Lisa Westbrook Stine

Dr. Crisp/RHET 5306

Final Synthesis and Reflection

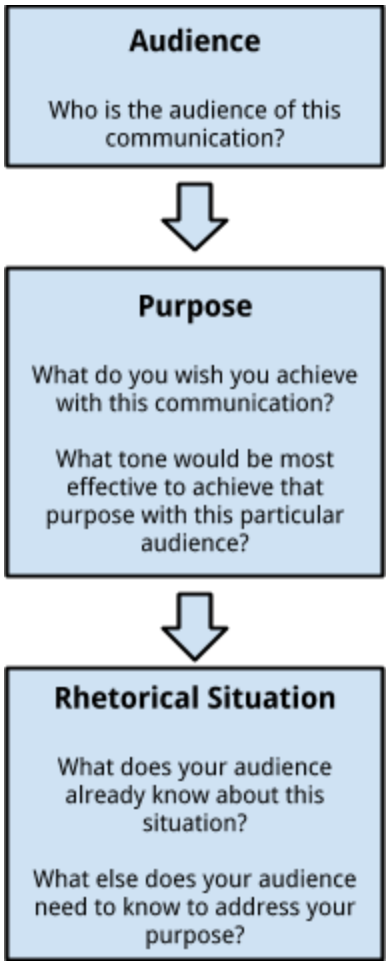
25 June 2015

Writing for Business and Government

What is the most important aspect of communication? Upon first consideration, it is tempting to identify the message, or the words themselves, as the most important aspect. And it is certainly true that the message itself is quite important, since without words, it is difficult to communicate. However, the readings and assignments in this course have emphasized that without considering the audience of a message, words can confuse, offend, or mislead. Unless a writer carefully considers the recipient--his or her prior knowledge and beliefs, social or organizational rank, as well as other factors--the message itself could be useless.

The three points of the rhetorical triangle reinforce the idea that considering audience is vitally important to communication. While “Audience” is only one of the three points, the other two, ”Purpose” and “Rhetorical Situation,” address issues of audience as well. When considering the purpose in writing--what one hopes to gain from the correspondence--writers must consider the appropriate tone that will convince their interlocutors to give them what they want. For the assignment in which I had to write a memo to June’s boss regarding her raise, for example, I had to consider that if she approached her boss with an angry tone, she was much less likely to achieve her goal. I had to first analyze her audience, then determine the appropriate tone for the purpose. The rhetorical situation also addresses issues of audience. I had to consider what had already happened in this situation, as well as what June’s

boss was already aware of and what he still needed to know. It seems that instead of a triangle, a different sort of graphic organizer that depicts the primary importance of audience would be most appropriate for writers--perhaps something like this flow chart:



The RTAA formula for correspondence also emphasizes the importance of considering the audience in writing. In the first step, writers must establish rapport--in other words, they must remind the recipient of their relationship and what they have in common. In June's memo to her boss, I established rapport by letting her boss know how much she enjoys working for the company, and adding that she attributes her personal success to the quality of their products and the timeliness of their manufacturing and distribution. I could assume that June's boss also views the company favorably and that her success reflects positively on him,

so this was an effective way to begin the memo and establish a relationship. In the second step of RTAA, writers influence the thinking of the audience. For this step, I had to reflect on what June's boss already knew and what he needed to know in order for June to achieve her purpose. Part of influencing thinking is also adopting an appropriate tone for the message. I reminded June's boss of the previous interactions they had regarding this issue, but I did so in a congenial tone to avoid seeming confrontational, which would possibly result in his becoming defensive. The third step in RTAA is for writers to ask for an action from the audience. Again, writers must tread carefully to avoid stepping on toes when making a request. I maintained the congenial tone by acknowledging that June's boss has "extraordinary demands on [his] time," as well as noting that June would "greatly appreciate" if he would set up the appointment. I also mentioned that June was including supporting documents with the memo for him to use at his meeting--this helpful gesture may further convince her boss to assist with her raise. Finally, RTAA advises writers to leave the audience with a positive attitude about both the writer and the request. In order to do this, I closed the letter with a promise from June that she would continue to do quality work and an appreciation for her boss's assistance in the matter.

