

# A Tutor's Audience Is Never a Fiction: When Written and Oral Communication Collide in the Writing Center

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Susan Andersen



Student's  
Audience



Student  
Writer

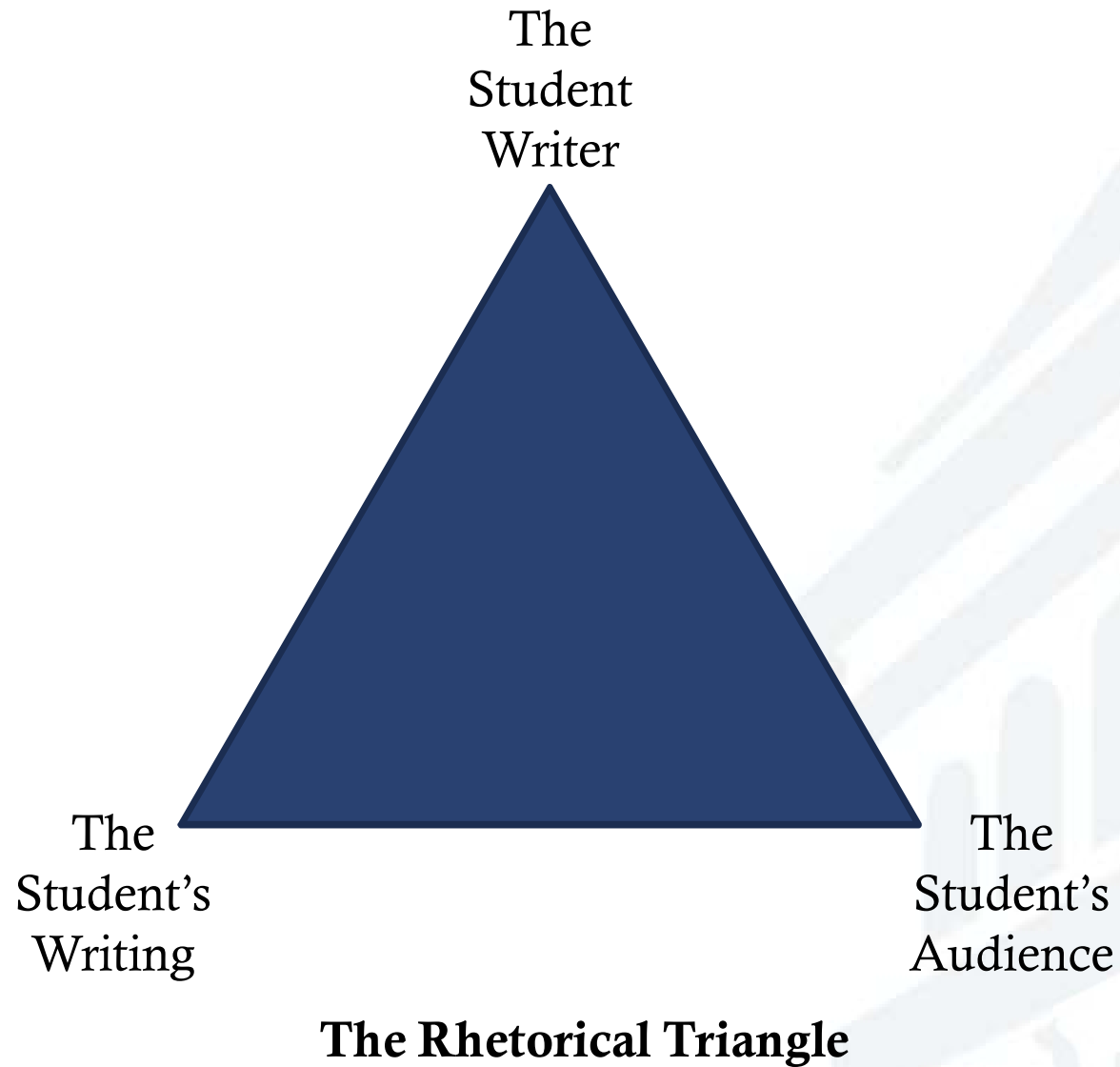


Peter Elbow's  
*Writing with Power*



Student  
Message

## Where is the writing center tutor?



- Tutors find themselves in an awkward position in the writing center.
- We believe that when faced with that awkwardness, tutors enter the role of the audience.

