Knowing Your Audience and Purpose: Keys to Effective Academic Writing

- Academic writing demands that you support your ideas with evidence and reasoning.
- Different kinds of academic writing tasks will require different approaches to providing information and supporting your ideas in your papers.
- Therefore, before you get started writing, you have to figure out who will be reading your paper and what you want to accomplish in it.
  - In other words, **determine your audience and purpose.**

**For communication to be effective, whether through speaking or writing, you must consider more than the message itself.**
- As noted in *The Brief Penguin Handbook*, “the speaker and the audience are also essential components of communication” (6). This interrelation can be depicted as the rhetorical triangle:

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   writer or speaker
   
   audience
   
   subject
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- Faigley et al. explain that *these elements are in a dynamic relationship* and note that everybody makes adjustments to suit their audience at the time; just as audiences adjust to speakers (6-7).

**It is important to know your audience:**
People write and communicate differently, depending on the intended recipient.
- For example, in a personal letter to a friend, you probably use slang, jump from thought to thought, and use creative punctuation. This approach would likely be inappropriate in an essay for a professor.
- In academic writing, **knowing your audience will influence the way that you present material:**
  - **Simple audience:** If your audience has an academic background similar to yours, you can expect that they are familiar with terms and concepts that you employ.
  - **Multiple audience:** If you are writing for a more diverse audience, you need to think about presenting the material to people with differing levels of knowledge about your topic.
Knowing your purpose:
Once you have established for whom you write, you must also determine why you write.

- You have to decide what you want to accomplish: this is your purpose.
- Faigley et al. list a number of possible reasons:
  - To reflect on experience
  - To inform others about a subject
  - To change people’s attitudes
  - To persuade your readers to pursue a course of action (12).
- As Faigley et al. explain, “Your purpose will determine the tone and presentation of your message” (12, emphasis added).
- Knowing your purpose brings focus and structure to your writing.

When you know the purpose for your text, you can select the appropriate structure and form:

1. **Rhetorical analysis** (*Brief Penguin Handbook* 83-84)
   - also called “critical analysis” or “textual analysis”
   - examines how meaning is made by dividing a whole into its parts
   - you consider the text from multiple perspectives
   - focus on the relationship of the text’s context to the text itself

2. **Writing to inform** (*Brief Penguin Handbook* 96)
   - there are **four main functions** of informative writing:
     a. report new information
     b. analyze meaning, patterns, and connections
     c. provide an explanation for something
     d. explore questions and problems

3. **Writing to persuade** (*Brief Penguin Handbook* 111-13)
   - when you are writing to persuade, you are making an argument about your subject
   - **written arguments**
     o are founded on evidence
     o explore underlying assumptions
     o consider opposing arguments
     o anticipate objections
   - there are two types of arguments:
     a. position argument – you state your claim about an issue
     b. proposal argument – you suggest a course of action in response to an issue

Work Cited: