ORALITY AND AUDIENCE ANALYSIS: TEACHING WRITING IN THE CORRECTIONAL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

ORALITY AND AUDIENCE ANALYSIS: TEACHING WRITING IN THE CORRECTIONAL CLASSROOM

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Walter Ong’s theory of orality and literacy provides a framework for teaching the concept of audience to basic writers in a prison education program. This thesis uses empirical research from a class at Warren Correctional Institute in Lebanon, Ohio, and selected observations of current composition theorists to confirm Ong’s assertion that audience is essential to the student writer’s ability to move from a reliance on speaking to a mastery of writing.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: A REVIEW OF THE ONGIAN PARADIGM OF ORALITY AND LITERACY

At no other time in history has communication evolved so rapidly as it has today. In the past ten years, automatic teller machines have replaced the need for face-to-face interaction with the local banker, the arrival of electronic mail has revived the "lost" art of letter writing, and scholarly applications of computer software have allowed educators to extend learning beyond the classroom walls. Certainly many more examples exist where communication technology is altering the way members of society learn, correspond, and conduct business.

Despite its advances, forms of communication technology can trace their roots to the spoken word—arguably the first form of communication aside from early grunts and physical gestures. In this early oral society, the use of the spoken word as the only form of communication was sufficient for certain activities but was ultimately limiting for more complex thinking and reasoning. In order to be stored for future use, according to Ong, pieces of information had to be articulated into "mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral discourse" (Orality and Literacy 34). As a result, the language had little room for expansion, and most communication revolved around "life-situations." In other words, oral discourse was shaped around the basic tenets of society: important history and basic expressions of emotion and value.

From the limited world of orality evolved the invention of writing, which enables some members of society to acquire literacy and analyze ideas outside of their oral context. The
invention of writing, according to Ong, also enabled one to conduct formal logical thinking, reasoning, defining, and describing (55). Ideas could be recorded and studied without the burden of mnemonic articulation. The invention of writing enabled the words in the language to grow and to collect extended meanings of words disassociated from the original oral expression. Writing enlarged "the potentiality of language almost beyond measure" (7-8). Thus, literate members of society could spend more time focusing on the future rather than memorizing the past.

The invention of the printing press expanded the number of literate people in society, and certainly without this conversion of the written word into the printed form, people would be unable to access current communication technologies.

This evolution of the spoken word has been the focus of Walter J. Ong’s scholarly career. For Ong, the invention of writing not only expanded the capabilities of language, but also expanded the way in which people formulate thoughts and expressions. Ong suggests that writing is the one invention which has had a profound effect on the transformation of human consciousness (78).

During his research into the evolution of the spoken word, Ong uncovered four distinct stages of the transformation of the spoken word into current communication technologies. The first stage, primary orality, describes a society that has been untouched by the invention of writing. The second stage,
writing, describes a society that is able to transform the spoken word into the written form. The third stage, printing, describes a society which has been able to mechanically reproduce the written word in a so that it may reach a larger audience. The fourth stage, secondary orality, describes a society which has manipulated elements of both writing and speaking into an electronic format such as the telephone, television, or personal computer (Youngkin 58).

Although each stage of Ong's paradigm is associated with the invention of a monumental communication technology, the transformation of the spoken word was not very abrupt. In between the development of these new technologies, a constant battle of interaction between orality and literacy was, and is, being waged as members of society generate language and reformulate their consciousness in order to arrive at an acceptable truth and attempt a universal consciousness.

It is important to note, too, that not all cultures and societies will be in the same stage of evolution in terms of the spoken word as others. Of the some 3,000 languages in existence, only around 78 of them have a literature or a written form. According to Ong, "Even now hundreds of languages in active use are never written at all: no one has worked out an effective way to write them. The basic orality of languages is permanent" (Orality and Literacy 7). Even though languages exist without a affected by the invention of writing. Yet, Ong asserts that these cultures "preserve much of the mindset of primary orality"
African cultures are still rich with proverbs, which they often use in the courtroom to settle civil disputes. Middle Eastern cultures continue to view verbosity as a sign of maturation and power, and many Native American tribal communities still appoint a story teller to sustain their oral history. Although these cultures do not exist in a state of primary orality, they still retain large amounts of oral "residue" or characteristics.¹

Many theories of composition and communication, particularly ones that apply to the classroom, assume that students are situated in a world of complete literacy. It is not a cultural bias, but merely the natural relationship between logical reasoning and the act of writing. Ong confirms the nature of this relationship:

Language study in all but recent decades has focused on written texts rather than an orality for a readily assignable reason: the relationship of study itself to writing . . . . abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of unstated truths is impossible without writing and reading.

(8)

If there are cultures that still retain some of their oral residue, then certainly there are implications that exist when a student from a highly oral culture walks into the highly literate classroom.