Why?



Being *a reader*  
vs.  
Being *the audience*



# Walter Ong's "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction"



Oral Communication



Written Communication

In the writing center, they collide.

## Douglas Park's “The Meaning of ‘Audience’”

### **Reader:**

“Anyone who happens to listen or to read a given discourse” (250).

### **Audience:**

“External readers and listeners *as* they are involved in the rhetorical situation” (250).

The two words “are often used interchangeably [which] allows great confusion” (250).

# Using the terms interchangeably

Peter Elbow's "Closing My Eyes As I Speak":

"[W]e can teach students to notice when **audience** awareness is getting in their way—and when this happens, consciously to put aside the needs of **readers** for a while" (52).

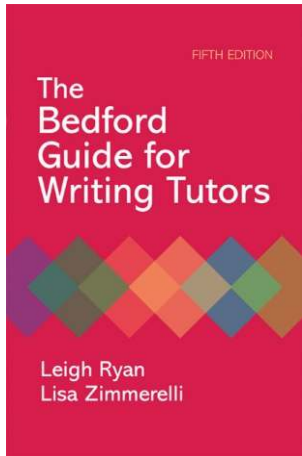
Virginia Davidson in *Writing Lab Newsletter*:

"[Aristotle's] cardinal rule was: know your **audience**. But how can tutors help writers adapt to their **readers**?" (2).

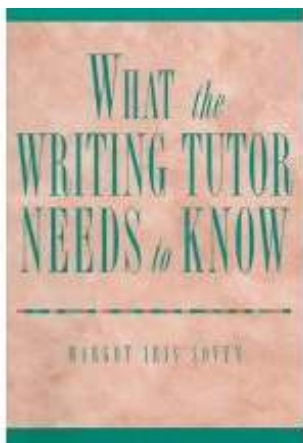
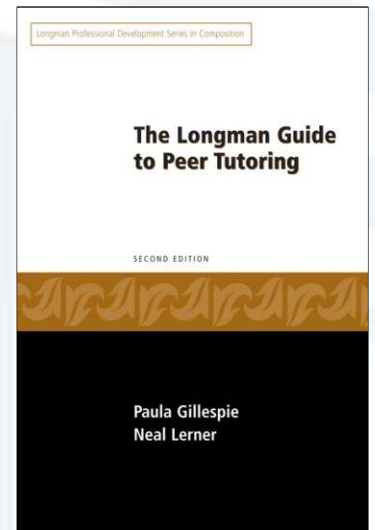




# Tutoring Guides from the Writing Center



- “As an intelligent, interested, and friendly **audience**, you will find it relatively easy to talk and learn more about the assignment and the writer” (19)
- “[D]escribe your reactions as a **reader**” (25)
- “Assume the role of the writer’s **audience**, rather than the role of a writing expert” (100)
- “[W]e suggest you respond to the writer’s draft as a **reader**” (163).



- “It’s helpful to think about three levels of response when tutoring writing. The first level is the **transparent reader** approach. This means responding more like an ordinary **reader**” (28).

## What does this mean?

This lack of distinction caused tutors not to be *readers* of student writing—but the *audience*.

Instead of asking students critical thinking questions pertaining to the students' audiences, they insert themselves as the audience, missing on an excellent tutoring opportunity.



