



RAY KYTLE

CONCEPTS IN CONTEXT:
ASPECTS OF THE WRITER'S CRAFT

Concepts in Context: Aspects Of The Writer's Craft

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Preface

This book, as the title suggests, discusses the writer's craft in the context of student and professional writing. Concept and context, principle and practice, aspect and application are never allowed to become independent of one another. The danger of talking *about* writing is that the student will conceive the writing act as a mechanical skill acquired by learning rules. The drawback of a separate book of readings is that a focus on specific aspects of writing can be lost in the myriad complexity of essays, each of which embodies multitudinous aspects. *Concepts in Context* attempts a synthesis.

To this end the text utilizes a five-part deductive structure consisting of explanation, illustration-discussion, illustration-questions, applications-contexts and writing options. First, a rhetorical concept is introduced and explained; the concept is presented. Next, a piece of writing is discussed in terms of the preceding explanation. Third, the student is asked to demonstrate his grasp of the concept in context by analyzing an illustrative example. Fourth, in order to emphasize that each aspect of the writer's craft points toward the whole composition, the student is asked to consider the concept in the total context of one or more complete works. Finally, the student applies the rhetorical consideration in his own writing through varied writing options.

In *Writing as a Process of Discovery* the authors observe that:

To respond to an assignment intelligently, a writer—student or professional—must know exactly what is expected of him. He needs to know precisely what his task is . . . ; he definitely needs to have a purpose for his writing about a specific topic; and he needs to know for whom he is writing.

If one accepts this view, then it is misleading advice, indeed, to tell the student that the preliminary or prewriting stages of writing are, as one popular handbook puts it, "focusing on a subject, gathering material, deciding on methods of development." Instead, the writer should approach his subject in order to realize a specific purpose in relation to a clearly conceived audience. (It makes little difference whether subject, purpose and audience are self-selected or prescribed.)

To advise otherwise is to deemphasize or negate the dynamic writer-reader relationship and interaction by which all written communication stands or falls. Hence, I have chosen to begin not with a discussion of subject and thesis but with a discussion of the writer-reader relation-

ship and the interaction among the writer's audience, his purpose and his tone.

In writing this book, I have become especially indebted to editor Thomas Gay, of Wiley, for his patience and unfailing support, to Professors Edward P.J. Corbett, Russell Meyer, Winston Weathers, Russell Larson and Joseph Trimmer for their insightful criticisms and thoughtful suggestions. To these friends and colleagues I wish to communicate my thanks and appreciation.

Ray Kytle

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Audience, Purpose and Tone

Even though the concepts of audience, purpose and tone may appear to be discrete, they are so tightly interrelated in practice that they are most profitably discussed together. When a writer considers one concept, he should consider all three.

AUDIENCE

All writing that will be read by someone other than the writer has an audience, and the writer should take into account the nature of his audience, their presumed values, knowledgeability and maturity. When one writes an argumentative essay, he should consider whether his audience will be sympathetic, neutral or hostile to the view he is espousing and should develop his strategy accordingly. When one writes an expository essay, he should consider the knowledgeability of his audience about the subject he is explaining, so that his presentation will neither be lost on his audience because it assumes knowledge they don't possess, nor insult his audience because it repeats what they already know. And, of course, the relative maturity of one's audience governs diction, sentence length, and the complexity of one's presentation.

PURPOSE

By definition, the purpose of argumentative writing is to convince or persuade, to make the reader agree with the writer's opinion, or take some action, or both. The surest way *not* to achieve this purpose is to write entirely from one's own personal perspective without considering the reader. The student-author of the letter reprinted below wanted to persuade the editor of his hometown newspaper to include more coverage of local sports events. Here's what he wrote:

September 14, 1973

Mrs. Betty Noteware, Editor
Manistee NEWS ADVOCATE
Manistee, Michigan

Dear Mrs. Noteware:

The coverage of county sports events in your paper is lousy. During recent years the county's sports programs have received very little or even *NO* coverage at all. This is sickening. Oh, there's nothing very much wrong with the sports writer except he could not even write a decent obituary, let alone an entire sports page.