One implication is that this student from a highly oral
culture immediately confronts the concept of audience. Aristotle claims that "of the three elements in speech-making--speaker, subject, and person addressed--it is the last one, the hearer, that determines the speech's end and object" (Porter ix). Peter Vandenberg argues that "regardless of any given theoretical conception of what an audience is, the necessary relationship between its consideration and good writing appears to be beyond question" (85). Audience is an important consideration, influencing topic, style, grammar, point of view, development and purpose, all the elements of discourse.

In Aristotelian terms, audience means the final form--the purpose or lack of purpose "that makes a piece of prose shapely and full of possibility or aimless and empty" (Park 247). This definition of audience, however, is carried over from the primary oral tradition. It is a definition, according to Ong, that harks back to the "old days," when rhetoric concerned itself with public speaking and a present audience provided an immediate and instantaneous response ("The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction" 53). It is a definition that provides the speaker with specific characteristics, values, and beliefs about the audience. It is also a definition of audience that is limiting and oversimplistic, especially when it is transferred to the activity of writing.

Much like the definition of "rhetoric," whose meaning had to transform from merely the art of persuasive speech in order to accommodate the new technologies in which people communicate, the
definition of audience needed to transform as well. Audiences in a primary oral society were close to the speaker in terms of time and space. In a literate society, however, the writer has only vague ideas as to the time and context in which his paper will be read.

Yet, for many composition teachers, the definition of audience remains in its primary oral setting. According to research conducted by James Britton on audience analysis, written texts often address an audience as the immediate reader of the text (16). Douglas Park argues that this prevailing definition of audience exists in the classroom today because it is the most visual or concrete (249). In other words, it is perhaps the easiest definition for teachers to explain in the classroom, and for students to understand.

Students are often told in the composition classroom to "consider your audience" at some unknown point in the composing process--a rule of thumb that is pedagogically empty. The problem with teaching an oral definition of audience, according to Park, is that "only sometimes does considering audience mean directly considering particular people; more often it means something much hazier" (247-248). Park further argues that "the familiar question 'who or what is the audience for this piece?' may prompt a ready answer, but equally often it suggests little, drawing especially blank looks from students" (247).

In 1977, Walter Ong addressed the issue of audience in his essay, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction." In his
essay, Ong argues that the oral definition of audience which Park describes is limiting because "most persons could get into written form few if any of the complicated and nuanced meanings they regularly convey orally" (56). Although literacy and orality are connected through the spoken word, the act of writing is not a natural extension of speech. It is, according to Ong, one that is artificial and composed of consciously contrived rules (Orality and Literacy 7).

The primary oral definition of audience limits not only those who reside in a highly literate culture, but also those students residing in a heavily oral culture who want to develop their writing skills. If one attempts to teach writing, an artificial act that is far-removed from orality, then advocating an oral definition of audience only reinforces the notion that orality and literacy are naturally linked, which they are not. Thus, writing skills will likely develop at a slower pace.

In order to accommodate a transforming definition of audience, modern composition theorists have attempted to expand their definition of audience. Park emphasizes that the current range of definitions of audience has identifiable extremes. At one extreme, "words like 'adjust' and 'accommodate' convey the familiar notion of audience as something readily identifiable..." (Park 248). This definition, of course, is based on the oral definition of audience. That is, audience is something that is readily identifiable.

Perhaps a more realistic definition of audience, a
definition containing words like "construe" and "invent," suggest that the audience exists within the consciousness of the writer. Ong argues that the students’ main problem "is trying to 'figure out' the audience" ("The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction" 59). In a sense, the writer actually has to "fictionalize" his audience. In the world of literacy, this definition is usually a reality. In the classroom, an audience for an assignment is rarely provided, and writers are constantly composing texts for an audience about whom they know very little. More often than not, audiences are created out of the subconsciousness of the writer, often through word choice and selection of topic. Certainly, then, a definition of audience which is rooted in primary orality is insufficient in a literate culture. This insufficiency is magnified when student writers reside in a culture that is steeped in oral tradition. For them, the oral definition of audience is a reality. Rather than make subconscious (or conscious) decisions to fictionalize an audience, these writers struggle with a conscious effort to reach a specific audience. The attempt is painfully difficult as they attempt to naturally extend the spoken word into the written word.

In this thesis, I will show that modern composition theorists either define audience in the classroom in terms of primary orality, or else they advocate ignoring audience altogether. Both definitions are limiting, especially when they are used in a classroom comprised of students who either reside
in or come from a society still steeped in orality.

