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Shifting Our Style of Writing Under Different Circumstances: Having Experience and Overcoming Obstacles Can Stimulate Academic Growth

Abstract

Three key concepts—tone, audience, and diction—are significant features that help convey messages. The purpose of this research article is to explore the importance of these concepts and how they can help refine a student’s ability to write effectively. I conducted an experiment by giving three participants two prompts and asked them to respond to it. For the first prompt, the audience was a professor whereas for the second prompt, the audience was friends and family. Once the participants finished responding to the prompts, I conducted an interview and asked them follow-up questions. Despite each writer having their own voice, each participant had similar responses to the prompts and during the interview. Some were faced with writing challenges and had to think about who they were writing to and how they would approach their responses. These results indicate that thinking about these three writing attributes in different situations encourages and promotes the growth of one’s writing abilities.

Introduction

There can be times where people find themselves entranced by a book and ponder why that is the case. What lies behind those effects is how considerate the author is with their words and who they are saying it to. These works are not created with ease—even successful writers face obstacles when composing. Students are always aiming to improve their writing. They often deal with having to shift to different genres. With that, they have to constantly consider the audience, diction, and tone. Being mindful of these rhetorical concepts can be challenging but also create opportunities for growth. Graf (2018) states that, “It is by challenging yourself that you grow and

improve your writing” (para. 1). As students work to overcome writing obstacles, they ultimately learn from them and apply it to future works, thus becoming more effective writers. This leads to my research question: how does the ability to utilize key concepts such as diction, audience, and tone in different situations help students become more effective writers?

Methods

The methodology used in this research paper was an experiment followed by an interview with questions. Three individuals—two college freshmen and a college alumni—participated in this study. The goal of this variation was to gather different perspectives based on experience. This provided insight in terms of the interviewees’ knowledge and if their level of experience contributed to their writing process.

To conduct the experiment, I gave each participant two prompts and asked them to respond to them as if they were real situations. The two prompts were:

1. Compose an email to a professor asking for a letter of recommendation.
2. Compose a Facebook post to your friends and family asking them to donate to a charity that you care about.

It was expected that a participant’s response to one prompt would differ from the other. These scenarios each require a different approach, and I did that in order to examine why and how these writers framed their responses. Each prompt requires certain conventions to be followed, keeping the audience, tone, and word choice in mind when responding.

I interviewed the individuals and asked them follow-up questions after the experiment. The questions that I asked were:

1. How would you compare your pieces of writing to academic writing?

2. How do you think the type of tone, diction, and audience that you used help you to convey your message?
3. How do you think the scenario would have differed if one of these concepts were missing or altered even by the slightest?
4. Did you face any challenges whilst responding to either of these prompts? If you did, how did you go about overcoming them?

These specific questions will allow me to see the reasons as to why certain choices were made in order to make connections to my research question. Using this data will allow me to analyze the relationship to academic writing and the contribution to the development of student writers.

Results

Figure 1

Similarities and Differences Between the Responses to Each Prompt

Letter of Recommendation

Similarities

- Diction/tone: formal, professional
- Audience: professor
- Expressed why they were reaching out
- Expressed how thankful they were in terms of how the professor played in a role in their lives
- Straight-to-the-point and provided a deadline
- Lengthy

Differences

- Length
- One stated that they would provide a resumé and a list of accomplishments

Charity Post

Similarities

- Diction/tone: casual, colloquial
- Audience: friends and family on Facebook
- Pathos
- Stated something along the lines of "every little bit will help"
- Concise

Differences

- Length
- One went in-depth by stating how it could affect friends and family if they were to

The Letter of Recommendation. Common themes that were noticed were that they reached out to professors who they "...talked to and related to the most" (Interviewee #1). They each made it clear how their professor of choice positively contributed to their life, stating how their "...class and guidance have helped..." them (Interviewee #2) and how they "...would be able to provide helpful insight..." (Interviewee #3). One individual kept the professor's schedule in mind, reminding them that "...there is absolutely no pressure" if they "...do not have the time...or

feel uncomfortable...” (Interviewee #1). They were all considerate, professional, and mindful whilst composing these emails.

