The Ethics of Persuasive Writing

This week's readings introduce you to the rhetorical lens that we will use to explore persuasive communication this term. In the first reading, you will read about the concepts of community literacy and intercultural rhetoric through Linda Flower's "Rhetoric of Community Engagement." The second and third readings focus on the expectations for college writing and critical reading skills. These will help you to interpret the expectations of any assignment that you receive and start critically analyzing information that you encounter in this class, other classes, at work, and in the community.

Unit 2 Part 1: Linda Flower's Rhetoric of Community Engagement

Community literacy is a form of literate action that allows:

Everyday people within the urban community to take agency in their lives and for their community;

Everyday people from places of privilege to participate in this struggle for understanding social justice.

Community literacy depends on the social ethic and strategic practice of intercultural rhetoric to:

Draw out the voices of the silenced and the expertise of marginalized people;

Draw people normally separated by difference into new roles as partners in inquiry;

Recognize and use difference in the service of discovery and change, transforming rather than erasing its conflicts and contradictions.

Community literacy is, in short, a working hypothesis about how we might construct a community that supports dialogue across difference.

--Linda Flower (2008).

Persuasive communication often takes place in the context of a specific community rather than just in face-to-face interactions between two people. When advocating for a community-level change, we must establish an understanding of the community. To do this, we must consider the many different stakeholders and how the issue affects each of them in unique ways. **Situated knowledge** is the treasure trove of experience and the meaning made from those experiences. It shapes how each community member thinks about an issue and their hopes and fears in relation to the issue.

The effort to understand and address an issue across community differences has given rise to a specific persuasive framework created by Linda Flower (2003) and referred to as **intercultural rhetoric**. The goal of intercultural rhetoric is to bring forth all voices in the community, regardless of education or training in persuasive communication, so that each has a place at the table in the effort to solve a problem. This means that intercultural rhetors are not easily

satisfied with the surface understanding of an issue. Instead, they are actively engaged in uncovering the missing, unrepresented voices in an issue and creating a negotiated understanding of the problem along with potential solutions.

> Partners in inquiry turn to literate strategies to help them to elicit something of the situated, affective, and embodied knowledge behind the speakers' words (where important differences may lie); to embrace these as rival interpretations; and to draw themselves into a joint, reconstructive negotiation with their own understandings. An intercultural rhetoric based on inquiry is, then, a deliberate meaning-making activity in which difference is not read as a problem but *sought out as a resource for constructing more grounded and actionable understandings*.
>
> --Linda Flower (2003)

There are three key processes involved in intercultural inquiry: seeking the **story-behind-the-story**, proposing **rival hypotheses**, and exploring **options and outcomes** (Flower, 2003).

You might remember the **story-behind-the-story** from Unit 1. The story-behind-the-story helps to uncover the situated knowledge that each stakeholder has. It seeks out a range of viewpoints and actively looks for stakeholders in the community that have a vested interest in the issue but haven't yet been heard in the conversation (Flower, 2008). For example, people often argue about how to improve prisons, but do we seek input from prisoners? If we wish to help the homeless, they are one of the most important voices that we should consult. What about stopping high school students from dropping out? Conversations with at-risk students and even those who have already dropped out can be a great source of information when trying to understand the cause of the problem and what would help motivate them to stay in school.

Our narrative about issues in prisons, homelessness, and dropout rates may only skim the surface of the issue if we don't pause to try to understand what is behind the surface story of prisoners, homeless community members, and at-risk students. When we find ways to engage a wide range of stakeholders, we can think about what concerns are important to them and advocate for change *with* these community members rather than *for* them.

Ethical persuasion in the community is focused on learning rather than winning an argument. Through openness and the willingness to negotiate meaning with other community stakeholders, writers can actually tune in more successfully to their own interests and positions (Flowers, 2008). Once community understanding has been negotiated, the intercultural communicator can establish a preliminary argument for change.