I will also describe how Walter J. Ong’s paradigm of the evolution of the spoken word into written form provides a framework for teaching the concept of audience to basic writers in a prison education program. Empirical research from a class at Warren Correctional Institute in Lebanon, Ohio, and selected observations of composition theorists (Elbow, Booth, Ede, and Lunsford) provide data to confirm Ong’s assertion that audience is essential to the student writer’s ability to move from a reliance on speaking to a mastery of writing.
CHAPTER 2
CURRENT DEFINITIONS: A REVIEW OF CURRENT DEFINITIONS OF AUDIENCE

While the three elements of speech-making first defined by Aristotle—speaker, subject, and person addressed—are the same elements that Wayne Booth believes are at work in any communicative effort, including the composing process, achieving a balance of these three elements of the rhetorical "stance" should be the main goal of teachers of rhetoric and composition (141). An over-emphasis or under-emphasis on any of the three elements results in what Booth terms a "corruption" of the rhetorical stance (141).

Perhaps the most elusive element of the rhetorical stance is "audience" (Park 248). In a society of primary orality, audience was easy to define. An audience was in close proximity to the speaker in terms of both time and space. A speaker was able to understand the context of the message by looking at the surroundings and the immediate reaction of the audience.

In literate societies, however, audience is often abstract and far-removed from the original message. In most instances, writers have very vague ideas as to when their message will be read and that context in which it will taken. A writer usually does not have the luxury of "reading the room," especially in the classroom, when paper assignments are distributed without any consideration or regard for audience.

Unfortunately, different pedagogical approaches in addressing audience usually follow the primary oral definition or choose to ignore audience altogether. This invariably results in varied types of writing which are often termed as reader-based or
writer-based prose. A heavy classroom emphasis on audience in primary oral terms, for example, could easily lead to a reader-based text that will eventually earn a grade but might not be a challenge to the writer. This emphasis not only inhibits the writer’s skills as he continually writes to the same audience, but also downplays the value of truth in writing and emphasizes pure effect. On the other hand, a total disregard of audience could result in a text that is writer-based and somewhat unintelligible to other readers.

In his essay, "The Rhetorical Stance," Booth defines the current extremes of audience as, on the one extreme, the "advertiser’s stance" and, on the other extreme, the "pedant’s stance." The advertiser’s stance, according to Booth, undervalues the subject by overvaluing the pure effect of the text on the reader (143). In other words, the advertiser’s stance overemphasizes the role that the reader plays in the creation of a text. According to Booth, the advertiser’s stance is a corruption of the rhetorical balance that should be maintained between the writer, the subject, and the writer’s audience (143). That is, since an actual audience exists outside of the text, students must make every effort to acknowledge and reach that audience through their texts.

Since the advertiser’s stance defines audience in primary oral terms of an audience that is close to the speaker in both time and space, the question exists as to its effectiveness in the writing classroom and its implications for both student and
teacher. An assignment that asks writers, for example, to write a paper that persuades the student council to oppose an amendment demands the students to do many things, including an attempt to figure out the collective thoughts of the student council and the forecasted reaction. If the student were to orally address the student council, he might be able to sense immediate reactions and adjust his dialogue. In writing, however, this is next to impossible.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the primary oral definition of audience reinforces a false assumption that writing is a natural extension of speech. Students, especially students from cultures with high oral residue, will become frustrated as they attempt to place oral nuances on the paper. On the other hand, students from highly literate cultures will not improve their writing skills simply because they have mastered the "write what my teacher wants to hear" mentality.

There is also an ethical concern over the advocacy for a primary oral audience in the classroom. Booth claims that this advocation "is probably in the long run a more serious threat in our society than the danger of ignoring audience" (143) in the sense that teachers of composition are rarely in the position to determine the difference between "justified accommodation" and "the kind of accommodation...in which the very substance of what is said is accommodated to some preconception of what will sell" (144). Certainly one can see the dilemmas associated with the primary oral definition of audience in the writing classroom. By
advocating the advertiser's stance on audience, teachers are not only telling their students that pure effect takes precedence over the truth, but also limiting the students' potential growth as writers.

At the other extreme of defining audience, according to Booth, is the "pedant's stance" (141). Advocating a position that the students should ignore an audience and concentrate on the text, the pedant's stance is also seen by Booth as a corruption of the rhetorical stance (141). Writing teachers who believe that audience should be ignored and that the text should rely on its factual value are telling their students that the "notion for a job to be done for a particular audience is left out" (Booth 141). This type of writing can be described as mechanical or without voice. There is an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, but often there simply isn't any "feeling" to the writing. According to Booth, "the writer who assumes that it is enough merely to write an exposition of what he happens to know on the subject will produce the kind of essay that soils our scholarly journals, written not for readers but for bibliographies" (141).

