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Making Our Institutional Discourse Sticky: Suggestions for Effective Rhetoric

by Muriel Harris

About the Author

Muriel (“Mickey”) Harris is the founding and current editor of the *Writing Lab Newsletter*; Professor Emerita of English; and founding (and now retired) Director of the Purdue University Writing Lab and its OWL. Her numerous book chapters, articles, conference presentations, keynote speeches, workshops, etc. are listed in her CV (online at www.writinglabnewsletter.org/new/contact.php), and her composition textbooks are *The Prentice Hall Reference Guide* (8th edition, 2011, co-authored with Jennifer Kunka) and *The Writer’s FAQs* (4th edition, 2011, also co-authored with Jennifer Kunka). Her current research interests are in the areas of the effectiveness of writing center rhetoric and the implications of individualized instruction as a defining writing center principle.

As writing center theorists and practitioners, we have created—and continue to create—a body of scholarship and praxis that influences how we present our writing centers to our institutional audiences—our students, instructors, and administrators. Using rhetorical analysis as a tool of inquiry, the scholarship of our field helps to identify and reconstruct how we define ourselves to our institutions and how our institutions define us. When studying the words we use to define ourselves, some colleagues have focused on the metaphors we work against (Carino “What Do We Talk About”; Fischer and Harris; Mayher; Pemberton) and the stories, lore, and images we share that bind us together as well as define us (Nicholas). In another of Peter Carino’s close readings of our institutional rhetoric, “Reading Our Own Words,” he examines the rhetoric of our “promotional

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materials and in-house correspondence” (93) and concludes that “nearly all of our materials, we persistently place before our audiences four issues that define us: 1) grammar instruction (e.g., we are not grammar garages); 2) the ethics of tutorial procedure (e.g., we do not write papers for students and do not correct every error); 3) the nature of the clientele (e.g., we do not primarily work with remedial students but are open to all writers on campus); and 4) the competence of our staffs (e.g., tutors are trained, experienced readers) (106). As a result, Carino reads our prose as both defending our work against marginalization while proclaiming our stance as innovators, and he advises us to be edgy, but not outlaws, while avoiding the servility of staying conventional (107).

As I read the writing center websites, reports, and informational brochures sent to our various audiences—students, instructors, and administrators—I see that Carino’s categories (as defined in 2002) continue to dominate the content of what we write for institutional consumption. Year after year, decade after decade, we address these definitions of our work, despite an admonishment in a 1998 book chapter in which David Enriquez, Carol Peterson Haviland, Candace Olson, and Dian Pizurie warned us that “If we define ourselves only as what we are not, we cannot be much, to ourselves or to others” (108). Clearly, the litany of what we are not continues to be repeated in our prose, proof that we need to rework the discourse not working for us. As we tutor, we voice allegiance to rhetorical principles that are long-standing hallmarks of effective academic writing, yet too often, we put aside some of those principles when writing to our institutional audiences. Fortunately, this is not the case universally, but because problems do exist in some of our documents, I offer here cautionary advice to help avoid some tempting morasses to unwittingly fall into as well as some more solid ground to stroll along when composing our institutional prose. Ultimately, drawing on concepts from the fields of business, linguistics, social psychology, and professional writing, I wish to introduce the concept of “stickiness” into our institutional writing; that is, writing that is positive, appeals appropriately to our audiences, is highly memorable, and is concrete and specific. The goal of writing in sticky ways to our local constituencies is that they will understand and correctly remember who we are and what we

contribute to the progress of student writing.

The Need to Be Sticky

Before examining ways to revise in our institutional prose, we need a clear sense of what sticky writing is. A particularly useful book to consult is Chip Heath and Dan Heath's *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. This book is likely, at first glance, to be dismissed as one of those slick, glib "self-improvement" types, aimed at the business world. It's highly readable, very positive, and filled with encouraging success stories, much like books that offer plans to lose weight without dieting or promise to show you how to manage your life, your email, your closets, and your bills in three weeks or less. But the brothers Heath base their analyses on sound, thoroughly researched results that are as relevant to academia as they are to the commercial world. The basic premise, as explicated by the Heaths, is that to make ideas stick in our minds, to be "sticky," we must find the core of an idea, "its most critical essence" (28). This idea's core has to be compact and profound (in the sense of being meaningful), has to avoid complexity, has to prefer simplicity (when we say three things, we say nothing), has to build on positive schemas, and, when necessary, has to replace old schemas with the schemas we want to stick. All these qualities are inherent in making messages sticky. But do we adhere to such principles or overload our messages with too many "things" (to use the Heaths' term) that are not sticky?