Once this argument is presented, the speaker actively seeks **rival hypotheses**. These **rival hypotheses** present alternative scenarios that challenge the presentation of the problem by the speaker (Flower, 2013). For example, in a recommendation for mental health support in prisons, a prisoner might argue that the current prison environment makes it difficult for prisoners to safely pursue their mental health needs. They may present a rival hypothesis that efforts to improve their mental health could make prisoners appear weak and thus a target for violence. They may argue that something larger has to change in prison culture for mental health programs to be effective. This information can be used by the speaker as a prompt for examining prison culture and how it may undermine efforts by mental health advocates.

Finally, rather than just attempting to win an argument, the writer of intercultural rhetoric seeks resolution within the community. Resolution is found by evaluating **options and outcomes** in a way that can bring about positive change (Flower, 2008). As new information comes to light, the solution is analyzed and reconsidered in an evolving process. Going back to the desire to provide mental health support in prisons, community members may offer a range of options. What if prisoners in mental health programs were kept in a different wing of the prison? Would that be special treatment? How might that increase the target on prisoners if they are perceived to have special treatment? Should every prisoner be required to undergo a mental health evaluation and rehabilitation protocol regardless of mental health status? Could specific prisons be designated as treatment facilities that try to build a culture of rehabilitation instead of the traditional prison culture? How would one decide who gets to go to the treatment-based prisons?

This exploration of options and possible outcomes through the lenses of different community members enables the rhetor to present a more effective argument by speaking *with* rather than *for* marginalized community members (Flower, 2008). Each community member's situated knowledge is valid and relevant as the writer explores solutions.

When we expand the definition of community to include the workplace or even the family environment, these same ideas can be applied. A decision within a company about establishing a new family leave policy will affect staff in different ways. Alice, who has a child in preschool and often has to take time off when her daughter is sick, is in a different situation than John, who is supporting an elderly parent who recently had a heart attack and lives six hours away. Alice and John will each bring their situated knowledge based on their experience to the table when negotiating a new family leave policy. The employer that learns to communicate across differences can expand the number of available solution

and can even test out those solutions by assessing the possible outcomes and how those outcomes may impact different workers.

References

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Unit 2 Reading - Part 2: What Does the Professor Want? Understanding the Assignment

Writing for whom? Writing for what?

The first principle of good communication is knowing your audience. Another basic tenet of good communication is clarifying the purpose of the communication and letting that purpose shape your decisions. In scholarly writing, your professor wants to see you work through complex ideas and deepen your knowledge through the process of producing the paper. Each assignment— be it an argumentative paper, lab report, or discussion question— is ultimately about demonstrating your learning.

> Don’t be scared whenever you are given an assignment. Professors know what it was like to be in college and write all kinds of papers. They aren’t trying to make your lives difficult, but it is their jobs to make us think and ponder about many things. Take your time and enjoy the paper.
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> --Timothée Pizarro

You would do well to approach every assignment by putting yourself in the shoes of your instructor and asking yourself, “Why did she give me this assignment? How does it fit into the learning goals of the course?”

Put the assignment in context. Many professors think in terms of assignment sequences. For example, a social science professor may ask you to write about a controversial issue three times: first, arguing for one side of the debate; second, arguing for another; and finally, from a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective, incorporating text produced in the first two assignments. A sequence like that is designed to help you think through a complex issue. Another common one is a scaffolded research paper sequence: you first propose a topic, then prepare an annotated bibliography, then a first draft, then a final draft, and a final reflective paper. The preparatory assignments help ensure that you’re on the right track, beginning the research process long before the final due date and taking the time to consider recasting your thesis, finding additional sources, or reorganizing your discussion.

Review Instructions, Rubrics, and Sample Projects: All courses at Purdue Global will include assignment instructions and rubrics. Some, like this one, will even include sample assignments. The rubrics and sample assignments can be

a great way to check your understanding and get a sense of what the final product should look like. A best practice to consider is printing two copies of an assignment rubric. The first copy can be used as a checklist while writing an assignment. The second copy can be used in the final editing stage to ensure that all of the necessary requirements have been addressed. If something in the rubric is unclear, you can email your instructor that section of the rubric and ask them for clarification.

Ask for clarification in an effective way. Even the most skillfully crafted assignments may need some verbal clarification, especially because students' familiarity with the field can vary enormously. Asking for clarification is a good thing. Be aware that instructors get frustrated when they perceive that students want to skip doing their own thinking and instead receive an exact recipe for an A paper. Go ahead and ask for clarification, but try to convey that you want to learn and you're ready to work.