By advocating the total disregard of audience in the writing classroom, teachers are again short-changing their students. There is always an audience for a paper which students either consciously or subconsciously attempt to reach. Teachers who advocate the total disregard of audience fail to acknowledge that readers are created through the student's word choice, tone,
style, and even topic. Maybe an audience does not exist in its primary oral definition, but it certainly exists, either consciously or subconsciously, whenever students put pen to paper.

Perhaps as a backlash to the lack of "feeling" and "honesty" in students' texts, the 1960's witnessed the emergence of an approach to writing that emphasized all the elements of composition that the primary oral definition of audience often overlooked--invention, self-expression, and a relentless pursuit of "honesty." This approach, known as the expressive approach, maintained that the primary audience for any student text should be the individual writer, at least in the initial stages of the composing process and arguably even into the final draft of the text.

Peter Elbow's essay "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience" suggests that writers need to blot out an awareness of audience in order to focus on the material at hand (50). According to Elbow, "When we examine really good student or professional writing, we can often see that its goodness comes from the writer's having gotten sufficiently wrapped up in her meaning and her language as to forget all about audience needs" (54). In other words, an awareness of audience should be the last thing on a writer's mind. In a sense, an expressive approach to writing entices students into exploring elements of writing that are often inhibited by an overwhelming presence of audience--voice, style, and "honesty."
It can be argued, however, that the expressive approach ultimately relies on a primary oral definition of audience. Elbow claims that writing that is "well-suited" to its readers is often appreciated (54), thereby insinuating that good writing is writing that ultimately is pleasing to an already existent audience. Elbow then contradicts the very reason for the need of an expressive approach to writing when he suggests ways in which to assess the value of a student's text. In "A Method for Teaching Writing," Elbow argues that "the student's best language skills are brought out and developed when writing is considered as words on paper designed to produce a specific effect in a specific reader" (119). Furthermore, he claims that the best assessment for student writing is either to let other students in the class evaluate student writing (125) or to judge an essay "solely on whether it contains conviction and a self" (123). In either case, students are still presented with the previously mentioned problems associated with the advertiser's stance.

With objections like Booth's to the "advertiser's stance," Ede and Lunsford discuss the problems associated with advocating a primary oral definition of audience. One primary weakness that they find in this particular stance, which they term as "audience addressed," is that students must somehow obtain a knowledge of their audiences' beliefs and values (156). In other words, as I write this thesis, I could be so concerned with finding common ground with my definable audience (my thesis director and second reader) that the larger and much more important task of
organizing my ideas to the composition community in general might be in jeopardy. According to Ede and Lunsford, the idea of audience addressed leaves little room for invention and limits the students' ability to convey their message to a wider audience than the teacher--an imperative step to be taken if students expect to gain anything meaningful from composition classes (158).

Ede and Lunsford also address the ethical concerns of this "corruption" of the rhetorical stance. According to Ede and Lunsford, "rhetoric has traditionally been concerned not only with the effectiveness of a discourse, but with truthfulness as well" (159). Like Booth, Ede and Lunsford question the ability of composition instructors to address ethical concerns. They argue that students' questions about "the degree to which this audience is 'real' or imagined, and the way it differs from the speaker's audience, are generally ignored or subordinated to a sense of the audience's powerfulness" (156). In other words, the question of how an audience is fictionalized is often ignored.

Ede and Lunsford cite other limitations of audience addressed which include a lack of emphasis on self-expression (157), little emphasis on variation of style (158), and an "oversimplified view of language" (159). Furthermore, Ede and Lunsford believe that a primary oral definition of audience suggests "that the writer has less control than the audience over both evaluation and motivation" (158). In other words, a primary
oral definition of audience places little emphasis on invention, which Erika Lindemann claims is the one part of the composing process which will likely lead to successful writing (75).

Ede and Lunsford discuss the concept of "invoking" an audience--an idea that borrows heavily from Walter Ong's essay, "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction." In invoking an audience, student writers use language "to provide cues for the reader--cues which help to define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text" (160). In other words, students essentially "create" their audience through word choice, style, and voice. Although theoretically different from Booth's pedant's stance, Ede and Lunsford argue that audience invoked also undermines the power of the reader. To suggest that an audience can be contrived around a text is to suggest that the student-writer is aware of the audience's needs and interests. According to Ede and Lunsford, "the writer who does not consider the needs and interests of his audience risks losing that audience" (165).

Another criticism of an invoked audience is that it overlooks "the insights of discourse theorists, such as James Moffett and James Britton, who remind us of the importance of such additional factors as distance between speaker or writer and audience and levels of abstraction in the subject" (Ede and Lunsford 164). In other words, students who are asked to invoke an audience in the classroom will create an audience with which they feel comfortable, often with subjects that they are
comfortable with as well. This produces little challenge for the writer. According to Moffett, students must deal with different levels of abstraction in order to "find subjects and shape them, to invent ways to act upon others, and to discover their own voice" (248).

