

Lesson 3.4

Knowing Your Audience

Writers and people who fish have something very important in common—a need to know their audiences. When you're fishing (assuming you want to catch anything) you'd better understand what you are fishing for. A cutthroat trout is a different audience from a smallmouth bass; they won't go after the same bait. Readers and listeners respond to different things, too. You probably use one voice when talking with your friends and another when talking with your parents. And by adjusting your writing voice even a little, you can increase your chances of hooking your audience dramatically.



Sharing an Example: "Sugarcane Fire"

Here's an example from David Rice's book of short stories, *Crazy Loco*. In this story, "Sugarcane Fire," Romero, a seventh grader, wants to buy tickets to a high school dance for himself and two friends. Unfortunately, he has to purchase them from some high school students who are enjoying making that a little difficult. Listen to the subtle way Romero uses voice to get what he wants.



One of the guys laughed. “You’re in junior high. You have no rights.” The other students joined in the ha-ha’s.

Then I recognized the guy’s laugh. A month earlier my English teacher had given the class extra-credit points for watching the high school drama club rehearse a Shakespeare play. Every time one of the actors messed up a line, the guy who was laughing at me now would jump in and make fun of him. And every time, the actor would throw his arms up and respond with the same sentence: “What is this? The Spanish Inquisition?” Then both guys would shout in unison, “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition,” and all the actors would laugh. I didn’t get it, but I knew it worked.

I threw my arms up. “What is this? The Spanish Inquisition?” I said.

The two poker players laughed and answered, “Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition,” and they let me buy three tickets. The girl with the tin box stood up and put out her hand. “That will be nine dollars for you and your dates,” she said, smiling. I paid her and walked out happily.

“Sugarcane Fire,” from *Crazy Loco*
by David Rice

Reflection

Talk about this passage with a partner or in a writing circle. Following are a few questions to guide your discussion.

- How was Romero feeling inside?
- If he had let those feelings show, what sort of voice would have come out?
- What sort of voice did he use?
- Why did the high school students give him the tickets?



A Different Audience

Romero understood that his audience was older high school boys, and he adjusted his voice accordingly. Suppose the person selling the tickets had been an adult—say, your own teacher. And let's say you're the one requesting the tickets, normally sold ONLY to students in high school. You have three minutes to write a convincing note, and the voice you use could make the difference in whether you get those tickets. Think! Adjust!

Share and Compare

Share your note with a partner or in a writing circle, taking turns reading aloud. What words would you use to describe the voices you hear? Which writer would most likely get the tickets? Share a few notes with your teacher and see!

The Perfect Triangle: Audience, Purpose, and Voice

Strong voice is always lively. But good writers keep audience and purpose in mind so that the voice always suits the occasion.

For this activity, you'll write two persuasive letters to two different audiences. Work with a partner or in a writing circle to choose the topic and the audiences.

There's just one rule here. Your audiences must be very different. Don't write to two teachers, for example. You might write one letter to a teacher or principal and another to a friend who lives out of town.

Choose a topic you have strong opinions about. Following are some suggestions, but you may choose any controversial topic.

- Gum chewing policy at your school
- Homework expectations
- Cell phone use at school

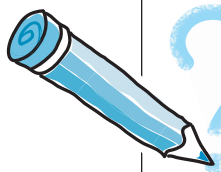
Dear _____,

[illegible]

Letter 2*Dear* _____ ,

Share and Compare

When you finish writing, pick one letter to share with a partner or in a writing circle. Don't read the greeting or tell who the letter is going to. See if your partner or your writing circle members can identify the audience based on the voice alone.



A Writer's Questions

You just finished writing letters to two different audiences. Even though the topic for the two letters remained the same, did the purpose actually shift a little? How so?



Putting It to the Test

In on-demand writing, you create a piece for someone you've never met and probably never will meet. Is there a safe voice you should use in this kind of situation? Or is it better to just be yourself and write with the full power of your natural voice, with all the confidence you can muster? Why do you think so?