

Mary Jo Reiff

Approaches to Audience: An Overview of the Major Perspectives

Book Review

—Reviewed by
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Index Terms—Audience, cognitive, reader, rhetoric, text, writer.

Let me begin the way Mary Jo Reiff begins her book, *Approaches to Audience: An Overview of the Major Perspectives*, with the same three quotes:

“Of the three elements in speech-making—speaker, subject, and person addressed—it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech’s end and object.” (Aristotle)

“I feel strongly that the reader plays an active role, and that the writer, when writing, must be consciously aware of the reader’s activity.” (Russell C. Long)

“... the audience is a primary factor, perhaps *the* primary factor, influencing discourse.” (James Porter) [p. v].

Reiff sets out to enhance our concept of audience by exploring various viewpoints on the subject, including rhetorical, cognitive, textual, contextual, and social-constructionist perspectives. What is clear from the onset is that no single perspective is comprehensive and that understanding audience is no simple matter. Reiff successfully navigates this difficult topic by considering a multitude of approaches within an academic framework, but doing so in a format that is very accessible and usable. The author does not intend to take an in-depth look at any given perspective, but rather, to give an overview that is sufficiently detailed to be useful but not so detailed as to lose focus. The organization of the book is clearly laid out and supports the plan of the book.

The book is divided into six chapters, in addition to a preface and afterword that elaborate on the purpose of the text and its place in the field. As an associate professor and director of composition at the University of Tennessee, Reiff has spent a

number of years tackling the concept of how to successfully reach an audience. She demonstrates quickly that this is indeed her area of expertise by building a historical picture for us in the first chapter, “Rhetorical approaches: A brief history,” which starts with Aristotle’s classical rhetoric and its function to persuade public audiences and moves through the medieval and Renaissance periods and then the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. Reiff traces the rise, fall, and resurrection of audience as a critical component of discourse—all in a modest 23 pages.

Reiff continues with an economic treatment of cognitive, textual, contextual, and social constructionist approaches to audience, using no more than 25 pages in any chapter and as few as 15 for the social constructionist approach. Chapter 2, “Cognitive approaches: The reader in the writer,” looks at “egocentrism and audience awareness” as well as some differences between spoken and written discourse, while also reviewing some empirical research. Chapter 3, “Textual approaches: The reader in the text,” examines the implications of language use for different types of readers. Structuralism, formalism, and phenomenology are all considered here. In Chapter 4, “Contextual approaches: Uniting audience, writer, and text,” Reiff focuses on the relationship between author and reader by the text chosen, and how context plays an important role. The penultimate chapter, “Social constructionist approaches: From context to community,” illustrates how the audience is a community. Teaching applications are highlighted especially here.

Reiff spends about 30 pages on the sixth and final chapter, “Acknowledging Multiple Audiences,” the most important section of the book and the culmination of all of the previous chapters. Here Reiff explores the reality that most situations involve multiple audiences and discusses organizational models and ways of handling conflict that can arise in these situations.

Each chapter is constructed effectively, not only to deliver information in a thorough yet concise manner but also to give readers ways to expand on the chapter. Many readers will find most useful the “questions for

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further consideration,” “recommendations for further reading,” and “for discussion” sections interspersed throughout the text, as well as the “applications for teachers” included at various points. The examples are also plentiful, ensuring that the information is practical and not simply theoretical. As a case in point, in discussing how different communities use different language, Reiff presents three different reviews of the same art exhibit on AIDS, and discusses the language differences in such a way that teachers will recognize what conventions are expected in different settings. Other cases provide constructive suggestions for assignments and classroom exercises.

Each chapter begins with a short introduction, often including some history of the approach, in order to frame the upcoming work. This may seem unremarkable, but these frames are effective introductions, and the author accomplishes her goals. Following the introductions, we get to the information-rich heart of the chapters. Scattered throughout these sections readers will find discussion questions and applications for teachers. Each chapter wraps up with a discussion of the limitations of the approach, a conclusion, additional questions, and a list of further reading. All of the chapters build to a natural concluding chapter, about multiple audiences, a conclusion that is obviously the author’s purpose from the outset. Reiff offers her summary in the form of an afterword, where she again reminds us of the difficulties in addressing audiences and why she has framed her book the way she has.