While Ede and Lunsford base their "audience invoked" theory on Walter Ong's theory of a writer's fictionalization of the audiences, they ignore Ong's classroom applications of the material. First, Ong suggests that students must be made aware of the fact that writing is a highly artificial act that, while it is based on the spoken word, it is far removed from the act of speaking ("Literacy and Orality in Our Times" 39). When students realize that writing is artificial, they will be able to understand that their audience is artificial as well. That is, once students realize that they are unable to squeeze oral nuances into their writing, they will also understand that the must redefine their audience. Ede and Lunsford's first complaint about audience invoked suggests that writers cannot afford to lose their audience. Ong suggests that the audience is created by the writer.

Ong's second suggestion is to let students know that it is perfectly natural to associate fear and anxiety with the act of writing (39). Writing is an artificial act, not a natural one. Ede and Lunsford suggest that teachers who advocate an invoked audience give the message to their students to choose a style and voice with which they are comfortable and familiar. By using
Ong's second suggestion, students will understand the challenges associated with writing and might even be encouraged to take chances and experiment with different styles.

Ong's third suggestion is to have students analyze readings from the point of view of the audience (40-41). This reinforces for students the notion that being a reader or audience, just like being a writer, requires a certain amount of flexibility and role-playing. This suggestion allows the students to realize that an audience is not a fixed, physical entity that exists outside of the text, but rather a flexible, created entity that exists within the text and within the writers themselves.

Ong's theory of fictionalizing an audience and his suggestions on teaching students about the artificial nature of writing would probably serve as a side note in most composition programs. Most college composition classes are filled with students who exist on a daily basis in a literate culture and, to a certain extent, are familiar with the conventions of writing. Although these students may not realize their conscious creation of an audience, they are subconsciously creating an audience every time they write a text.

It is important to note, as mentioned in chapter one, that not all cultures exist at the same stage of evolution of the spoken word. Most languages do not have a written form and exist only in an oral form. Although all cultures have been affected in one way or another by the written word, some subcultures,
according to Ong, are still deeply rooted in orality (Orality and Literacy 11). I mentioned before that many Native American tribes still appoint a member to mnemonically record and orally pass down tribal history. Middle Eastern cultures consider a person’s verbosity a form of maturation and wisdom, and African cultures are still rich with proverbs. All of these cultures still maintain close ties to the stage of primary orality.

Another subculture that contains a large amount of oral residue exists within the prison systems of the United States. The next chapter will show how inmates possess many of the characteristics of a culture that still retains a large amount of orality. This is especially apparent when one attempts to teach writing in the prison classroom.
CHAPTER 3

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE PRISON: ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND A REVIEW OF SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES

What if students in writing classes either grow up in or live in a society that still emphasizes a large amount of orality? If they did, how could they be helped in the classroom? As stated in the second chapter, current composition theories concerning audience are based on the assumption that all writing students arrive in the classroom from a literate culture. Ede and Lunsford’s theory of audience addressed, as well as Booth’s theory of the advertiser’s stance, assumes that students are able to transpose many of their oral nuances into the written form without any help or guidance aside from ‘figuring out’ the audience. At the same time, Elbow’s suggestion of ignoring an audience simply doesn’t match the reality of any form of written text, simply because there always is an audience. Ong asserts that all academic studies, not just composition studies, rest on this bias:

Language study in all but recent decades has focused on written texts rather than an orality for a readily assignable reason: the relationship of study itself to writing. All thought, including that in primary oral cultures, is to some degree analytic: it breaks its materials into familiar components. But abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of unstated truths is impossible without writing and reading. Human beings in primary oral cultures, those untouched by writing in any form, learn
a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they do not study. (Orality and Literacy 7)

If students in a classroom resided in a highly oral culture, the teacher would have to rethink not only the definition of audience but also the role of audience. In a primary oral society the audience is, in terms of both time and space, rather immediate. According to Ong, "Words are never fully determined in their abstract signification but have meaning only with relation to man's body and to its interaction with its surroundings" ("The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction 56).

In writing, and especially in the writing classroom, the audience is usually further away in both time and space. Ong suggests that when teachers hand out assignments with no specific audience associated with them, "problems with audience begin to show themselves" (56). Most students' writing problems stem from the fact that there is no talking, listening, or feedback present when they sit down to write a text. Ong argues that the students' main problem "is trying to 'figure out' the audience" (59). In a sense, the writer has to fictionalize the audience.