Well over half the papers which the *Manistee News Advocate* sells are purchased by people that live in the rural area surrounding Manistee, and

whose children attend rural schools. If all the people who have an interest in sports at the county level would cancel their subscription to the *News Advocate*, it would tickle me to no end.

Sincerely yours,

Stanley Finan
Concerned Manistee County Citizen

The letter is virtually guaranteed to evoke anger instead of action. It is pugnacious, it gratuitously insults the sports editor, and it ends on a note of sarcastic hostility.

If your purpose is argumentative, put yourself in the place of your audience: What considerations are most likely to sway them? What objections are they likely to raise? What appeals can you use to win a sympathetic hearing? Notice how this rewritten version of the letter to the editor differs from the original:

September 16, 1973

Mrs. Betty Noteware, Editor
Manistee NEWS ADVOCATE
Manistee, Michigan

Dear Mrs. Noteware:

As a native of Manistee, I have been a long-time subscriber to your newspaper. The thoughtfulness of your editorials and the in-depth analysis of national events have always impressed me as outstanding qualities of the *News Advocate*.

In one particular area, however, I feel there is room for improvement. Even though most of the subscribers to the *News Advocate* live in the greater Manistee area and are thus closely identified with the local scene, the coverage of county sports events is often spotty and thin. I cannot help believing that fuller coverage of local and regional sports would enhance the *News Advocate's* appeal and might well win your paper new subscribers. Such additional coverage would also demonstrate your concern for the community that supports the *News Advocate* and your support for the sports events that interest so many members of the community.

I hope you will consider my comments in the spirit in which they are offered. Increased coverage of the local sports scene would make an already fine newspaper finer.

Sincerely yours,

Stanley Finan

TONE

One of the major differences between the two versions of the letter is *tone*. The tone of the original is sarcastic, abrasive, hostile; the tone of the revision is mild and reasonable. "Tone" refers to the author's attitude toward his subject or audience, as communicated through his style of writing. The tone of a composition may be formal, informal, or intimate; it may be solemn, serious, humorous, ironic, indignant, sarcastic, condescending, and so forth. Sentence structure, diction, choice of examples, nature of presentation, all of these help to establish tone.

No one tone is intrinsically superior to any other tone. But the tone a writer creates should be appropriate to his subject, his audience and his purpose. And, in a short work, the tone should be *consistent*. Notice what happens in the latter portion of this brief essay:

COLLEGE: COSTS AND ALTERNATIVES

Phillip Livernois

A college education may not be worth it if one considers what it actually costs the student in terms of time and money, and also the use of alternative means of education in place of it.

It costs the average student \$12,000 to \$16,000 for four years of college, minus \$4,000-\$8,000 for living expenses that must be paid regardless of the education. One must live in school or out. The student suffers a loss from tuition costs of \$4,000. If he has had to borrow money to pay for this, there is also interest to be added in.

One must consider also money lost from not working at a full time job, plus of course, the insurance benefits and seniority rights one can attain. This runs from \$6,000 to \$12,000 per year for four years, if not more. Since, on the national average, a man with four years of college does not make much more than a factory worker, the college graduate might not make up the money lost.

Consider, also, alternatives to a formal college education. One could work for awhile and then take a leave of absence to travel around the world; or work in another country for awhile; or trade homes with a foreign family. Conceivably one could get a better education in these ways than a university could give. True, it is not the formalized and accredited education of the big university, but it is education. Isn't that what really matters? Or is it the piece of paper that you get for four years of your time and four thousand dollars that matters so much? Hell, it would be easier just to up the ante and get the piece of paper in the mail, without putting in your time. That way you could get the so-called education and also be free to learn.

The straightforward statement of thesis, the third person point of view, the relatively formal language, the objective analysis of the cost of a college education, all of these aspects of style and presentation together create a "standard essay" tone: impersonal, objective, analytical. But about halfway through the last paragraph, the tone shifts abruptly. The author shifts from third person to second person, from an objective analysis to a subjective, personal response, from relative formality to informality. The effect is disconcerting to the reader. Objective analysis suddenly gives way to subjective judgment.

