Study Notes:
Introduction to Scholarly Writing: Purpose, Audience, and Evidence

Purpose

Every piece of writing—a shopping list, an advertisement, a car owner's manual, a newspaper editorial, a poem—presumably is written for a reason. Three common purposes of all writing are to (a) inform, (b) persuade, and (c) engage or somehow entertain.

Consider this paragraph—the opening of an essay written by a high school student. As you read, think about her purpose:

> If you have too much cholesterol in your blood, your arteries can become coated with this fat-like substance. Eventually your arteries can get narrowed and clogged, which will make it more difficult for your blood to get to your heart. When that happens your chest might start hurting. If part of your heart gets completely cut off from the block artery, you might experience a heart attack.

In essence, this high school student was trying to persuade her teacher that she knew something about cholesterol's effect on blood circulation. And she demonstrated her knowledge by summarizing what she had read about cholesterol and the blood supply to the heart.

Now consider the purpose of this paragraph on a related topic, taken from a medical journal:

> According to the oxidative-modification hypothesis, LDL initially accumulates in the extracellular subendothelial space of arteries and, through the action of resident vascular cells, is mildly oxidized to a form known as minimally modified LDL [14] (Figure 1). This minimally modified LDL induces local vascular cells to produce monocyte chemotactic protein 1 and granulocyte and macrophage colony-stimulating factors, which stimulate monocyte recruitment and differentiation to macrophages in arterial walls.[16] The accumulating monocytes and macrophages stimulate further peroxidation of LDL (Diaz, Frei, Vita & Keaney, 1997, p. 409).

Ultimately, the task of both of these writers was the same as your task will be as a scholarly writer at Walden. You must ensure that your writing includes the use of credible evidence, logic, and careful structure to inform and persuade a reader to accept a conclusion (Rosen, 2006).

As a scholarly writer, you must demonstrate that:

- you know what you are writing about,
- what you are writing about is true, and
- what you are writing about matters.

To do this, you must present solid evidence that will pass the critical read of your audience in a scholarly voice.

Look more closely at the essential components of scholarly writing: audience, evidence, critical reading, significance, style, and voice.

Audience

When we speak and when we write, all of us, whether consciously or unconsciously, are aware of the expectations and needs of our audience. Read the following writing examples and consider:

- the author's purpose
- the audience for whom the author was writing

1. Once upon a time there was a hare who, boasting how he could run faster than anyone else, was forever teasing the tortoise for its slowness. Then one day, the irate tortoise answered back: "Who do you think you are? There's no denying you're swift, but even you can be beaten!" The hare squealed with laughter.

   "Beaten in a race? By whom? Not you, surely! I bet there's nobody in the world that [sic] can win against me, I'm so speedy. Now, why don't you try?"

   Annoyed by such bragging, the tortoise accepted the challenge.

   From Aesop's fables. (n.d.). The tortoise and the hare. Retrieved May 21, 2005, from http://childhoodreading.com/Arthur_Rackham/Tortoise_and_the_Hare.html

2. World government through the United Nations is a serious threat to the freedom of all Americans. Imagine being held prisoner in a foreign land and tried in an international court with judges from such countries as Afghanistan, China, or Iraq.

Fact: The United Nations (financed by American taxpayers!) has long been a safe harbor for terrorist and oppressive regimes which target America as the enemy.

Even more alarming, the United Nations is beginning to take aim at the God-given rights enjoyed by Americans since our great nation was founded. The right to self defense, to use your own property, or even the right to have children may all be trampled if the United Nations is allowed to have the power it seeks.

Why *Get US out!* of the United Nations? (2004). Retrieved from http://www.getusout.org/index.html 2004 John Birch Society.

3. A cultural systems approach to education “considers the organization of society, specifically the roles and status assigned to cultural groups within a society as a major determinant of cognitive and social development” (Garcia, 1994, p. 197). Earlier, Ogbu (1991) suggested that the specific social placement of a cultural group within the broader social fabric of society will directly affect the values, perceptions, and social behaviors of members of that group. For several decades, distinct culturally influenced social behaviors have been found between multicultural children and European American children (Cartledge & Milburn, 1996; Rivera & Rogers-Adkinson, 1997, ¶14).

