



Cornell University

John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines

Document Title: Know Your Audience: Observing (and Making Choices about) Languages

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Course: Earth and Atmospheric Sciences 1420

Course Title: Sustainable Earth, Energy, and Environmental Systems

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Fall 2011 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it, addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning Writing Exercises and Handouts will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See creativecommons.org for more information about cc licensing.)

The two winning entries will receive \$350; honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, December 16. No exceptions can be made.

Fall 2011 Knight Award for Writing Exercises

~Please Print Clearly~

Instructor's name Emily Pollina

Department EAS Course # and title 1420: Sustainable Earth, Energy, and Environmental System

Should I win a prize, I give the John S. Knight Institute permission to publish, quote from, and/or distribute copies of the writing exercises, and to distribute publicity to newspapers and other publications, local and/or national, about my winning the prize. I also grant the Knight Institute permission to deposit the writing exercises in a web accessible archive and make them available under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. I am prepared to send electronic versions of my text to Donna O'Hara (dlo1@cornell.edu) in the Knight Institute. I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

Know Your Audience: Observing (And Making Choices About) Language
Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature Emily Pollina Date 12/16/2011

Know Your Audience- Observing (and Making Choices About) Language

Science writers, including professional scientists and science journalists, must choose language carefully to communicate effectively with their chosen audience. They must consider the words their audience is likely to know and the sentence structures to which their audience is accustomed. This exercise is designed to encourage you to *observe* the language choices professional writers make and then *use* your observations to re-write a passage for a different audience.

Consider the three writing samples you read for homework:

Sample 1 is the summary (abstract) of a key 1981 *Science* article that modeled the connection between increases in carbon dioxide and global warming. It was published in a journal read by people in all disciplines of the sciences (chemists, physicists, biologists, etc.). The abstract of an article is designed to give an overview of the paper's most important messages and convince specialists in the field to read the full article in more depth.

Sample 2 is a set of sections from the body of the same science article as Sample 1. While people in many fields might read this article, it is primarily addressed to other climate scientists. (That is, people outside of climate science are more likely to read the abstract than the full article.)

Sample 3 is a *New York Times* article that reported the findings of this science paper. It is written by a professional journalist (not the author of the previous paper).

STEP 1: Re-read the three passages and compare the language and sentence structure of the three samples. The chart on the last page of this exercise suggests some potential categories for comparison. What language features do the articles share? How does their language differ?

STEP 2: In a group of 3, compare your observations about the language. What did all of you notice? What did only some people notice? Did you disagree about the language use?

STEP 3: Still in your groups: Imagine you are being asked to produce a set of up to 6 informational museum signs for a display on this topic. Your museum signs should summarize the key information in this article in language appropriate for audiences in late elementary school/early middle school (and those who are older).

STEP 4: Write up your signs on the butcher paper provided and post them. Be prepared to give a tour of your museum signs to your classmates and to defend to the class your choices in A) information included and B) language chosen.

Comparison Chart for the Three Writing Samples

	Sample 1: <i>Science</i> Article Summary	Sample 2: Excerpt from Body of <i>Science</i> Article	Sample 3: New York Times Article
Word choice (technical terms, overall impression of vocabulary used)			
Sentence length			
Voice (active or passive)			
Complexity of sentence subjects			
Use of prepositional phrases			
Use of Punctuation (commas, question marks)?			
Use of Adjectives			

Other cool stuff you noticed			
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Rationale: Environmental scientists consider it very important to communicate with the public about their findings, because large scale public action is needed to solve many environmental crises. They must therefore consider how to present their work in a way that makes sense to many different audiences. This exercise is designed to give you the opportunity to study and practice how writers shape language to reach different audiences. It is a chance for you to put what you have learned about writing at the sentence level to work. You will first consciously observe the language of experienced authors, hopefully becoming conscious of language features. You then write for a different, younger audience. This gives you a chance to practice adapting your language as you will need to do as you prepare essays 5 and 6.

Notes for Instructors: This exercise is designed to give students the opportunity to study and practice how writers shape language to reach different audiences. They first consciously observe the language of experienced authors, becoming aware of language features they may have passed over when reading. They do so by observing in groups writing covering the same major topics but directed to three different audiences:

- an academic audience with experience in the general topic area covered by the article but not necessarily expertise in the particular field of the article (Sample 1)
- an academic audience of specialists in the field of the article (Sample 2)
- an adult non-academic audience (Sample 3)

They then write about the same topic for a different, younger audience. This gives them a chance to practice adapting their language for a chosen audience, using what they have gleaned from observing language of others. In addition, this type of exercise may also increase their understanding of discipline specific concepts (for this class, the mechanics of climate change). In fact, a recent study has demonstrated that writing for younger audiences is especially effective at increasing student knowledge of scientific material (Günel et al, 2009). The tour of the their museum signs gives students a chance to articulate to their classmates why they made the language choices that they did in presenting the material to a new audience.

I found this exercise fit well into the course in mid-semester, after several exercises on characters and action verbs, emphasis and concision. As I discovered when using this for the first time, it may also be helpful to have a brief discussion on basic grammar and parts

of speech (e.g. reminding students about definitions for terms like "voice" and "prepositional phrase".)

I've attached to the end of this document the article samples I used for reference.

Gunel, M., Hand, B., and McDermott, M.A.. 2009. Writing for different audiences: effects on high school students conceptual understanding of biology. *Learning and Instruction* 19: 354-367.