Ong also argues that "the spoken word is part of present actuality and has its meaning established by the total situation in which it comes into being . . . this meaning is not captured in writing" (56). Ong is implying that culture, especially a culture steeped in orality, has a large influence on the speaker and the meaning of the message. Some composition theorists also assert the influence of culture on the writer. According to
Joseph Harris, there is no single voice in a writer, but rather the voice of a community that has formed the writer’s values and beliefs:

We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, but reflective of communities to which we belong. (268)

If a writer is a product of his community, then social influences have shaped not only the final draft of the text but also certain elements of the composing process as well. If a person exists in a highly oral culture, then oral influences could disrupt the student’s writing ability.

Although not all inmates arrive at the prison from relatively oral cultures, inmates in a correctional institution exist in a relatively oral culture in which the spoken word and oral communication are reinforced on a daily basis. In other words, they become socialized into a culture that is highly oral. This socialization process, known as prisonization, limits the inmate-writer’s perception of audience.

How does one tell if a culture in the classroom is heavily oral? According to Ong, there are characteristics of cultures that are largely oral-based that show up in a person’s speech or writing. First, there is a resistance to define words that have no context in the person’s life (Orality and Literacy 8-9). A
person in an oral culture simply has a hard time defining words that really have no context in his or her life. A person in an oral culture could define a ball or a stick (if, it is assumed, he is familiar with these objects), but he would have a hard time defining words that are either abstract (happy or sad) or words that have little significance to him (fulcrum).

Ong suggests that those residing in an oral culture also tend to construct their sentences in an additive rather than a subordinate manner (37). That is, those residing in an oral culture are much more likely to carry on a continuous construction of a sentence by adding on clauses rather than subordinating them. This repetitious construction is useful in an oral culture for purposes of memorization. Sentences also tend to be aggregative rather than analytic. According to Ong, sentences tend to be cliche-ridden and repetitive rather than creative and original (38). Again, this served the purposes of a culture that needed to simplify the spoken word for better memorization.

There are also other signs in language which are characteristic of largely oral cultures: a lack of abstract thinking or words, a tendency to define in relational terms instead of abstract terms, and a tendency to keep the language simple. According to Ong, "oral societies must invest close to the human life-word" (41-42). In other words, those residing in an oral culture must not stray too far from what their oral capacity allows them.
Donald Clemmer's pioneer study, entitled *The Prison Community*, established that incarceration creates a unique set of social conditions that can constitute a culture (Fish and Williams 19). Clemmer studied the inmates' language in order to study their culture. According to Peterson and Thomas, Clemmer conducted over 30,000 conversations with inmates and compiled a list of over 1,063 words and phrases which had a context only within the prison—terms that were not written, but oral (4). Words such as "kite" (to send a message) and fish (new arrival) only have a context inside the prison walls.

Clemmers' work was continued by others, particularly Richard McCleery, Sheldon Messinger, and Gresham Sykes. Messinger and Sykes acknowledged the special oral nature of the prison setting by categorizing the maxims that inmates tend to use on an everyday basis. They developed five groupings of maxims, all of which dictate inmate values and beliefs (5). Maxims such as "don't lose your cool" and "keep your nose clean" are spoken over and over by inmates, not only in casual conversation, but also to settle disputes and dictate trading interactions. Furthermore, Gresham and Sykes found that the maxims are asserted without hesitation and with "great vehemence" and are "held forth as guides for the behavior of the inmate in his relation with fellow prisoners and custodians" (5). Their finding reinforces Ong's suggestion that those who exist in an oral culture must conduct their thinking in mnemonic patterns so that they "are shaped for ready oral occurrence" (Orality and
Certainly the inmates' ease in reciting maxims is indicative of an oral culture.

The oral nature of the prison is an aspect known as "prisonization," or, according to Fish and Williams, the "accepting values, customs, and general culture of the prison (41). McCleery noticed the reinforcement of oral culture almost immediately as the inmate enters the institution:

The absence of public regulations and the lack of a formal orientation program, the secrecy and the arbitrariness associated with the enforcement of discipline, the shocking unfamiliarity of the prison situation, and the demands of the regimentation imposed, all combined to make the newly admitted inmate completely dependant on the experienced prisoner. In a unique sense, his knowledge was power. He could share on his own conditions his knowledge of the limits of official tolerance and the means by which sanctions could be avoided, which could make life tolerable for the new man. (57)

The new inmates, without any written manual concerning the norms of prison culture, rely on word-of-mouth, oral maxims, and an unwritten code for the guidelines that need to be followed in order to "fit in" in the prison. This fact underscores Ong's idea that those who live in an oral culture learn by apprenticeship or discipleship (Orality and Literacy 19).

