testify that the primary organs for writing are the mouth and the ear.

At first it feels peculiar in a school setting for students to share their writing with the teacher or with other students but get no feedback at all. A question usually hovers in everyone's mind: "But how was it?" It helps to use a ritual: listeners always say "thank you" when the reader is finished (and I scrawl "thanks" at the bottom of assignments that are for me to read but not comment on). Actually most writing in the world gets no response: people write newspaper stories, memos, reports, poems, novels--teachers write reams of responses and letters of recommendation--and readers *just read it* without giving any feedback to the author. Sharing with no response can quickly become natural and satisfying in the classroom.

Examples: getting students to read a sketch or exploratory draft--just to "see how it sounds"; using the first ten minutes of class for students to read in pairs or small groups the pieces they wrote for homework about the reading or previous lecture material (a practice which enormously improves the discussion); having a celebratory reading of finished work--for pleasure and learning; class publications.

THE SHAPE OF TEACHING: SOME USEFUL PROGRESSIONS

Notice the progressions implied in my map--from left to right and lower to upper:

- From safety to risk. Students need low-stakes writing (for self and for ally--and getting no response) in addition to high-stakes writing. The earlier audience and response relationships tend to make students *enjoy* writing more and feel it as more natural.

- Writing for self and ally makes students readier to give to peers and teacher. From easier to more difficult--each one paving the way for the next. Sharing but getting no response improves peer response by giving students practice in reading their writing out loud and hearing that of others; but no worries about hearing or giving responses. Nonevaluative response helps peer feedback by giving students practice in responding and hearing responses; but no worries about criticizing or being criticized.

- From activities that require little teacher time and skill to those that require the most. Private writing takes little or no class time and requires no teacher reading time. Sharing without response takes little class time and not much teacher reading time. It's a remarkable and positive experience to read student writing when it's understood that you will just read: you can read for pleasure and they can write just to say what's on their mind. And yet private writing and sharing cause *striking* improvements in student writing: increased fluency and liveliness of voice and thinking--all learning and no teaching. Most of all, private and shared writing vastly increase the *amount* of writing that we can ask of students. No one learns writing well unless they do a great deal of it--much more than we can read and respond to.

So this map gives a shape to my teaching. I introduce the kinds or experiences of writing more or less in order--moving upwards and rightwards. *But*--and this is crucial--the earlier modes are not less important or less "mature" than the later ones just because they are easier. The earlier ones are not just ways to get to later ones. I keep the earlier one going all semester. In truth I consider them *more* important--more foundational. The later modes may "teach more"--but they sometimes interfere with the earlier ones. That is, sharing with others may teach more than just writing for oneself, but if sharing starts to make students avoid writing at all, it's worth cutting back on sharing. Feedback may teach more than just sharing, but if it starts to make people avoid sharing, it's worth going slower. If evaluation makes people avoid feedback, obviously we should hold back on evaluation. I always make the following announcement at the start of each course: "It is more important to me that you write what is true and important for you than that you share with readers or get feedback. If at any time during the semester you want to keep something private that you have written--or just share it but not get any feedback--I can almost certainly work that out with you."

Conclusion. We and our students will prosper most if we write for all audiences and all modes of response. We can plan our teaching to keep them all going. In the end, I believe that what writers need *most* is an audience for sharing and a private place to experiment.

*To give a fuller analysis of audience, I would have to add some other important and interesting dimensions. For example, are we writing to readers we know or to those we don't? Are we writing to a large group or to a few or just one? Are we writing to absent readers or to readers present with us as we write (as happens in some writing classes and writing groups--and as happens when we speak)? For more on this whole matter, see Chapter 2 of my *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing* (Oxford 2000).