It also helps to be as specific as possible. Below are some examples of vague questions that are hard for professors to answer and preferable alternatives.

Vague or difficult to answer questions	**Preferable alternatives**
I don't get it. Can you explain this more? or What do you want us to do?	I see that we are comparing and contrasting these two cases. What should be our focus? Their causes? Their impacts? Their implications? All of those things? or I'm unfamiliar with how nurses write up case notes. Could you say more about what key elements I should address to make sure I meet the guidelines?
How many sources do we have to cite?	Is there a typical range for the number of sources a well-written paper would cite for this assignment? or Could you say more about what the sources are for? Is it more that we're analyzing these texts in this paper, or are we using these texts to analyze some other case?

What do I have to do to get an A on this paper?	Could I meet with you to get feedback on my (pre-prepared) plans/outline/thesis/draft? or I'm not sure how to approach this assignment. Are there any good examples or resources you could point me to?

What's critical about critical thinking?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) defines critical thinking as "a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion" (Rhodes, 2010, p.1). Ultimately, critical thinking means taking a good look and deciding what you *really* think rather than relying on the first idea or assumption that comes to mind.

The critical thinking rubric produced by the AAC&U describes the relevant activities of critical thinking in more detail. To think critically, one must ...

(a) "clearly state and comprehensively describe the issue or problem", (b) "independently interpret and evaluate sources", (c) "thoroughly analyze assumptions behind and context of your own or others' ideas", (d) "argue a complex position and one that takes counter-arguments into account," and (e) "arrive at logical and well informed conclusions" (Rhodes, 2010, p.2).

Interestingly, the AAC&U defines critical thinking as a "habit of mind" rather than a discrete achievement. And there are at least two reasons to see critical thinking as a craft or art to pursue rather than a task to check off. First, the more you think critically, the better you get at it. As you get more practice in closely examining claims, their underlying logic, and alternative perspectives on the issue, it'll become automatic. You'll no longer make or accept claims that begin with "Everyone knows that ..." or end with "That's just human nature." Second, just as artists and craftspersons hone their skills over a lifetime, learners continually expand their critical thinking capacities, both through the feedback they receive from others and their own reflections. Professionals find satisfaction in continually seeking greater challenges. Continual reflection and improvement is part of the craft.

Critical thinking is hard work. Even those who actively choose to do it experience it as tedious, difficult, and sometimes surprisingly emotional. Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2011) explains that our brains aren't designed to think; rather, they're designed to save us from having to think. Our brains are great at developing routines and repertoires that enable us to accomplish complex tasks like driving cars, choosing groceries, and having a

conversation without thinking consciously and thoroughly about every move we make. Kahneman calls this “fast thinking.” “Slow thinking,” which is deliberate and painstaking, is something our brains seek to avoid. That built-in tendency can lead us astray.

Some students assume that an unpleasant critical thinking experience means that they’re either doing something wrong or that it’s an inherently uninteresting activity. While we all relish those times when we’re pleasantly absorbed in a complex activity--what psychologist Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi (1990) calls “flow”--the more tedious experiences can also bring satisfaction, sort of like a good workout. Critical thinking can also be emotionally challenging, researchers have found. Facing a new realm of uncertainty and contradiction without relying on familiar assumptions is inherently anxiety-provoking because when you’re doing it, you are, by definition, not yet clear about something. Think about children learning to walk. They get frustrated more easily and they fall over and over again as they figure out the movements and coordinate them into their first steps. The frustration is a necessary part of the process, and the breakthrough of walking makes it worth every moment. Fortunately, as we age, we also learn that we can take steps to minimize frustration as we work through creative tension and critically explore a topic.