The orality of the inmates exists in reality as much as it
does in sociological theory. I noticed many of the traits in the inmates' language that Clemmers, Sykes, Gresham, and Messinger noticed in their early studies. Essentially, I wanted to see if the oral nature of the prison could influence the students' writing ability. I started the Basic Writing class at Warren Correctional Institute by collecting a diagnostic writing sample. I received papers consisting of writer-based prose with a limited sense of audience. Also evident in the inmates' writing, however, were the "signs" that Walter Ong describes as being indicative of a culture that is heavily oral. Many of the papers were additive rather than subordinate. That is, they contained a pragmatic oral structure. Consider the following student paper written early in the term:

I'm not sure how to write about myself. I am six feet tall, I am honest, I am caring, I am driven and I am looking forward to another chance through education and I am willing to do whatever it takes to make it back to my home.

Notice the repetition of the word "am" as the only verb. In an oral culture, the use of "am" could likely be used as a mnemonic pattern in order to relay the message more effectively. The structure, while it is not entirely additive, could certainly be written with more subordinate constructions.

In these early papers, cliches were used extensively. Walter Ong describes this as aggregative rather than analytic. Certainly cliches popped up all over the place during many of the
early writings. "Lovely lady," "hardened criminal," "lose your cool," and "keep your head on" were all cliches that existed not only in the inmates' maxims, but also in their writing.

There was also a desire to identify abstractions with known objects. That is, the writers define abstractions by using other objects, giving the definition, in a sense, a visual cue. Consider another student paper as the writer tries to describe his feeling of loneliness about being separated from his family:

It [loneliness] is like being in a dark cave where nobody can touch or hear or see you. My family is supportive, and I see them, but there is still a big wall between us that is hard to climb over. Even when I get out, I think that wall will be there. The student has taken an abstract idea, loneliness, and provided his reader with visual descriptions in order to give the abstract idea a concrete form, in this case a wall and a cave.

The heavy reliance on verbal maxims to sound out the inmates' value system, the tendency to perceive writing as a natural extension of thought, and the natural tendency to communicate orally in written texts rather than literally—all of these symptoms place the inmates in what Walter Ong describes as an oral culture.

If this assumption is accepted, then the inmates' perception of audience as a barrier is easily understood. As Ong states, "to move from the entirely natural world oral world into this artificial world of writing is bewildering and terrifying . . .
For, except in the case of personal letters or their equivalents, writers commonly know almost none of their putative readers" ("Literacy and Orality in Our Times" 40). Everyone who writes must move into this artificial world at one point or another. Because of the unique social setting of the prison, inmates' entrance into the artificial world of writing is delayed. By living in a highly oral culture, inmates are not required to possess a sense of audience beyond a concrete, face-to-face perception. Suddenly, according to Ong, "there are no live persons facing the writer to clarify his thinking by their reactions. There is no immediate feedback. There are no auditors to look pleased or puzzled" (41). The artificial world of writing is certainly not as friendly as the oral world of the inmates.

Walter Ong also describes an article written by Thomas J. Farrell, "Literacy, Basics, and All That Jazz," which "isolates nicely two of the basic problems a person has to face in moving from orality to the world of writing . . . students make assertions which are totally unsupported by reasons, or they make a series of statements which lack connections" (40). These two symptoms were also seen in the early writings of my students. Claims were unsupported with evidence, and evidence was unsupported by warrants. In short, the students made no attempt to reach an audience at all in their papers.

In addition to the student examples, I also developed a set of questionnaires that fleshed out certain characteristics about
my students' perceptions of audience. The first questionnaire (Appendix A) was distributed on the first day of class. Essentially, I wanted to know if my students were even conscious of an audience. If they were, I wanted to know their definition of audience. I also wanted to explore the point at which the students allow the audience to influence their writing. Finally, I wanted to know their general feelings toward writing.

Six students responded to the first questionnaire. The entire class perceived audience as a single person; that is, the person who eventually reads the text. The questionnaire also revealed that the students merely perceived writing as a natural extension of speech. In other words, the act of writing and the act of speaking were completely synonymous. The students, however, acknowledged that they had trouble in expressing this "natural" form of communication. One student commented that "If one speak [sic] to an audience he can say exactly what he wants to say, but if you write you may make errors." Another student simply replied that "it comes out better spoken." The students perceived writing as a natural act, basically speech which translates onto paper.

The questionnaires also revealed that the students considered audience at the very beginning of the composing process. In other words, the audience is in control of the text. In his article, "Closing My Eyes as I Speak: An Argument for Ignoring Audience," Peter Elbow comments that:

It's not that writers should never think about their
audience. It's a question of when. An audience is a field of force. The closer we come—the more we think about these readers, the stronger the pull they exert on the contents of our minds. The practical question, then, is always whether a particular audience functions as a helpful field or one that confuses and inhibits us. (51)

Students at Warren were completely dumbfounded as they tried to express certain ideas through writing, especially when I assigned a self-analysis as a diagnostic writing sample early in the term. One student began to write a joke, quit halfway, and placed an asterisk next to the incomplete thought. Next to the asterisk, he commented that he would tell me the joke later, as it was much easier to say than to write. Another student simply jumped from one idea to the next, making some points but lacking any clear connection between them. Repeated comments such as "you know" were sprinkled throughout their writing. The combined fact that students were considering audience at the beginning of the composing process and that they also found writing to be a difficult process was clearly expressed in their early assignments.