Before applying the Heaths' concept of what is embodied in being sticky to a message offered by one writing center, I wish to offer a rationale for deviating from standard practice because I am not citing sources for these examples. When we draw on the ideas of others, we cite their work. But if drawing on that work can cause embarrassment, common courtesy wins out, and such sources used here will remain anonymous. And I offer these examples for two reasons. First, I am holding up our prose for us to re-read, to look more closely at, so that we can re-think and revise what we are offering to our institutional readers, and, second, because, as William Kruck wrote in a review of a composition text he criticized for not having any bad examples, "Bad examples are usually instructive" (65). With all this in mind, I offer

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the following example, found on the web:

Our Writing Center can help students learn to develop ideas, structure their writing in ways appropriate to the audience and purpose, write clear and correct prose, identify and correct errors, and assess their writing in relation to the assignment and the applicable conventions of the discipline.

From our writing center point of view, this (like other examples in this essay) is an excellent description of our goals and services—albeit in terms we would use when talking to each other. But what would a student take away from it? What is memorable and powerful? What is the core message? Is it too complex? Is it trying to say many things and thus violating a core principle of the Heaths to say one thing at a time? Is it, thus, “sticky”? Excellent questions to prompt us to consider how we phrase explanations of what our writing center offers. Consider another public description of a writing center that is, again, admirable from our point of view, of defining our work:

Consultants will not provide students with unchanging models of “good writing,” as if all kinds of writing for any discipline are always the same. Instead, consultants help students determine the standards and expectations of the specific discourse community their piece of writing speaks to, recognize how the features of the discipline they are studying are reflected in writing practices, and adapt prior writing strategies to current situations.

How much of that can you quickly recall from memory? Are “the standards and expectations of the specific discourse community” or “features of the discipline” specific or very general? Too complex? How many ideas are packed into these statements? How much of the whole statement might students easily remember? Are there too many things packed into it? Is it stripped down to its essence in terms that are clear, specific, and concrete? Instead, how much of it sounds like language used in our scholarship? This example violates the Heaths’ caveat about the importance of concreteness and the difficulties involved in remembering abstract generalizations. Given this, contemplate the statement from another website: “we help students develop strategies to achieve their goals as writers.” Simple and concrete or too abstract? Do students come in asking to “develop

strategies”? Or can we make that phrase more concrete by, perhaps, offering instead to show students “how to proofread their own papers” or help students learn how to see if their papers meet the assignment? Are the phrases in the statement memorable? A sticky idea in the sense that the frame or concept has been whittled down to its critical essence? We know what that statement is saying, and we agree that it’s correct and framed positively. But it lacks stickiness. And it lacks effective framing.

The Need to Find a Powerful Frame

When studying how to convey memorable concepts, some linguists talk about finding effective “frames” within which to convey our information and ideas. This concept of framing is one that George Lakoff, a cognitive linguist, focuses on extensively in his work. A frame, as he explains it, is “a conceptual structure used in thinking.” To demonstrate this, he asks the reader to do the following: “Don’t think of an elephant!” (Care to try it?) Lakoff explains: “It is, of course, a directive that cannot be carried out—and that is the point. In order to purposefully not think of an elephant, you first have to think of an elephant.” (One of Lakoff’s recent books returns to that imperative, *Don’t Think of an Elephant.*) Lakoff demonstrates the influence of effective framing in terms of his interest in political discourse, examining phrases such as “tax relief” invoked during George W. Bush’s presidency. As Lakoff notes: “Every time the phrase *tax relief* is used and heard or read by millions of people, this view of taxation as an affliction and conservatives as heroes gets reinforced.” Whether we are conservatives or liberals, we see the power of what Lakoff suggests: “The truth alone will not set you free. It has to be framed correctly.” And it has to be memorable. President John F. Kennedy could have framed his project to help people in impoverished countries in terms of the skills Americans offer, the aid they provide, or the concept of these groups being workforces. Not particularly powerful or memorable frames. But the project is “The Peace Corps,” invoking a vision of a military corps fighting for peace, a powerful and memorable goal when someone signs up to dig wells in rural Haiti or deal with non-biodegradable trash in Tonga.

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There are frames out there for writing centers, and while they are memorable and vivid, they are neither of our choosing nor ones we care to see live on. Michael Pemberton’s “The Prison, the Hospital, and the Madhouse” dissects several of the most frequently invoked metaphors for how some people view writing centers. Other metaphors that identify frames we cannot seem to stamp out are traced in “Fill ‘er Up, Pass the Band-Aids, Center the Margin, and Praise the Lord” (Fischer and Harris). As yet, we writing center professionals have not identified universally applicable positive frames that are powerful and memorable. But that lack, in itself, is far from being a failure. Writing centers in different institutions, cultures, countries, and continents are likely to be structured to meet different needs. Moreover, as Melissa Ianetta and others have cautioned, we should not box ourselves in with absolutes, confining ourselves in ways that limit our flexibility that is so generative to our profession. There may be frames to gather from listening to students’ need for guidance as they work on papers or talk about what to write, or have someone read their papers before they are finished, or ask questions, in a one-to-one, non-classroom setting. Or perhaps those verbs—listening, talking, reading, asking—can underpin memorable frames about how to work with writing outside the classroom. Perhaps we can mine Jeanne Simpson’s statement that “We may teach to a group, but the people in it learn one at a time.” (“Re: [wcenter] Response”). Because writing centers offer non-traditional instruction, they are perhaps so unique, so flexible, so varied in different contexts that memorable frames will differ, according to local settings. And universally applicable frames would constrain our ability to stay flexible and move forward. As just one example of this, the verb “listen,” mentioned above, applies to face-to-face tutoring, but not to asynchronous online tutoring.

