

Interacting With Audiences
Social Influences on the Production
of Scientific Writing



Ann M. Blakeslee
Eastern Michigan University



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Editor's Introduction

Charles Bazerman
University of California, Santa Barbara

Audience is central to rhetoric, for rhetoric is concerned with how words move an audience, influence their actions, persuade their judgment, change their minds. But because audience in rhetoric is typically treated as a projection of the rhetor's plan, audience has remained a shadowy concept. Audience tends to be considered as the rhetor can see it, or as the rhetor can address or invoke its possibilities, or as the text constructs subject positions for those who might hear or read the crafted utterance. The study of the actual response of real people to an utterance has been most often left to communication studies.

There are reasons for this tendency, for rhetoric serves primarily to focus and help realize the intentions of rhetors needing to act within rhetorical situations and with uncovering the intentions and techniques of already delivered utterances. Rhetoric circles more around the craft of utterance than around the concrete consequences of that utterance in the world. The concept of audience in rhetoric serves as a hortatory call to exercise the imagination—you need to imagine your audience, so you can speak to it; you need to imagine who that other rhetor was speaking to and how she was trying to move them to uncover her design. This hortatory imaginative invocation of audience does not immediately direct one to gain more concrete information about how audiences are affected by utterances.

Gaining concrete information about audiences, moreover, is hardly unproblematic. The audience is never stably nor absolutely and comprehensively knowable, nor knowable outside the attention-focusing effect of the utterance. The demographics of potential audiences will never predict accurately who will see and attend nor how much they will identify with other auditors to form a collective greater than an aggregate of individuals. Nor can the demographics predict how the utterance itself will gather or disperse attention, create unity or difference among potential auditors.

And with each moment the available participants and the conditions that constitute their potential audienceness change. Nor will the demographics of the present and attending auditors tell you what they feel and believe and perceive, for these are matters of individual sense-making, influenced by many factors, and driven by individual purposes in the moment. As a transitory social phenomenon that is separately and imaginatively constituted from each witness's position, the dynamic entity of audience affords no objective description. Finally, rhetorical analysis of audience tends to come at the wrong moment for capturing what one might be able to capture concretely about the auditors and their responses. Productive rhetoric must consider the audience before the delivery of the text (so the audience is in the uncertain future) and critical rhetoric is post-mortem, after the audience has dispersed.

So it does make a certain kind of sense simply to encourage the rhetor to gather as much as she can about the potential audience and develop her own perspective on how the utterance might influence them. "Do your best in the shifting world of human phenomenological orientation towards each other!" However, such a strategy, even if long experience with many audiences in many situations has given one a diverse and savvy rhetorical repertoire, still does not direct one toward knowing more about the concrete responses of the audience.

In practice, people find a practical solution to this dilemma, for rhetorical situations are rarely isolated events. Knowledge of audiences typically emerges from evolving sets of relationships and interactions rather than from disengaged descriptions. Over time, rhetors modify their behaviors, stances, and goals as part of their relationship with evolving audiences consisting of many speakers. Some specific elements of the audience's behavior in past circumstances may make certain typical aspects of their audienceness salient enough to evoke explicit comment that becomes sedimented into a generalization or advisory rule for approaching them.

This process of getting to know audiences through interaction is the news that Ann Blakeslee brings us about rhetoric from her sojourn among a team of physicists. In her ethnographic net, she has caught a team of physicists who need to know about new sets of audiences because they feel their work has interdisciplinary applications. They accurately see the fate of their innovation as dependent on how others utilize their ideas and techniques, but these audiences are a bit strange to them, unlike the audiences in their own specialty which they have learned about in their education, specialization, and professional life. So they have to learn about these new audiences, and this learning takes them down a path of interaction, adjustment, negotiation, and adaptation—extending to the point where one of the team goes as a postdoc to work in a lab in the target specialty.

The interdisciplinary character of the rhetorical problem these physicists face makes the problems and processes of coming to communicate with audiences more visible, but it turns out to be not so different than the process they went through to be socialized in their own discipline. Learning to communicate with one's peers is at the very core of learning to be a scientist, and is at the very core of making meaningful contributions, as Latour (1987), Myers (1990) and I (1988) suggested. Failures of forming relationships with readers are coincident with failures of meaningful vitality of erstwhile contributions. Successful contributions are the vehicles through which relationships with audiences are bonded.

Learning to interact with audiences, Blakeslee shows, is something that necessarily continues throughout the scientific career, for the making of knowledge is a social process of knowledge makers engaging others in what they believe they have found that is true, reliable, and useful. For knowledge lives only in the minds and practices of people, and in the artifacts that people make on the basis of that knowledge. Part of the fundamental challenge of those who would make knowledge is to find the means to plant that knowledge in the minds and lives of others, where that knowledge may find sustenance and continuing life. Blakeslee's physicists know that, although they may take shortcuts due to impatience with a troublesome project. By showing that there is no getting around the sociality of knowledge making, Blakeslee implies there is no solution but for scientists to keep interacting with audiences. That is the news Blakeslee brings us about science.