   From Utley, C. A., Kozleski, E., Smith, A., & Draper, I. L. (2002). Positive behavior support: A proactive strategy for minimizing behavior problems in urban multicultural youth. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 4*(4), 196.

Writing examples 1–3, each have a purpose. Which, if any, exemplify "good writing"? Any that successfully meets the needs and expectations of its audience—in this case, children, United Nations bashers, and academics and educators.

As a scholarly writer at Walden, who is your audience?

You can assume that your audience, your faculty reader, has a master’s degree or a doctorate; has high expectations for your writing; doesn't like to read a lot of fluff; has a pretty good sense of humor; and is committed to social change, online learning, and you as a Walden student. Your reader is also someone who is eager to work with you, help you, have you show him or her that you know what you're talking about, and learn from *you*.

Audience Expectations

You might picture your reader as an old coot in a stuffed chair drinking warm brandy, say, Eleanor Roosevelt or Andy Rooney. In some cases that's not far off (though some Walden faculty prefer to see themselves having the grace and intelligence of a Katherine Hepburn or Denzel Washington). While your reader might be your biggest cheerleader, understand that he or she definitely has high expectations and will require that your writing demonstrate critical reading and critical thinking skills, clarity, conciseness, coherence, objectivity, strong mechanics, and adherence to style. Your reader also knows that writing of this caliber develops, not overnight, but over time.

Reading and Writing Critically

Too often students make the mistake of regurgitating what they have read, in a style not far from this:

> Jones (1997) studied such and such. He surveyed 100 students. He found this and that. Smith (2000) studied something else. She surveyed a different group. She found this, that, and the other. Perez (1999) studied yet something different. She too surveyed people. She found out something interesting too. But to tell you the truth, I think these people are all wrong.

As you can imagine, your eye-strained reader will not be impressed with a patchwork quilt of vaguely related ideas and mini book reports. Scholarly writing must show that you have critically examined what you have read. In other words, that you have analyzed, evaluated, interpreted, and questioned the material and your own experience.

As a scholarly writer at Walden, you are responsible to:

- summarize
- compare
- contrast
- synthesize
- analyze
- evaluate
- interpret

"So What?" and "Who Cares?" Questions

Merely repeating the ideas and words theorists and researchers is not interesting to you or your reader. However, critically reading the literature and synthesizing ideas and past research into a new whole, one that addresses an area of

practice that you may be involved in, can be very interesting and stimulating to read, and even fun to write.

The number of syllables a writer uses or the number of fancy words a reader has to look up is not a measure of the best academic writing. The best writing has a purpose for every word, every sentence, every paragraph, and every page. The best writing grabs the reader by the eyeballs and announces, "This is important. I am about to show you a new way of understanding how the world works."

Evidence

As noted earlier, one of your key tasks as a scholarly writer is to show that what you have written is true and that you know what you're writing about. A convincing assertion of the truth, then, demands convincing evidence, presented objectively and based on logic.

Read the following assertions, which someone surely has asserted at one time or another as "the truth":

- Boys are naturally better at math than are girls.
- In the northern United States, cedar shakes withstand seasonal climate changes better than asphalt shingles do.
- Individual school districts rather than state or federal governmental bodies should set achievement standards at the local level.

How do we as readers and writers know if one or any of these assertions is true?

Your task, as a scholarly writer, involves not only writing the truth—but also reading about it with a critical, evaluative eye—looking for logic and adherence to scientific method and rigor.

Like a gold miner sifting through buckets of sand for a few sparkling nuggets, your task is to mine seemingly endless evidence for those nuggets that best help you establish your authority. That is not to say that you're searching only for supportive evidence. To the contrary, scholarly writers understand that one-sided arguments that ignore opposing viewpoints are usually thin on credibility. Your readers expect you to support your arguments with unfiltered evidence that assumes the rigor of the scientific method.

The Value of Opinions and Experience

At this point, you might be wondering what role your opinions and experience play in scholarly writing and if they matter to the scholarly reader. To be honest, your opinions and experience matter only insofar as the solid evidence you present backs them. After all, our opinions, as author Anaïs Nin pointed out, often reflect not the way the world is—but the way we see the world.

Scholarly writing often is about discovering and revealing what is *not* known. The beauty of the scholarly endeavor is not to confirm what you have determined to be “the truth,” but the opportunity to find out the truth of something you don’t already know.