The Need to Incorporate Our Rhetorical Values

The familiar rhetorical principles we rely on as principles of good writing include such basics as encouraging writing that is positive rather than negative, that takes into account various audiences, that is specific and concrete—and that is thus sticky. Composition textbooks and our handouts (or website resources) continue to assert

the importance of such principles. And some of what has been theorized about effective rhetoric is being confirmed by researchers in other fields studying how the human mind processes and remembers information transmitted through language. So all the more reason to incorporate our own advice as we write, but it is too easy to find examples of our institutional writing lacking awareness of such principles. To illustrate the discourse I am placing before us for the purpose of considering why such prose needs revising, I offer a few samples of our public prose currently being produced. These examples should sound familiar, but as explained above, as a matter of common courtesy, the sources for these examples are not cited. A fifteen-minute search on the Internet or a quick tour of bookmarks and brochures on display at writing center conferences can turn up similar prose:

- Tutors can help students with any stage of the writing process, from getting started on an assignment to the final stages of revision. They can help students with grammar, but they will not make any changes on a paper, nor will they edit or “fix” a paper for the student.
- The Writing Center’s long-term goal is to serve the entire university and engage in community outreach. In past years, the Writing Center has provided some services to students, faculty, and staff outside the College. Demand for appointments has run high, and we have turned people away many hundreds of times each year.
- Please remember that the Writing Center is not an editing or proofreading service. We will work with you to improve your own proofreading and editing skills, but we don’t simply correct mistakes for you. We don’t write your papers for you.
- Myth #1: The Writing Center is only for inexperienced writers.
Reality: We can help people who aren’t experienced at writing, certainly, but some of our best work is done with those who know how to write and who want some help along the way. Our tutors are very knowledgeable about writing, and can help no matter what experience level you’re at.

Are these samples of our institutional discourse—samples that are negatively phrased, that refute myths, that stay aloft in the realm of

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grand generalities, that don't address our audiences directly or speak to the readers' interests—truly serving our purpose of getting our messages across? If we are to revise our prose or delineate useful guidelines for future documents, we need to understand, first, why negatively phrased messages can defeat our purposes and then, which positive principles of effective writing we can employ instead as we compose our texts. (Please note that the “we” used here is not the regal or editorial “we.” I include myself as a composer of some of the misguided use of the language under the microscope here.)

Negative Effects of Using Negatives

As Carino found (“Reading”) and as the examples cited above illustrate, one of the more widespread problems in our public prose is the prevalence of negation, the predilection to define ourselves by what we are not, to clear away the underbrush of what will not happen in tutorials (“we do not proofread papers” or “we do not write the paper for the student” or “our center is not only for remedial writers”). The intent is to prevent students' misunderstanding of what our services include. But do we realize the emotional response that litanies of such “we do not's” evoke in our audiences? Consider for a moment how you might internalize a sign at a store's Customer Service Desk:

- We do not accept refunds after 30 days.
- We will not issue a refund without a receipt.
- We do not accept returns on used merchandise.
- We cannot cash personal checks.

Might you wonder exactly what the so-called “customer service representative” actually does do? Before protesting that such clarification is needed, please consider that there is also another possible outcome—that some readers will not remember our explanations correctly. To understand why this is so, we turn to the research of social psychologists studying how people cognitively process negative language.

In a study of how people remember what they hear, Ruth Mayo, a social psychologist, and her colleagues analyzed how people hear

a negative statement. They found that their subjects first processed the core assumption and then mentally negate it. As explained by Mayo et al., that means that when we hear Jim is not guilty, we first process the core of the idea, in this case that “Jim is guilty,” and then move on to process the negation of that core assumption. The critical point, as Mayo et al. note, is that the core assumption is processed as a cognitive assumption—the schema—and then given a negative tag. But the catch is that when negated messages are stored, by the process of dissociation, the negative part can get disconnected at a later time. Mayo et al. conclude that “as a result, individuals may remember the opposite of the intended meaning” (435). To apply this to writing centers, if we proclaim that writing center tutors do not correct grammar, listeners store that cognitively first as the concept of correcting grammar (the schema) and then add the negator “not.” In time, as numerous researchers have found (see Mayo et al.’s review of some of this research), some people will separate the two—the core and the negator—and remember the core concept—that tutors do correct grammar. However, Mayo and her colleagues stress that forgetting the negator is not a universal phenomena because negative statements are remembered correctly by some people. They just don’t get remembered correctly by all people.