The closing of the afterword is perhaps most telling:

As a result of this complex interaction among writers (who envision their multiple audiences), texts (that construct these multiple audiences through various textual clues and linguistic devices) and readers (who are actual and multiple), a fully integrated perspective on audience is achieved: one that encompasses the multiple locations and descriptions of audience and recognizes the multiplicity of real readers. [p. 146]

Reiff argues that her book has successfully mapped out the major perspectives on audience, in the process updating the work of Ede and Lunsford two decades ago, and ultimately provides a work that acknowledges and begins to deal with the sticky reality of multiple audiences. The closing sentence above gets to the point: readers are many and multiple, and no two are exactly alike. Understanding how to effectively reach as many readers as possible is not easy, and Reiff manages to help in the challenging process.

Refreshing in Reiff’s work is a pervasive humility. The book does not cover any of its topics exhaustively, and the author does not pretend to have done so. The

emphasis on limitations and the extensive suggested readings are clear signals that the book is meant to be an overview, a good start, and in that capacity it has done well. Reiff also presents balanced information, including views she does not necessarily support. This is clear in some of the discussion questions, such as “Do you agree with Britton et al.’s claim that writing ‘emancipates’ writers from audience intrusions?” [p. 34]. On the surface it would seem obvious, from Reiff’s vantage point, what she thinks the answer would be. But in recognizing the value of discussing the topic, she gives Britton nearly a page of space, leaving it to the readers to decide what effect the physical space between writer and reader means to the discourse.

This style, including frequent discussion points, is especially useful for the targeted audience. As a survey, the book will be an effective teaching tool in undergraduate and graduate classrooms. The focus on various approaches to audience makes the book useful to an interdisciplinary audience, including those in fields such as rhetoric and composition, speech communication, cognitive psychology, literary studies and linguistics. In fact, anyone who will be writing, speaking, or otherwise communicating professionally would benefit from time spent with this book.

The most useful application of this book, it seems, will be for teachers. Education departments should start making this text a required part of their program as it would undoubtedly stimulate invaluable discussion about the difficult task of teaching. Reiff may not realize it, but there are perhaps fewer audiences more diverse than children and young adults in school, and teachers that have studied and thought critically about how to address those audiences will most certainly be increasing their value to those students. The applications for teachers are stimulating and useful, with examples of different types of communication to make the book as practical as possible.

Looking for a moment at a high school art teacher, we see a host of audience-related challenges ahead. The teacher, obviously, must be prepared to successfully communicate with 14–18-year-olds who all have different learning needs and a variety of preferred styles. Some will be interested in art while others will be interested in anything **but** art. The same teacher also needs to be able to address the parents of these students, who will range dramatically in age and often are older than the teacher. This, of course, must be done on an individual basis as well with groups, and at times may include the student along with the parents. Perhaps even more daunting than the parents are supervisors and administrators in the school. Plus, the teacher will need to prepare a budget or some sort of financial look at what is needed in the classroom. All of these situations will be made easier

with this book, with sections about handling conflicts, classroom implications and examples, including a proposal to enhance a digital photography program.

The downside to this book is what it chooses not to do. Each of the approaches to audience that Reiff discusses could be expanded to a book in itself, or at least receive more than 20 pages. By no means can Reiff complete a thorough analysis in such a short span. And given that the author makes it so clear that approaching audiences is complex and challenging, to address the whole topic in a short, easy-to-read book is almost a contradiction. Lastly, covering the section on multiple audiences—the most important and practical part of the book by all standards—in about 30 pages leaves much to be desired.

However, this strategy is consistent with Reiff's goal. She has deliberately used an approach that will be

accessible to many and in fact usable by those who need it most. The pages can get tattered and marked up as the reader forms an understanding of how to be an effective communicator. In this process, some approaches or topics will pique the reader's interest, and this book will be one-stop shopping to find other materials to satiate that interest.

In the end, we are left with a book that meets its goal and provides as useful a guide for professional communicators as anybody could desire. The purpose of each exercise is clear, the language accessible. The book does not pretend to be an "authoritative guide," nor does it try to be an "idiot's guide to communicating." It treats the reader with respect and checks pretension at the door. What is left is quite simply an invaluable way to think about audiences and how to reach them effectively.