

Writing Spaces

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“Establishing the Who”: Professional Writing, Power Dynamics, & Improv

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Overview

When I started teaching professional writing, I would ask students: “Imagine you’re a nurse and you need to explain the signs of a stroke to a young child. Or, imagine you’re a business student writing a “how-to guide” for investors that will be published on a company website. How does your relationship to these audiences affect the way you communicate? How do differences in power influence this relationship?” I wanted to find a way to help students practice these advanced rhetorical skills.

I turned to improvisational theater—or improv. This activity is based on an improv exercise called “Establishing the Who”¹ and it introduces students to the concept of power dynamics. I explain the exercise by identifying core improv skills—listening, observing, and accepting and supporting others’ ideas. Next, students work in pairs. One student (the leader) is assigned a relationship that her partner (the follower) has to figure out. For example, the leader might be playing a parent and the follower is playing a child. Or, the leader is playing a student asking her teacher, the follower, about an assignment.

This exercise leads to discussions about communicating with readers with more, less, or the same level of power as a writer, or “writing up, writing down, writing across” (Lindblom, “Power Dynamics”). It also compels us to discuss how the power we and others hold is

¹ This exercise is based on Viola Spolin’s theater game called “Who Am I?” Special thanks to Valerie Lantz-Gefroh at the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science for teaching it to me. I’m grateful to have taken her “Improv for Scientists” course.

rooted in character (ethos), including “racial, gender, ethnic, political, class, age, religious, geographical, and historical identifications” (Ryan 143).

Finally, we use this exercise to brainstorm ideas for professional texts students are writing in the course. Whether students are writing a scientific report, a press release, or a public service announcement, or firing off an email, they will need to figure out how to relate to their audience. Examples of discussion and reflection questions are included in the Activity Process section. In the Learning Accommodations section, I also share ways of adapting this activity to an online, synchronous session with students.

Time Commitment

2 class sessions

Materials

Prior to the activity, ask students to read CCC’s Poster of “Rhetorical Situation” and “Professional and Technical Communication: An Overview” (“Writing Commons”) to provide a context for discussing the concept of rhetorical situation and a definition of professional writing.

Activity Process

- Before the assigned class, review with students the concepts of rhetorical situation and power dynamics, and a definition of professional writing. Consider assigning CCC’s Poster “Rhetorical Situation” and “Professional and Technical Writing: An Overview” (“Writing Commons”).
- At the beginning of class, explain that today’s activity will have students exploring ways of relating to audiences in positions of higher, lower, or equal power.
- Next, ask students to form pairs. One student is the leader

and the other is the follower. Prior to the activity, assign the leaders a relationship to play with their partner. The followers have no knowledge of this chosen relationship. For example, students can play two best friends getting together to work on a class project, or an interviewer and job candidate, or a student volunteer working with a child at a daycare center.

- The leader begins the activity by imagining they are entering a room as one of the characters in the chosen relationship without being too obvious about who they are. The follower must listen and observe how the leader is interacting with them through words, tone, facial expressions, and body language.
- Once the follower becomes aware of their role in the relationship, they begin to participate as the other established character. For instance, if they notice their role is the job interviewer, they respond and interact in ways that would be appropriate to the situation.
- After 2 minutes, ask the leaders to reflect on whether they successfully communicated the relationship to their partner without explicitly stating it. Then ask the followers to provide feedback to the leaders by responding to the following: What was the relationship between the both of you? Was it familiar or distant? What information or details did the leader share to establish this relationship? What did you notice about words, tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and movement within the space? How would you describe the power dynamics of the relationship? To what extent did those power dynamics influence the choices that were made during the activity?
- Repeat the activity to give students a chance to participate as both leader and follower, and to practice relating to each other within relationships of higher, lower, or equal power dynamics. It's helpful to first brainstorm as a class possible relationships that reflect these differences in power.

- Next, students' map their verbal and non-verbal choices in the activity onto a diagram of the rhetorical triangle. The discussion that follows helps to illustrate connections between decisions in the exercise and the rhetorical moves students make in their own professional writing, including language, tone, and grammatical choices.
- Finally, students brainstorm ideas for applying these connections to professional texts they are writing (a letter, a report, a memo, a press release etc.) using our discussion of rhetorical choices and power dynamics.
- Here are questions to explore with students as they work through these power dynamics in professional writing situations: What should you keep in mind when writing to someone whose level of power is more, less, or equal to yours? How do differences in power affect the way you relate to an audience? How do your identities and the identities of your audience influence power dynamics?

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of how power dynamics influence a writer's relationship to a reader
- Develop advanced rhetorical skills by exploring the effects of power dynamics in professional writing situations
- Experience the process of making rhetorical choices using verbal and non-verbal elements, including tone of voice, body language, facial expressions, and physical space to communicate with others and to build relationships
- Apply knowledge of advanced rhetorical choices to new professional writing situations

Learning Accommodations

- Students may choose to participate as leader or follower, or

as discussion leader or note-taker, to increase engagement and to accommodate different learning styles. They can observe others in the roles of leader and follower, and make note of the verbal and non-verbal cues being used to communicate and relate to each other. Students can also participate by providing suggestions for relationships to use in the activity.

- Students can brainstorm possible relationships and scenarios beforehand and choose from these suggestions during the activity. These suggestions can be gathered and shared in a digital format, including a Google document, that can be accessed during class.
- This exercise can be facilitated over a virtual platform, such as Zoom or Google Meet, for synchronous, online class sessions. Students can brainstorm ideas for relationships using the chat feature, which serves as a resource during the activity.

Works Cited

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Further Reading

- Alda, Alan. *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on my Face?: My Adventures in the Art and Science of Relating and Communicating*. Random House, 2017.
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