A reasonable conclusion, then, is that such research affirms the familiar rhetorical principle: messages phrased affirmatively are more effective than messages phrased negatively. As such research shows, affirmative messages are more likely to be remembered correctly than negative messages. Yet we persist in our practice of stating what we do not do. Consider the following description (including the original emphasis as it appears on the website):

The Writing Center **does not offer tutoring**. It is not the place to be if you need to focus on problems with grammar, spelling, and sentence structure. **Staff members will also not proofread papers**. Staff members will not assist individual writers over long periods of time, but will offer reader feedback about writing, answer specific questions, and discuss topics.

This explanation is hardly unique as we can see in the following examples culled from current websites and brochures shared at recent writing center conferences:

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- Tutors do not write or edit papers for students. Instead, we help students develop strategies to achieve their goals as writers.

A revision delivering the same message, but in positive form, might read as follows: “When you want to proofread your paper, a tutor can help you learn the proofreading skills you’ll need.” Yet other websites continue the litany of negation:

- Tutors will not edit or proofread student papers. Instead, we will identify patterns of error in grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation and help students become editors of their own work.
- We aren’t copy editors; we don’t revise, edit or proofread for students; instead we help writers develop and use appropriate strategies for improving their writing.
- The Writing Center supports all students in their efforts to become better writers rather than produce perfect papers. To this end, the Center’s writing consultants do not “fix” or proofread papers, nor do they tell writers what to do. . . . The Writing Center is not a panacea for the ills of writing, but a support service for any writer who values feedback as part of the learning/writing process.

We are rather emphatic in our lists of “we do not’s,” and we know why we lapse into such verbiage—to cast aside those absolutes we hear (from the “Can someone fix this paper?” at the reception desk to “This student met with a tutor, and there are still two fragments in the paper she turned in!”). We feel compelled to deny allegations that misrepresent who we are and what we do. But this denial has theoretical as well as rhetorical and cognitive problems. When Ianetta warns us that we should be rightly cautious about defining ourselves in ways that deny our own fluidity and flexibility, she asks us to do the following:

Question what we offer the campus that is unavailable elsewhere and . . . consider how the mission of the center simultaneously creates dissonance and harmony with other agendas. The fluidity of the margins also encourages a resistance to categorical definitions, positivist arguments, fixed binaries and unilateral solutions. (43-44)

When Ianetta cautions us to resist fixed binaries, we can keep that warning in mind as we consider phrases often repeated in writing center institutional prose—the familiar “we are not a center for grammar instruction” or “we do not proofread for students.” Yet, as Jeanne Simpson notes (“Whose Idea”), we do help writers learn to apply grammatical rules, and when we enter into a generative conversation with students about developing that skimpy paragraph on civil disobedience, are we really absolutely sure we have contributed nothing to the paper—not even the crumb of a nuance or a perspective to consider? Because we should be cautious—very cautious—of binaries, we need to step back from such absolute statements about what we do not do. Having looked at the multitude of problems with the obvious use of “we do not’s,” we can turn to another form of negation some of us have indulged in, a form of negativity that can also result in incorrectly remembering the message.

The Questionable Value of Exploding Myths

Another strategy for defining our work is dispelling myths by stating the myth, then negating it, and concluding with correct information. Some time after he wrote his essay analyzing our institutional discourse (“Reading”), Carino looked back to reflect on what he found: “at the time of writing that article I was surprised at the size of the rhetorical chip on our shoulder” (“THANKS”). Among the institutional statements he examined, the first is from a list of “Misconceptions about the Writing Lab”:

The Lab is primarily for grammar problems.

NO. Writers come mainly to work on rhetorical skills and the writing process.

Carino, a careful, perceptive reader of our rhetoric, reads this as “feisty to the point of belligerence as it almost renounces grammar instruction to embrace rhetoric” (“Reading” 98). I’m sure that example was from a letter to instructors I distributed at the beginning of each semester (though Carino was too polite to offer a citation). I thought I had relied on a workable format to overcome some of the prevalent

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myths, a format that others in our field also rely on. (An example of this approach, one that many of us admire and have drawn on, is Issue # 21, “Seven Myth-Understandings about the Writing Center,” in Rick Leahy and Roy Fox’s *Word Works*, distributed to faculty on their campus and available on the Boise State website). However, no matter how gently we go about dispelling myths about our work, there are consequences to conveying information this way because, like simple negation that can get remembered incorrectly, information conveyed as responses to myths can also be remembered incorrectly.