The first few sentences of a piece of writing automatically establish a tone. If they are serious and formal, so is the tone; if they are ironic, the tone is ironic. If the writer shifts or drifts into a different tone in the course of his composition, he has changed his attitude toward his subject and audience, and the reader will almost certainly be annoyed or confused, or both.

ILLUSTRATION

Ultimately, the economic foundations of this country must be shaken if black people are to control their lives. The colonies of the United States—and this includes the black ghettos within its borders, north and south—must be liberated. For a century, this nation has been like an octopus of exploitation, its tentacles stretching from Mississippi and Harlem to South America, the Middle East, southern Africa, and Vietnam; the form of exploitation varies from area to area but the essential result has been the same—a powerful few have been maintained and enriched at the expense of the poor and voiceless colored masses. This pattern must be broken. As its grip loosens here and there around the world, the hopes of black Americans become more realistic. For racism to die, a totally different America must be born.

*Stokeley Carmichael,
"What We Want"*

DISCUSSION

Carmichael, in the essay that this paragraph introduces, is addressing a generalized audience of whites and blacks. His purpose is to persuade, and his tone is one of forceful but restrained indignation. Given his purpose, an angry or strident tone might alienate a large segment of his white audience. But studious, analytical objectivity would be hypocritical. He elects a tone that identifies him as an angry black, but also as a man whose emotions are under control and who intends to reason. The alternating long and short sentences describing condition and conclusion, situation and solution, help to create the forceful, challenging tone, as do the strong images and metaphors: "colonies," "octopus," "tentacles," "grip." In respect to tone, at least, the critical view that form and content are inseparable is hard to fault.

ILLUSTRATION

Who are you? You singly, not you together. When did it start—that long day's journey into self? When do you really begin to know what you believe and where you're going? When do you know that you are unique—separate—alone?

The time of discovery is different for everybody. Some people find themselves in early childhood, some in middle-age, some—the tragic ones—never.

I suggest that the first recognition comes when others try to tell you what you are. And although what happened in my generation is supposed to have no relevance to what happens in yours, I know when it happened to me.

I may have been six years old when aunts and uncles and cousins used to say: "You look just like your mother!" or "You're the image of your brother!"

Now, for reasons that have nothing to do with duty or discipline in that distant day, I loved my family. I loved them because they were interesting, handsome, talented, and loving people. I was lucky. But in spite of that, I felt an immediate, instinctive resistance to any suggestion that I was like them or like anybody else. I didn't want to be like anybody else. I was Me. Myself. Separate. Alone.

*Marya Mannes,
"Who Am I?"*

QUESTIONS

1. How does the tone of this excerpt differ from the tone of the paragraph written by Stokeley Carmichael? Is it more personal or less personal, more formal or less formal?

2. What aspects of style create or help to create the tone of this passage? (Consider point of view, level of diction, directness of address, sentence structure, and so forth.)
3. What audience is the author addressing? How do you know? How is this writer's audience different from Carmichael's?
4. What is your reaction to the tone of this passage? Does it seem appropriate? Does the tone induce you to read on, sympathetically, or does it bother you, perhaps alienate you from the author? Can you explain the reasons for your reaction?

APPLICATIONS

1. Why is the tone of the commercial printed below grossly and grotesquely *inappropriate*? What does your answer suggest about the relation of tone and subject?

ON CASKETS

Chambers' caskets are just fine,
 Made of sandalwood and pine.
 If your loved ones have to go
 Call Columbus 690.
 If your loved ones pass away,
 Have them pass the Chambers way.
 Chambers' customers all sing:
 "Death, oh death, where is thy sting?"

Casket Commercial, sung to tune of Rock of Ages.

2. Analyze the purpose, presumed audience and tone of the introductions below. What does your analysis suggest about the typical tone of argumentative essays addressed to a general audience?

The Indian can probably survive the bad housing, lack of jobs, dismal health conditions, and poor education—but not the implication that he is irrelevant to American culture. For once the Indians are deprived of the last