# Research

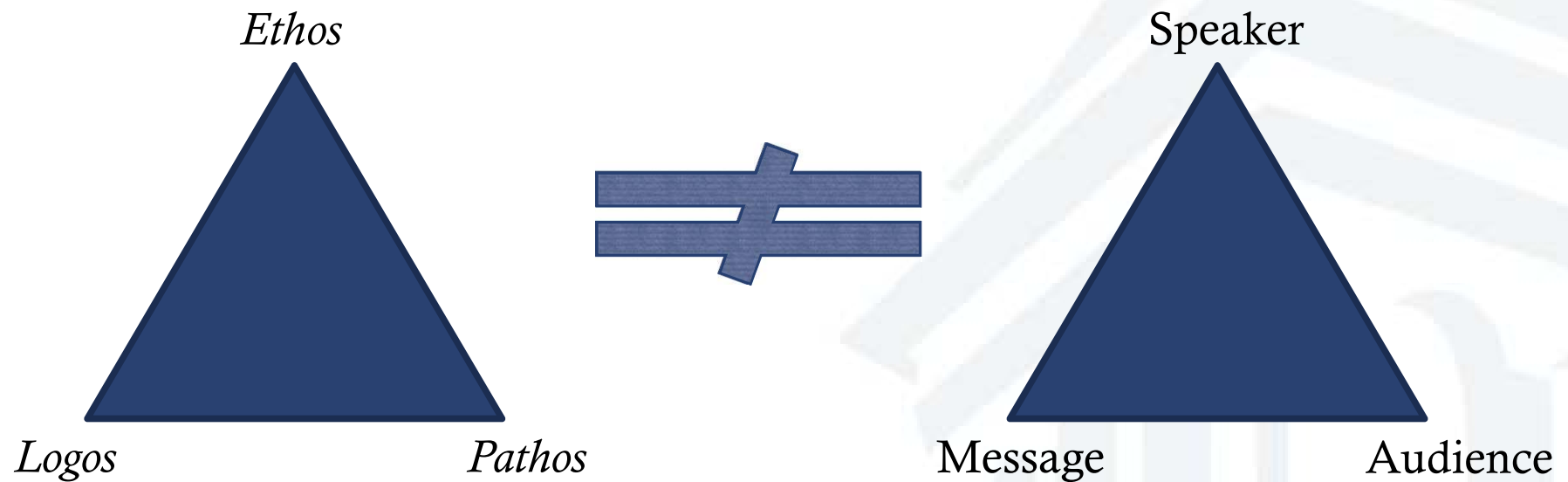
Surveyed  
17 undergraduate  
writing center tutors

- The rhetorical situation
- Audience awareness

Then we observed  
22 of their sessions

- Respond as the audience
- How often audience awareness was discussed
- *Reader vs. audience*

# The Rhetorical Triangles



# The Rhetorical Triangle

41% Never discuss the rhetorical triangle

“The rhetorical triangle is a big part of starting a paper for my tutoring.”

29% Rated their level of comfort less than 5

“The words ‘ethos, pathos, and logos’ scare me. I don’t even know where I may have needed to explain it, or where it would help students.”

18% Used the term “audience” in their answers about the rhetorical triangle--all in relation to *pathos*

82% Did not articulate a connection between the rhetorical triangle and audience awareness



# Audience Awareness

65% Only sometimes bring up audience awareness

29% Use it in reference to persuasive writing

53% Use it from an outside influence: assignment description, teacher comment, or student question

“This paper is supposed to be read, so we have to keep the **audience**—or the **reader**—in mind.”

18%

Took ownership

“Sometimes it’s hard identifying an audience **for** the student.”

“Sometimes it’s hard for **me** to figure out who their audience should be”



# The 22 Observations

**55%** Didn't discuss  
audience awareness

**10%** Specific audience

**30%** Used "audience"

**30%** Referred to the instructor  
as the audience

**50%** Used "reader"

**90%** Responded to the  
student as the audience



**Reader:**

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**Audience:**

“External readers and listeners *as* they are involved in the rhetorical situation” (250).

Douglas Park’s  
“The Meaning of ‘Audience’”





Because writing center literature and tutoring guides lack instruction about the tutor's rhetorical role during a session (by confusing the terms *reader* and *audience*), tutors do not fully understand the value of the question: "Who is your audience?"

Instead of being a critical *reader*, they try to become the *audience*.