When social psychologist Norbert Schwarz and his colleagues examined this phenomenon of how people process the dispelling of myths, their subjects were people asked to read a Centers for Disease Control (CDC) flyer for doctors to use when educating patients about the importance of flu vaccinations. The purpose of the flyer, as Schwarz notes, “was to counter misleading information by confronting ‘myths’ with ‘facts’” (147). The flyer, despite its presentation of “strong arguments,” cast its information as rebuttals to myths and compounded the problem by repeating myths people were likely to have heard elsewhere. Schwarz concludes that the repetition “may contribute to their [the myths’] fluency and perceived familiarity when they are encountered again, possibly increasing rather than decreasing their later acceptance” (147). Shortly after reading it, most of the people who read the flyer correctly recalled most of the information. But as time elapsed, they stored a great deal of the information incorrectly:

Thirty minutes later, however, their judgments showed a systematic error pattern. They now misidentified 15% of the myths as true, whereas their misidentification of facts as false remained at 2%. This is the familiar pattern of illusion-of-truth effects: Once memory for substantive details fades, familiar statements are more likely to be accepted as true than to be rejected as false. This familiarity bias results in a higher rate of erroneous judgments when the statement is false rather than true. . . . On the applied side, these findings illustrate how the attempt to debunk myths facilitates their acceptance after a delay of only 30 minutes. (147)

The Power of Repetition to Convince—Too Easily

As Schwarz and his colleagues point out, not only do some people incorrectly remember myths as being true, the repetition of the myths adds to the problem. Research into the use of repetition as an influencing factor has uncovered some unsettling results about how strongly people are influenced by repeatedly hearing or reading something. Social psychologists Kimberlee Weaver, Stephen M. Garcia, and Norbert Schwarz note that “what we think others think greatly influences our own personal thoughts, feelings, and behavior” (831). Humans are by nature social animals, and we take into consideration what others think. Of course. (Advertisers depend heavily on this outcome, as for example, when a sports star endorses a pizza product or a group of people is shown enthusiastically enjoying their meal at a particular restaurant chain.) Weaver, Garcia, and Schwartz’s research, confirming the research of others, shows us that people form opinions partly based on what they think the group thinks. While we recognize the truth of this, what is more troublesome is that, as Weaver, Garcia, and Schwartz substantiate, people can make these judgments based only on what one or two people say, but say repeatedly. Even hearing an opinion from one or two people repeatedly can convince some that this is the prevalent opinion, and so they absorb and retain it. Weaver, Garcia, and Schwartz cite a long list of references to research that consistently shows the power of repetition to result in accepting some view, and they illustrate this as follows:

From college students gauging their peers’ views on alcohol, to stockbrokers speculating about consumers’ confidence in the market, to everyday Americans wondering how scared others are about terrorism, our estimates of group opinion affect not only the decisions we make on behalf of groups but also our perceptions of reality. (821)

When Weaver, Garcia, and Schwartz extended this principle to the number of people repeating a view, the hypothesis was that “the more often an opinion has been encountered in the past, the more accessible it is in memory and the more familiar it seems when it is encountered again” (821). The research affirmed that “repetition of the same opinion gives rise to the impression that the opinion

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is widely shared, even if all the repetitions come from the same single communicator” (822). When Weaver, Garcia, and Schwartz had participants read a statement by the same person multiple times, the participants were later asked to estimate how widely that statement is believed. The findings show the subjects estimating a far higher number that corresponded to the number of times they were exposed to the statement. The disturbing relevance for us is that when one person or a few people (a roommate? a classmate? a composition instructor?) repeat their negative view of the writing center, that statement can (but not always, of course) be retained in other people’s mind as convincing because they then assume that’s what most people think.

Thus, when we repeat a myth in order to negate it, not only will some people incorrectly remember it, they may think the incorrect information is a prevalent view and accept it because of the repetition. Confirming Weaver, Garcia, and Schwartz’s findings that a person’s repeatedly spreading the wrong information can create a bandwagon of one, Schwartz et al. remind us that “[a]ny attempt to explicitly discredit false information necessarily involves a repetition of the false information, which may contribute to its later familiarity and acceptance” (146-47). Worse yet, when people cite credible sources that try to discredit false notions, the credible sources may see their work backfire. For example, in Schwartz et al.’s research, when research subjects misremembered the CDC flyer that attempted to get people to get flu vaccinations, they attached the false information to the credible CDC. It’s likely then that if these people had repeated what they thought was correct, they may also have credited the CDC as their source. (Schwartz et al. here invoke one of philosopher Paul Grice’s “maxims” or cooperative principles of conversation that allow meaningful communication. Schwartz et al. note that “conversational conduct is based on the assumption that communicated information is truthful and relevant” [Grice, qtd. in Schwartz 153]).