The Charity Post. The charity posts had more of a casual tone that was appropriate for friends and family. A common theme that was noticed throughout these posts was that they were concise. These responses all used pathos to appeal to the audience’s emotions, stating that any sort of acknowledgement to these charities “...can help this world become a better place” (Interviewee #1) and “...provide and enhance care and support for all affected...” (Interviewee #2). Each individual made it clear that “Every little bit will help...” (Interviewee #2), “...whether \$1 or \$50...” (Interviewee #1). These posts were written with authenticity, which was shown through the key concepts used and the facts presented.

Discussion

It was expected that there would be major similarities between all responses. I noticed that all of these individuals had similar things to say in their interviews. They all focused on using language and tone that would have gotten them what they wanted. They all believed that this would not have been possible to achieve if these three concepts were not present and effectively complementing one another. It is common for students to frame their papers around these three key concepts when writing. Though, it is adapting to different writing scenarios that stimulates thinking about how to convey a message with these three concepts working together, which was highlighted in my primary research. This creates learning opportunities that can be applied to future compositions.

Audience. It is important to structure a piece of writing in a way that makes the audience “...feel something,” (Jones, n.d., para. 13) and that relates to effective writing. Students are constantly writing to express themselves and to reach a wide audience. With these responses, it

was notable to see that was the case and how each writer was considerate of their audience. For example, rather than writing a long Facebook post full of facts and assuming that a great majority of friends and family would read it, each individual “...stop[ped] and examine[d] that assumption” (“Scholarly Voice: Audience,” n.d., para. 10). By doing this, it kept the message concise whilst decreasing the chances of someone scrolling past it.

Tone and Diction. Tone helps to establish personal relationships and move readers to do something that they perceive from the text. Hess (2017) makes this clear in her informative article, stating how tone has the ability to affect “...how your reader will emotionally respond...and...make decisions...” (para. 66). This is also crucial when communicating in verbal, serious contexts, such as the field of medicine. There are times where “Careful word choices can facilitate better communication...” (Curtis et al., 2014, p. 608), especially in situations where friends and families may be worried about their loved ones. Despite the differences between writing contexts and verbal contexts, keeping in mind the word choice holds the same level of importance when considering an audience. These choices helped these students adapt to different contexts to convey the message that they wanted to, ultimately creating an effective piece of writing.

Challenges and Experience. As these students learn how to apply certain kinds of words and tones to a variety of audiences, their ability to effectively communicate develops. These writers were aware of whom they were writing to and were able to adapt to each specific scenario. This is something that comes with time and overcoming obstacles in writing. Students tend to struggle with implementing all of these key concepts into a paper. Graf (2018) makes a good point in her article regarding writing challenges: “Only through challenges will you see your writing blossom” (para. 4). Being mindful of each device and using strategies to figure how

to complement them encourages students to look for new ideas and from a different perspective. This comes with experiences and dealing with multiple scenarios over time.

The last question asked during the interview was meant to see if there were any challenges that the participants may have faced. The college alumni (interviewee #3) and interviewee #1 faced no challenges whilst responding to the prompts while interviewee #2 did. This is because of the level of experience that each individual had. For instance, interviewee #1 stated that they had applied to many different scholarships and schools that asking for letters of recommendation felt normal to them. Interviewee #3 went through four years of undergraduate education and encountered many situations where it was necessary to adapt and write to a variety of audiences. For interviewee #2, they stated that they were used to the high school atmosphere where it was conventional to reach out to people in person. They are still trying to adapt to the college atmosphere that composing these responses was difficult, so they turned to other resources and looked at it from a different perspective to sufficiently respond to each prompt.

As a result, constantly considering these key concepts and overcoming the challenges that can arise with them can lead to discovery where students are constantly being enlightened.

Conclusion

Becoming a more effective writer as a student comes with experience and the ability to consider the audience, tone, and diction in different contexts to successfully convey a message. There are many forms of writing and an infinite number of things that can be written about. Students are constantly reviewing and annotating other works that they usually write about later on. Eventually, they may even reflect on what they wrote about and how they can improve it for future assignments. Thinking about who the audience is, what to say to them, and how to say it are key factors in these processes. Being attentive to these devices urges writers to constantly

think about what they are saying, especially since one word can alter the meaning of a sentence entirely. Conventions are different for every genre, allowing student writers to view these concepts differently to make decisions appropriately. I noticed this in my research and how each participant shifted their audience, diction, and tone so that it was suitable for each circumstance. Overall, it takes learning how to adjust to these different scenarios and being considerate of all of these key factors that help students grow as writers.

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