The assignment in which I revised a letter to Dr. Reynolds from the Final Seasons Nursing Center also demonstrates the importance of audience analysis with RTAA. In order to establish rapport with Dr. Reynolds, I acknowledged the nursing home's mistake and thanked him for bringing it to their attention. Since I can assume that Dr. Reynolds is probably annoyed (and possibly quite angry), starting with an apology is the best way to try to repair the relationship. To influence his thinking, I clearly explained the reason why his bill appeared to be higher than normal. The purpose of his letter to the nursing home was to understand this discrepancy, so addressing it clearly and thoroughly ensures that he will be satisfied. In the

conclusion, I ask for action as well as leave Dr. Reynolds with a positive attitude about the company by requesting that he contact Lou Ann Hitchcock personally if the letter has not thoroughly addressed his concern and by thanking him for his continued trust in them to care for his relative. Both this analysis and the analysis of the memo to June's boss demonstrate that throughout the RTAA writing process, audience is the primary concern.

While Dr. Fred Reynolds addresses a variety of communication issues in his article on "adult work-world" writing, many of those issues can be traced back to concerns with audience. For example, when he breaks down the "General Tendencies of Adult Work-World Writers" into seven "basic issues," the first issue he mentions is that writers do not often consider the complexity of their audience, and they are often over-confident in their ability to deal with that complexity appropriately (Reynolds 5). Other issues he notes are that writers tend to be more concerned with small corrections in secondary drafts rather than examining the effectiveness of the writing as a whole; they write everything like a story (narrative), saving the "best for last" instead of addressing the main points earlier in the message; they include too much information in one sentence instead of breaking information down over several sentences; and they ignore (probably due to lack of training) document design and readability concerns. All of these problems result from not thoroughly considering the needs of the audience. Reynolds offers several suggestions for how to avoid many of these problems. He advises that writers should adopt a "reader-oriented" mindset, writing the way that readers prefer to read. He also suggests that writers focus on the rhetorical context of a piece of writing before they start so that they can avoid "big picture" issues in secondary drafts--writers can plan using outlines (or what Reynolds calls "chunking charts") in order to ensure that writing is rhetorically appropriate. Writers should place key ideas in prominent positions (and perhaps make them more obvious with visual cues, such as headings), as well as simplify their

sentences for ease of comprehension. Reynolds also breaks down some of the issues he sees in workplace writing, such as “wrong tone,” “bloated style,” and “poor planning/low readability,” which are all clearly concerns dealing with the audience’s understanding and perception of the communication (Reynolds 8-9). He argues that if writers simply take the time to create a plan for writing, they can avoid readability issues and inappropriate rhetorical approaches.

The article “Understanding Failures in Organizational Discourse” by Herndl, Fennell, and Miller is fraught with issues regarding audience, and unfortunately in these situations, problems lead to catastrophic consequences. It is easy to assume when discussing the idea of audience abstractly that if a writer is attentive enough to the needs of the reader, the possibility for misunderstanding can be eliminated--however, in practice, writers and readers are human, and a lot of problems can arise in communication that the writer cannot anticipate. In their analysis of the communication that occurred within organizations preceding the nuclear incident at Three Mile Island and the Challenger space shuttle crash, the authors make several observations about audience. One example is in the memos regarding a change to operating instructions within the Engineering and Nuclear Services departments at Babcock & Wilcox, the organization responsible for building the failed reactor at Three Mile Island. They note in a pragmatic analysis of the memos that although one of the writers (Kelly) attempted to keep his memo about a serious operations failure at a plant in Toledo from having an accusatory tone, one of the recipients (Walter) obviously took offense, and used his response to defend himself rather than address the problem. This is not necessarily a flaw in the message itself, since it is apparent that the participants can still understand each other. I’m sure that when Kelly wrote the memo about the incident in Toledo, he had no intention of bruising anyone’s ego--he just wanted to make the changes necessary to prevent a larger

incident. Although Kelly's message is rhetorically appropriate for his audience, Walter's emotions got in the way, which kept Kelly from achieving his purpose. The authors also note in their Toulmin argument analysis that the arguments in the memos written by employees in Engineering had notable differences from those written by employees in Nuclear Services. The engineers seem to be most concerned with new events--the new information regarding the accident in Toledo and how the accident could be worse in the future if not prevented. The Nuclear Services department seems most concerned with "prior organizational commitments"--they want to maintain what has already been established, while Engineering is interested in an explanation of new information that does not fit the current framework (Herndl, et al. 291). This situation reveals another hurdle that writers may encounter regarding audience--their own circumstances may prevent them from seeing a situation from their audience's perspective. Our paradigms are powerful, and forcing ourselves as writers to think from outside our own boxes is a difficult task.

Another clear demonstration of this problem is explained in the authors' analysis of the Challenger space shuttle memos. A top engineer from the Morton Thiokol company, which created the "O-rings" for the shuttle, was trying, unsuccessfully, to persuade the managers of his company that the launch should not go on as scheduled due to concerns about cool temperatures. The managers' concern, however, was with proceeding with the flight as planned, and in the absence of "conclusive" data regarding a connection between the O-ring and temperature, they could not be convinced to abandon flight plans. The resulting miscommunication due to differing priorities (one with causes, one with effects) led to the Challenger space shuttle disaster the following day. However, the authors do not blame these managers for the accident--they write that "it may be that engineers and managers were unable, more than unwilling, to recognize data which deviated from that characteristic of their

organizational roles," confirming that it is often nearly impossible for communicators to abandon their own perspectives (Herndl, et al. 303).

The primary concern of document design is how the audience receives the information, so Sam Dragga's article "Is This Ethical? A Survey of Opinion on Principles and Practices of Document Design" is definitely relevant to a discussion of audience and communication. Dragga notes that in years past, technical communicators were solely technical *writers*--they were not responsible for page layouts and illustration. However, "today, more often, the technical writer is a technical communicator, choosing the typography and graphics as well as the words" (Dragga 256). Unfortunately for technical writers trying to navigate the ethics of document design, there is not much guidance. Several works on technical communication ethics only provide brief mentions of advice for designers--for example, the STC Code for Communicators mentions that a communicator should "hold [him or her]self responsible for how well [the] audience understands [the] message"--however, this small piece of advice still emphasizes the need for considering the audience in design (Dragga 256). Dragga's survey, which the article describes, asks technical communicators and educators to determine the ethicality of several potential document design scenarios. Questions of ethicality inherently address issues of audience, since the field of ethics is concerned with fair treatment of people who receive and interact with the information--whether an action is deemed "right" or "wrong" (or "ethical" or "unethical") primarily depends on the perceived effect of the action on the recipient. In this study, Dragga was interested in comparing responses to the example scenarios to determine what caused communicators to deem some actions ethical and others unethical. Dragga mentions that while explanations of reasoning behind answers varied greatly, they did "espouse a basic principle of ethical document design: The greater the likelihood of deception and the greater the injury to the reader as a consequence of that

deception, the more unethical is the design of the document" (Dragga 262-263). This is a negative guideline, forcing designers to weigh possible consequences of a given situation to determine its ethicality, and the author questions whether this is practical for communicators who may not always be able to anticipate the needs of their audience.

While effective technical communication is a complicated endeavor, I have gathered from the various readings and assignments in this class that starting any writing task with a thorough analysis of the audience will create a solid rhetorical foundation. While other factors must be taken into consideration (such as the writer's own purpose and the rhetorical situation as a whole), viewing these factors in light of the audience's response will allow the writer to communicate most successfully. As Herndl, et al. make apparent, it is not always possible to anticipate how a recipient will interpret the message (just as it is not always possible to see how our own biases are affecting our perspective), but a concerted effort to thoughtfully approach the audience will go a long way in ensuring that our message is heard, we are understood, and our purposes are achieved.