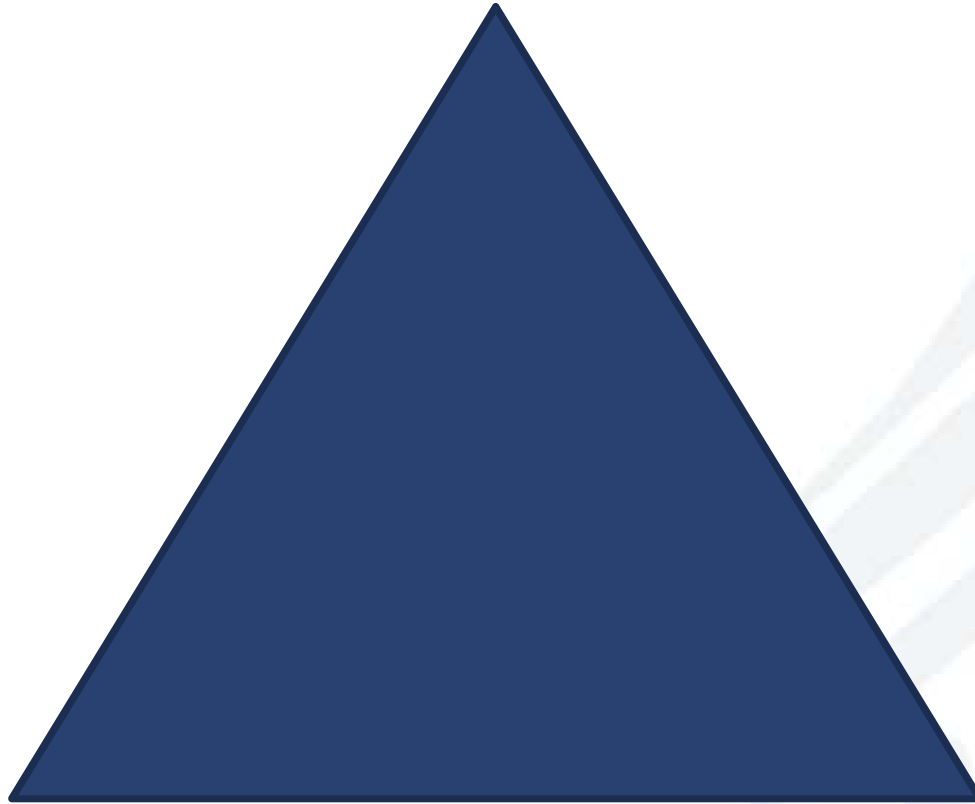


# The Solution?

We teach our tutors about their rhetorical role in the writing center.