To sum up, social psychologists’ research shows what leads some—and the number varies with each instance—people astray as we use negatives, try to overturn myths, and attempt to replace wrong information with correct information. And repetition, whether it’s our dispelling myths or stating what we don’t do, adds to the

problem. We are better served by turning to the positive, productive approaches of sticky language rather than wringing our hands and wondering how to quell the impulse to warn students against false expectations, to assure the institution that we do more than tend to under-prepared students' needs, and to assure instructors that our staffs are trained and qualified. For example, here's a rather informal invitation I found on a writing center website, a level of informality some might not want to resort to. But it speaks directly to students, its intended audience, and does not dwell on what that center won't do:

Stressed out about your paper? Want some help proofreading it? Wonder if it meets the assignment? Want to hear how an experienced reader would read it? You don't have to keep worrying about what you've written because we aim to help you improve your writing. But we won't be the author of your paper because we want you be an even better writer.

Positively framed messages such as this example also illustrate guidelines recommended by colleagues who teach professional writing.

The “You Approach” (It’s Not All about Me)

In the world of professional and business writing, the catch phrase the “you approach” promotes the perspective that writers are more likely to have an attentive audience when they switch from their stance of looking out at the world to taking into account readers' perspectives. After studying business and technical communication textbooks, Lilita Rodman notes the long history of this prevailing “you” approach and concludes that the concept appears to have originated in the first decade of the twentieth century (10). Andrea Muldoon, a writing center director and teacher of professional writing, deems the “you approach” or “you attitude” to be “one of the most important concepts in professional writing.” This “you attitude,” as defined by Rodman, requires that “writers first . . . view a real-world situation from the reader's perspective and then . . . show in the text of the document a sensitivity to the reader's perspective” (11). Rodman reminds us that this entails more than merely switching

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from the first person “I/we” pronoun to the second person “you” pronoun because it requires empathy on the writer’s part. Though Rodman finds most textbook explanations of the “you attitude” inadequate, she cites a notable exception, Kitty Locker’s widely used *Business and Administrative Communication*, and Rodman summarizes Locker’s principles as follows:

- Focus not on what you can do for the reader, but on what the reader receives or can do. In positive or neutral situations, stress what the reader wants to know.
 - Refer to the reader’s request or order specifically.
 - Don’t talk about your own feelings unless you’re sure the reader wants to know how you feel.
 - Don’t tell readers how they feel or will react.
 - In positive situations, use “you” more often than “I.” Use “we” when it includes the reader.
 - In negative situations, avoid the word “you.” Protect the reader’s ego. Use passive verbs and impersonal expressions to avoid assigning blame.
- (12)

Rodman offers a quick demonstration of this from Locker’s textbook examples:

Lacks you attitude: We are happy to extend you a credit line of \$5000.

You attitude: You can now charge up to \$5000 on your American Express card. (qtd. in Rodman 13)

We see how pervasive this approach is in advertising, e.g., military recruitment posters that proclaim “Be all that you can be” or fast food burger ads that entice us with “Have it your way.”

If we review some of the examples of writing center prose cited earlier in this essay, the excessive overuse of what “we” do and what “we” don’t do lacks any sense of the “you” approach. “We help students develop strategies” or “We aren’t copy editors” or “The Center assures faculty that. . . .” Clearly we need to consider how we empathize with the perspective of instructors, administrators, and students so that

we offer messages acknowledging their viewpoint. It's not a matter of merely casting sentences into the second person as an easy way to transform our prose, as Andrea Morrow warns us:

Certainly it's true that "you-attitude" is only one of many strategies for managing tone. Deciding which strategy to use involves assessment of audience, situation, and objective. It's also true that almost any tool, strategy, or piece of advice about writing can be over-generalized or misused. (A classic misuse of you-attitude includes junk-mail phrases like, "You will be excited to know that you can lower your rate!" That's not you-attitude, according to the definition used by Locker and others, but writers who just latch onto the "you" part often think it is.)

We may have different approaches to incorporating truly empathetic messages, especially given that we inhabit different local contexts. But the working principle is that we put ourselves in the shoes of those we are addressing. Why might your students want to come to the writing center? We often read in student evaluations that, after a successful tutorial, they feel more confident about their writing (Harris). If this is an outcome students often want, do we address that or do we invite them to be better writers? (That's *our* goal, but how often is it the writer's goal?) We know that what brings most students to the writing center are papers they are working on, and only rarely does a student respond to a tutor's "how can I help you" with the request to make "learn the recursive processes of writing." True empathy for students' needs might, then, include acknowledging the student's desire to be "more confident" about her writing, or to offer assistance in "understanding the assignment," or to work with the writer to identify why a paper "isn't working" or "what's wrong with it." These are a few of the student responses we hear when we ask what students want to work on. Listening to what students ask for leads us into valid "you approach" statements that empathize with them—to the extent that we *can* offer what they are seeking. A particularly effective example of this "you" approach aimed at students is the Boise State Writing Center's promotional video "Go to the Writing Center."