The demands students face are not at all unique to their academic pursuits. Professional working roles demand critical thinking, as 81% of major employers reported in an AAC&U-commissioned survey (Hart, 2010), and it’s easy to imagine how critical thinking helps one make much better decisions in all aspects of life. Embrace it. And just as athletes, artists, and writers sustain their energy and inspiration for hard work by interacting with others who share these passions, look to others in the scholarly community—your professors and fellow students—to keep yourself engaged in these ongoing intellectual challenges. While writing time is often solitary, it’s meant to plug you into a vibrant academic community. What your professors want, overall, is for you to join them in asking and pursuing important questions about the natural, social, and creative worlds.

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(Reading from Guptill, A. (2016). What does the professor want? *Writing in College:FromCompetence to Excellence*. (pp. 9-18). Open SUNY Textbooks.)

Unit 2 Part 3: Critical Reading

Critiquing a Text

Here's a new term: when we critique (crih-TEEK) a text, we evaluate it, asking it questions. Critique shares a root with the word "criticize." Most of us tend to think of criticism as being negative or mean, but in the academic sense, doing a critique is not the least bit negative. Rather, it's a constructive way to better explore and understand the material we're working with. The word's origin means "to evaluate," and through our critique, we do a deep evaluation of a text. (see the glossary of terms).

When we critique a text, we interrogate it. Imagine the text, sitting on a stool under a bright, dangling light bulb while you ask, in a demanding voice, "What did you mean by having Professor Mustard wear a golden yellow fedora?"

When we critique, our own opinions and ideas become part of our textual analysis. We question the text, we argue with it, and we delve into it for deeper meanings.

Here are some ideas to consider when critiquing a text:

- How did you respond to the piece? Did you like it? Did it appeal to you? Could you identify with it?
- Do you agree with the main ideas in the text?
- Did you find any errors in reasoning? Any gaps in the discussion?
- Did the organization make sense?
- Was evidence used correctly, without manipulation? Has the writer used appropriate sources for support?
- Is the author objective? Biased? Reasonable? (Note that the author might just as easily be subjective, unbiased, and unreasonable! Every type of writing and tone can be used for a specific purpose. By identifying these techniques and considering *why* the author is using them, you begin to understand more about the text.)
- Has the author left anything out? If yes, was this accidental? Intentional?
- Are the text's tone and language text appropriate?

- Are all of the author’s statements clear? Is anything confusing?
- What worked well in the text? What was lacking or failed completely?

- What is the cultural context* of the text?

These are only a few ideas relating to critique, but they'll get you started. When you critique, try working with these statements, offering explanations to support your ideas. Bring in content from the text (textual evidence) to support your ideas.

Synthesizing

To synthesize is to combine ideas and create a completely *new* idea. That new idea becomes the conclusion you have drawn from your reading. This is the true beauty of reading: it causes us to weigh ideas, to compare, judge, think, and explore—and then to arrive at a moment that we hadn't known before. We begin with a simple summary, work through analysis, evaluate using critique, and then move on to synthesis.

Check Your Understanding: Jargon

Jargon refers to language, abbreviations, or terms that are used by specific groups— typically those people involved in a profession. Using jargon within that group makes conversation simpler, and it works because everyone in the group knows the lingo.

The problem with using jargon when writing is that if your readers do not know what those terms mean, you'll lose them.

Read this paragraph that relies heavily on jargon:

- *Those who experience sx of URI might consider visiting a PCP. This should happen ASAP with pyrexia >101, enlarged cervical nodes, purulent nares drainage, or tonsillar hypertrophy. Tx may include qid antibios, ASA, fluids, and a mucolytic.*

If you're in a medical field, you probably understood that paragraph. Otherwise, it probably sounded like another language!

Now read this translation in lay (non-jargon) terms:

- *Those who have cold symptoms might consider visiting their primary care provider. This should happen quickly if there is fever over 101, swollen glands in the neck, green or yellow drainage from the nose, or inflamed, swollen tonsils. Treatment may include antibiotics, aspirin, fluids, and medications designed to loosen phlegm and make it easier to cough.*

That's quite a change, yes? It's a good example of why we usually want to avoid jargon, only use it with an audience that understands it, or explain each term carefully as we use it.

What did you discover about jargon? What areas are you familiar with that may have their own types of jargon?

(Reading from Babin, M., Burnell, C., Pesznecker, N.R., & Wood, J. (2017). *The word on college reading and writing*. https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/wrd/)