

# Teaching Students How to Analyze and Adapt to Audiences

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*Goal: To provide students with an opportunity to understand, practice, and evaluate audience adaptation*

*Courses: Persuasion and Public Speaking*

Not long ago, one of the author's students told him, "I won't be able to make it to your class today. I have to study for a test in another course. Will I miss anything important?" The author, of course, had heard this excuse before, as many of us probably have. What made this interaction more amusing was what, by coincidence, the student was going to miss that day: a discussion on analyzing and adapting to audiences. Had she attended the class, we wonder if she would understand the negative ways in which her excuse might be interpreted by a professor (e.g., "your class is not as important as others" or "you waste a lot of time on trivial topics").

If asked to name the most critical skill communication instructors can teach their students, we could probably nominate several candidates, but at or near the top of our list would be the topic covered in class that day. Indeed, we have argued elsewhere (Gass & Seiter, 2007) that, to be successful, a "persuader doesn't move the receiver to a message, the persuader moves the message to the receiver" (p. 113). Even so, as our example suggests, students are not always adept at doing this. What is more, the simple act of telling students how important it is to identify and adapt their messages to an audience's values, demographics, personalities, and so forth is not enough. Instead, we believe that students understand and attach more meaning to this skill when it is *shown* to them. For that reason, we have developed and used the exercise described below. The exercise involves providing students with a basic understanding and demonstration of audience adaptation and then asking them to practice and evaluate the skill. Although we use this exercise in our courses on persuasion, it could easily be adapted for use in courses in public speaking, advertising, marketing, and others.

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## **The Exercise**

### *Step 1: Background*

We begin by providing students with background on analyzing and adapting to audiences. For those without background on the topic, we refer you to our own book (Gass & Seiter, 2007) or you might examine other books devoted entirely to the subject (e.g., Beebe & Beebe, 1996; McQuail, 1997; Morgan, 2003). In general, we provide students with examples of persuaders who did an ineffective job analyzing audiences (e.g., the classic example of Chevrolet trying to market the Nova in Spanish-speaking countries where “no va” means “it doesn’t go”). We also discuss several variables persuaders should consider when analyzing audiences. For example, while presentations with a lot of statistics or analysis might lead to a lot of ants in the pants for young audiences, other groups (e.g., those with high levels of intelligence or high in the need for cognition) might like statistics or detailed reasoning. In addition, an awareness of audience needs (e.g., here, you might discuss Maslow, 1970) and the communication situation (e.g., is the audience large or small, noisy or quiet, supportive or hostile?) are important aspects of analysis.

### *Step 2: Guessing the Target Audience*

For this step, the instructor collects several persuasive artifacts—including magazine advertisements and/or videotaped commercials—and shows them to the students, who then try to guess what kind of magazine or television show would carry those messages. For instance, if the ads are for Geritol, health insurance, and so forth, the class might guess that retirees are the target group and that possible shows might include PBS series, nature shows, or older reruns of series like the *Golden Girls*. If the ads are for beer, body-building equipment, and electric razors, the class might guess the advertiser is targeting younger males in magazines like *FHM* or *Maxim*.

### *Step 3: Practicing and Evaluating Audience Analysis and Adaptation*

In this step, students get a chance to create their own persuasive appeal aimed at a particular audience. We find that this exercise works best if the instructor selects a product or service suggested by the students. To do this, ask students to shout out products or services that an audience might be persuaded to use or purchase and then pick one of the suggestions. By way of example, the last few times we have conducted this exercise, our students have suggested home-security systems, vacuum cleaners, vacation packages, attorney services, and restaurants as the focus of persuasive messages.

After a product or service is selected, separate the class into small groups with five or six members in each and *secretly* give each group a target audience. Examples include children, teens, elderly people, Christian fundamentalists, mothers, disabled persons, intelligent people, undocumented immigrants, dogmatic individuals, gays, people high in the need for cognition, members of fraternities, sports fanatics,

different cultural groups, and so forth. As a variation, you might also consider including one group that is given no target audience.

The groups now have 20 minutes or so to design a 1 to 2 minute commercial or presentation targeting their particular audience. Once finished, each group will present its commercial skit to the rest of the class. In other words, students are not just telling the rest of the class how the commercial would look; they are actually acting it out. The only constraint is that the groups are not allowed to mention whom their target audiences are in the presentation.

After each group presentation, the rest of the class is given the chance to guess who the target audience was. This, we believe, is an important element of the exercise for a couple of reasons. First, it engages the entire class; knowing that they will be guessing, students seem to pay more attention to the presentations. Second, when members of the class come up with several different guesses, it might indicate that the group was not as effective at targeting their group. Finally, the class discusses how effective each group was at targeting its respective audience.

### **Debriefing and Conclusions**

In our experience, students not only have fun participating in this activity, they walk away from it with a greater understanding of the importance and impact of audience analysis and adaptation. First, if you try this exercise, we think you and your students might be surprised about the wide variety of messages that are generated for the exact same product. Second, you should find that the starting place for creating persuasive messages makes a big difference in the end result. We have noticed, for example, that the group without a target audience not only reports having a more difficult time than the others when coming up with ideas for the presentation; more often than not, its presentation seems less rich and less focused, suggesting that not having an audience in mind may be less effective.

Next, perhaps the most important element of this exercise is the discussion of effectiveness that follows the presentations. We suggest asking students two questions related to effectiveness. First, would the message be effective at getting the target group's attention, and second, how persuasive do you think it would be? Sometimes, you will find presentations that accomplish one but not both of these goals. In one of our classes, for example, students created a presentation aimed at getting children to discuss home-security systems with their parents. The "commercial" featured monsters under the bed. Although the rest of the class thought this angle might be effective at getting children's attention, most thought the end result would probably be negative, i.e., angry parents with frightened children. As another example, one group targeted a message at elderly residents to install smoke detectors by suggesting they were slow and feeble and would not make it out of their house in a fire. A better approach, mentioned during the debriefing, was to remind seniors that they have lots of photos and keepsakes with sentimental value which could never be replaced. Teaching students to avoid negative stereotypes and sweeping generalizations when adapting their message to their audience is an important element of this exercise.

Other effectiveness issues may crop up as well. In each case, be sure to ask students *why* a particular message was or was not effective while connecting this prompt to your earlier discussion about principles of adaptation (e.g., the message was effective because it addressed audience needs or the specific situational constraints).

Finally, you might want to explore how principles learned in this exercise have applications in contexts other than advertising. For example, in face-to-face interactions, would students try to persuade a teacher, a friend, or a child in the same way? In medical contexts, how might a doctor deal with compliant and noncompliant patients? How might audience analysis improve persuasion between managers and employees, salespersons and customers, or with various family members?

### **Troubleshooting Tip**

For Step 2, we have found that it is best to collect advertisements from magazines and television shows with extremely different viewing audiences. Prime time shows with wide audience appeal do not work as well. The more specialized the audience, the more students will be able to distinguish the appeals.

### **References and Suggested Readings**

- Beebe, S. A., & Beebe, S. J. (1996). *Public speaking: An audience-centered approach*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
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