To move on to our other audiences, what would teachers want? That requires surveying teachers or sending evaluations asking

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what they see as valuable in the center's work. In my years of reading teacher evaluations at my institution, instructors repeatedly responded that they value having the writing center offer the additional one-to-one time with their students that they can't provide, that they want "additional help" for their students, or that tutors work with students on individual "problems." In particular I often noticed instructors' emphasis on the fact that students we tutor are *their* students. And administrators? Have we researched that or relied on what we think they need to know? We are repeatedly advised to show how our work aligns with the institution's mission, always a good suggestion. But often, institutional mission statements are expressed as lofty ideals, not concrete statements. In that case, we look at strategic plans, administrative memos, assessment documents, external review forms. Those documents may reveal that the institution is concerned about retention, about reaching out to the community, about demonstrating to accreditation organizations that they are successfully attaining certain goals, about proof of excellent teaching, or about a commitment to educating a "diverse population." There's a vast mine of useful information on institutions' websites in the "to the prospective student" section, the glossy brochures that represent the institution, and the enticing documents sent out by admissions offices. They often contain very concrete statements about what the institution wants to provide, a way into the concreteness that adds to stickiness. Before we make assumptions about how to address our audiences, how to understand what they want, and how we assist in meeting institutional goals, we must vigorously engage in institutional research, not merely switch pronouns. It would be counter-productive to assume we know what our audiences want without assessing their needs by interviewing or surveying these audiences or reading the relevant documents. As we study this group's goals, we should heed Jeanne Simpson's cogent reminder to keep the institution's values and language in mind when communicating with them ("Perceptions").

The Intended Audience vs. the Wrong Audience

We know the importance of considering our audience—even though we don't always make use of that knowledge when composing

institutional documents—but sometimes we may write for the wrong audience. As John Clayton notes in his essay “When to Ignore Your Readers,” problems arise when we do so. In Clayton’s study, this can be a matter of realizing that the initial audience may not be the intended audience, the audience whom we want to act on our message, or it can be a matter of not attending to all the audiences who read our documents (49). The public explanations of who and what our centers are and do can be read by multiple audiences: 1) teachers interested in knowing what the writing center offers; 2) administrators who need to understand how the writing center benefits the institution; 3) students who may intend to use the writing center’s services; and, especially in announcements on a center’s website, 4) the larger world out there that defines this particular writing center and demonstrates that it adheres to the best of writing center principles. Yearly reports normally go to administrators, so those documents have a clearly identified single audience. But informative materials for students and instructors are different, and perhaps the most often accessed documents where these descriptions can be found are on writing center websites. Here we have to wonder how many centers are describing themselves in terms that, at some level, convey the stance of what writing center scholarship tells us is appropriate.

In light of this allegiance to our core principles, consider this text from a writing center website:

- Our objective, then, is to make the power and consequence of the activity of writing salient for both students and teachers. . . . Our consultants . . . stimulate among their fellow students a reflective, recursive writing process.

This is a well-thought-out description in terms we use to talk with each other. But we have to wonder what students make of being told to use the writing center to help make their writing a reflective, recursive process. Moreover, would a composition teacher react negatively when informed that she benefits from the center’s making the activity of writing salient for her and her students? (Surely, the writer of that text had instructors in other fields in mind, but that’s not stated here.)

Consider this excerpt from another writing center’s home page

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that directly addresses faculty and their needs:

Faculty: Did You Know? The Writing Center Is for You, Too!

You may have just found the greatest sounding board . . . ever!

Faculty, if you're looking for a couple of writing-centered folks to bounce classroom writing task ideas off of (no matter the subject you teach), then look no further than your friendly neighborhood co-directors. Here are just a few writing-related topics on which we can provide ideas as well as feedback:

- writing assignment instruction sheets
- writing assignment assessment materials
- in-class writing tasks
- academic integrity issues that pertain to writing, such as plagiarism
- strategies for dealing with errors in student writing

This direct, specific, sticky text aimed at teachers conveys the message clearly and effectively. The text may not be appropriate for some institutions, but it's very likely that it works well in its context. And some centers' websites solve the problem of multiple audiences by using the home page to provide separate links to materials for teachers and for students (and in some cases, several links for students, including one for resources, another for online tutoring, and another for making appointments). The first few sentences in another overly long example may have administrators in mind as the primary audience, or perhaps there's an interest in announcing to the world that this writing center embodies the best of writing center theory and practice:

The Writing Center is committed to providing an environment that facilitates intellectual, cultural, personal, and professional growth. The Writing Center seeks to foster such an environment for writers across the curriculum, in between the rigorous community of the classroom, the easy familiarity of the commons area, and the solitude of the writer's desk.

But being more aware of audience is not all we need to consider as we write or recast our public discourse to make it more sticky.