Speaker



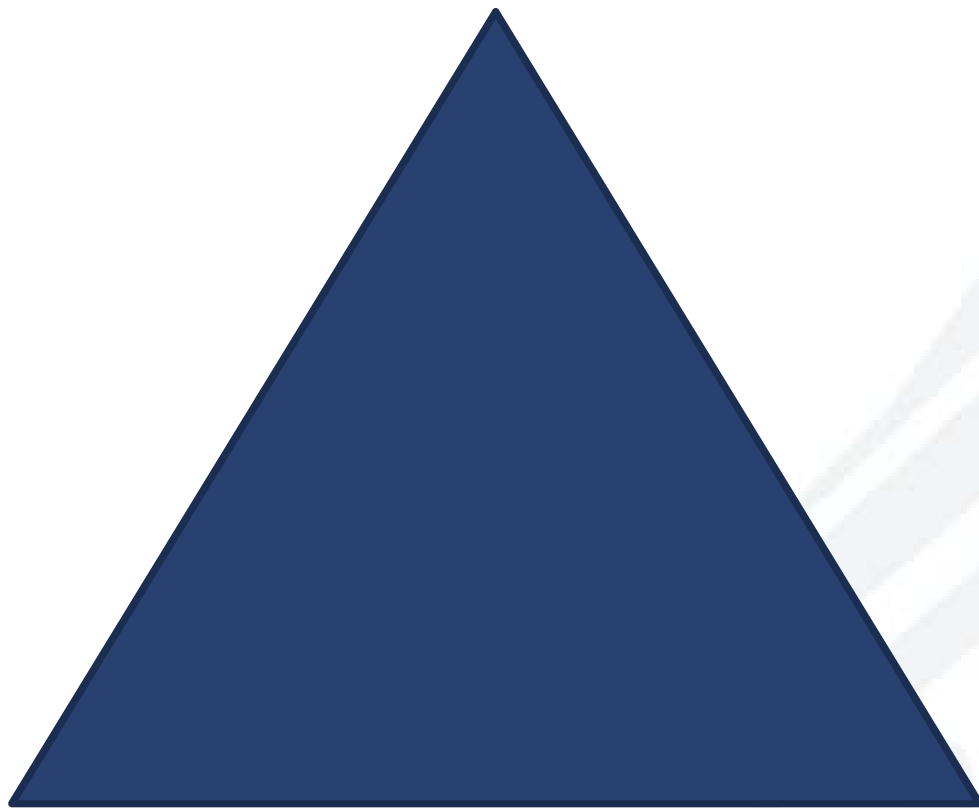
Message

Audience

The Rhetorical Triangle



Student



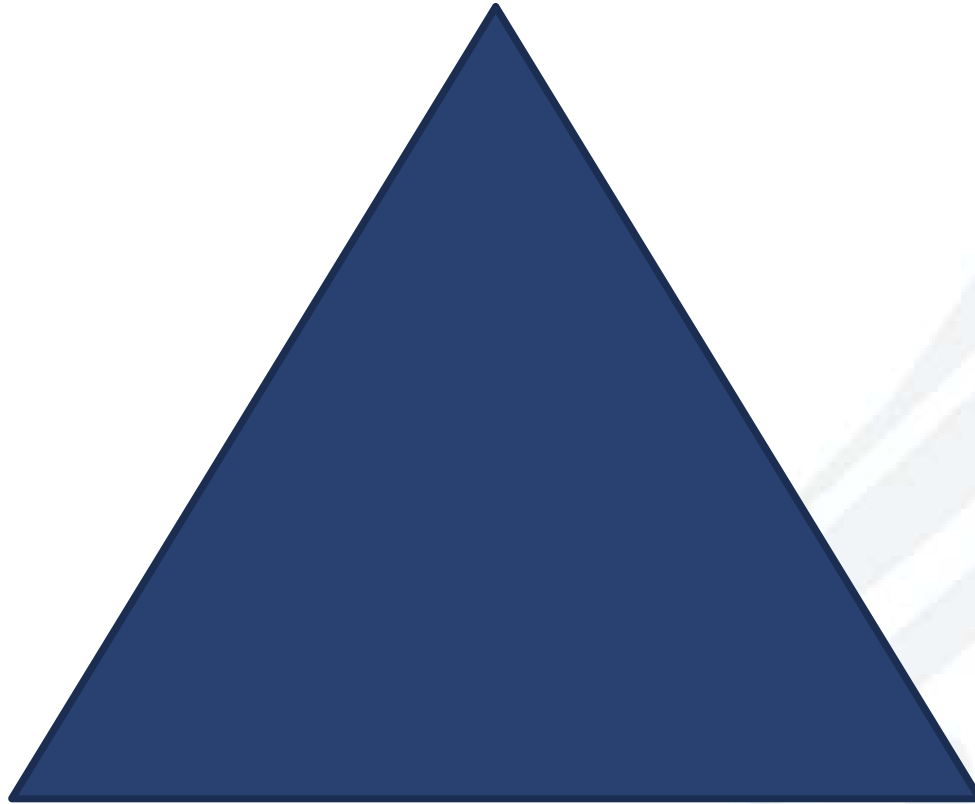
Student  
Writing

Student's  
Audience

The Student's  
Rhetorical Triangle



Tutor



Writing Center  
Mission

Student

The Tutor's  
Rhetorical Triangle



A student's audience may be a fiction, but not for the tutor.



# Questions?

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