Other Approaches for Making Change Happen

While some of our institutional communication is aimed at delivering information (e.g., about location, hours, online tutorials, etc.), much of our prose is intended to alter perceptions, to create attitudinal modifications (e.g., to convince students that all writers benefit from talking with tutors). But some attempts to inform and persuade fall by the wayside, a failure that Stever Robbins points out as a frequent result: “Most change efforts convey information about the desired change, but that’s where most communication stops” (92-93). Robbins’ point is that merely telling people what the resulting change should be is not sufficient to make the change happen. His collection, *Written Communications that Inform and Influence*, is intended for audiences of business people who need to convey information that institutes change in their worlds. Thus, Robbins’ examples from company settings introduce his point that change is more likely to occur when the intended audience is both informed of the results—described from the perspective of those on the other end of the problem—and also becomes involved in seeking solutions themselves. In an example Robbins cites, a manager wanted employees to improve customer service. Knowing that not much, if anything, would result from a memo calling on them to improve customer service, the manager had a videotape made of a customer describing the frustrations he endured at the hands of customer service people. When shown to the employees, the video conveyed the message so effectively that it became a catalyst for the change the executive was asking for. The employees, realizing the result of their actions, began to discuss what they could do and became invested in working on solutions. Similarly, in the world of writing centers, Noreen Lape’s tutors, frustrated by teachers’ responses on student papers, created a podcast, “The Manifesto” (available on YouTube), in which the student tutors, in voices that “range from subdued to demanding to annoyed,” forcefully “urge instructors to consider the humans behind the essays they grade” (3). Lape notes how successful this podcast was in terms of number of viewers, requests from other institutions to show to their teachers, and teachers on her campus who noted how deeply they were affected by the video and how it changed their commenting practices.

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The conclusion Robbins draws from his studies is that changes can happen, but the initial step should be a conversation with those who need to alter their attitudes or behaviors, a conversation in which they are presented with the results of their current mode of behavior. Then, many (rarely all) are more likely to understand and start thinking of ways to address the problem. In writing center terms, this can be a simple shift from a message to students reminding them not to wait until ten minutes before a paper is due to see a tutor to a vividly portrayed communication showing the frustration or disappointment experienced by an unhappy student who did wait until shortly before a paper was due. She can talk about what she could have done had she started earlier to meet with a tutor. Same message, different perspective. Possibly more likely to effect change.

Our Institutional Prose Revisited

In sum, we can compose better messages, given the principles for rhetorical effectiveness offered here, but re-seeing some of wrong rhetorical moves we make can illustrate again what to avoid. Consider this statement, for example:

We offer more than 150 guides and interactive activities for writers, as well as an extensive links list. We also offer extensive support for instructors.

The problems here should now be evident: the focus is on what “we” do rather than “you”; no awareness of the student’s point of view; lack of empathy; general rather than specific (guides to what? what kind of activities? links to what? what kind of support for teachers?); not memorable or sticky; and not whittled down to the essence of the center. Yet another that lacks specificity and does not address audience’s needs:

We are available for consultation at any stage of the writing process.

could be revised to the following:

You don’t have to be finished with your paper—or have started it—to come for a conference. You can come with ideas, notes, or a draft. And your questions.

Yet one more example I found:

At the Writing Center, full-time writing instructors and experienced peer

writing consultants offer individual conferences and workshops that foster a writer's objectivity, sense of audience, and critical thinking—habits of the mind best cultivated through thoughtful interaction between reader and writer. Any member of the academic community wishing to sharpen expository writing skills can contact the Center to set up a conference.

The opening sentence affirms that the staff is trained and experienced (primarily addressed to instructors who may wonder about the tutors' competence?). The blurb then reverts to what "we" can do. Besides the obvious formatting problem (perhaps changed to bulleted lists for ease of reading?), is a student writer most likely to be looking for ways to get his or her objectivity fostered? This is our goal. Is it the student's goal? How sticky is the concept of "foster[ing] habits of mind best cultivated through thoughtful interaction between reader and writer"? How memorable, specific is it? Is that prose so overloaded that in saying many things, it says nothing? Again, as we search for frames to present, can we switch from guessing what students want and perceive their needs to be to talking with them and listening closely? If none come to mind for our audiences when they are asked, this is the time to collaboratively work on answers they may become invested in. Specific institutional contexts will lead each of us to different ideas to toss around. We can also engage instructors in thinking about resources to help with their teaching, such as offering assistance with writing assignments or providing resources such as podcasts on writing (e.g., Vee et al.) or offering resources for their own writing as done in one center that holds successful retreats for instructors to work on their own writing (Schendel). When we are willing to re-read our own institutional writing, to put aside our immediate urge to define ourselves in terms that writing center scholarship advocates (concepts that rightly guide us as we structure our centers), and to shift our perspective from what we don't do to that of the various institutional audiences we are writing for, we may just find frames that will define us in positive ways and create messages that will change attitudes, be remembered correctly, and that will—finally—get students to come in not for proofreading ten minutes before the paper is handed in but for the kind of beneficial one-to-one collaboration tutors can provide. We need, ultimately, to write sticky prose.

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