In essence, students were frightened by the aspect of addressing an audience through their writing. Practically all of the students pointed their finger at the teacher as their least favorite audience. Yet, it was the only audience they could define in the classroom. One student, I believe, summed it up
best when he said that writing for an audience is "embarrassing and scary."

In an attempt to broaden my students’ understanding of audience, I followed the advice of Walter Ong. Ong suggests that to help students build audience, teachers need to stress three points. One way to broaden audience is to stress that audience is artificial ("Literacy and Orality in Our Times" 40); students need to be aware that writing is a far-removed process from speaking and that it is perfectly natural to associate fear and anxiety with the composing process. To help my students understand this concept, I showed them several drafts of a paper I had written (probably the first time many of them had ever seen a rough draft). I photocopied the first page of every draft from a previous paper—seven drafts in all. The students were given the packet, and we discussed changes being made in regard to audience. After some time, students were able to see how audience played a more prominent role in the later drafts than in the early drafts. Students were able to see how writing is an artificial process that needs to move beyond the audience often associated with orality.

Ong’s second suggestion is to reassure students that it is perfectly natural to associate fear and anxiety with the writing process (40). Students often associate the act of writing with the romantic image of the poet waiting for his muse. In this image, writing is easy and natural. Students often become too frustrated in the writing process, a frustration which leads them
to believe that they simply do not have the "muse." Student-writers need to be aware that the frustration and anxiety simply comes with the territory.

Ong's third suggestion is to have students analyze readings from the point of view of the audience (40-41). Essentially, I had to reinforce the notion that students also need to play the role of the reader. If writing is an artificial process, then so is reading. To analyze the inmates' arrival at audience awareness, I had them read Judy Brady's essay, "I Want a Wife." In the essay, the author redefines the accepted definition of a wife to include a person of either gender who is willing to sacrifice personal gain for the sake of the spouse's personal and professional advancement. Students at Warren who played the role of audience in the essay understand Brady's sarcasm. On the other hand, students who were unable to understand her technique tended to view Ms. Brady's essay as a form of homosexual literature. According to Ong, a reader who is unable to serve in the role of the reader is likely to accept the literal interpretation of the text. If the text was orally spoken, then perhaps the oral nuances might show through. On paper, however, the text has a blank face. In other words, students at Warren were unable to detect for themselves the oral nuances that might exist in the written text. Basically, they were unable to play the role of audience.

The second set of questionnaires (Appendix B), which were answered at the end of the semester, clearly demonstrated a
broader understanding of audience. Many of the students were able to understand Brady's point in her essay. When asked to define audience, students responded in much broader terms than simply "the teacher;" however, the students were still unaware of the power of writing in invoking or creating an audience. Although they held a much broader understanding of audience and understood their appropriate role as the reader of the text, they still had a hard time understanding their ability to use writing to invoke an audience. They still defined an audience as the immediate readers of the text.

When asked again about the difference between speaking and writing in the second set of questionnaires, student responses clearly demonstrated growth and maturity in their understanding of the writing process. The same student who earlier stated that "it comes out better spoken" was now commenting that "with writing, you could sit down and take your time and put all of your thoughts and feelings on the paper." Another student commented that "when you have the chance to speak to people, you can get quicker responses. With writing, you have to anticipate the response." Although not consciously aware of the power to invoke an audience, the students were much more aware of the difference between writing and speaking. In essence, they were taking a definitive step towards the artificial world of writing.

The students' essays towards the end of the semester suggested a broader understanding of audience. Claims were being backed by warrants, abstract ideas were explained in abstract
terms, and students were even viewing the self-analysis paper as "easy." Phrases such as "you know" and "do you understand" vanished, indicating that the writers were not expecting an immediate response from an audience.

By locating and expanding a student’s perception of audience, a teacher can certainly improve his writing. In many instances, I realize that this may be close to impossible. Incoming freshmen will arrive from a variety of backgrounds and a variety of cultures, ones that are both highly oral and highly literate. The diversity of the typical college freshmen class not only makes this type of analysis difficult, but also the sheer number of students being squeezed into the classroom.

Without making sweeping generalizations, I believe that my experience with inmates has shown that they still live in a highly oral culture. Awareness of this fact, according to Ong, will certainly lead to a better understanding of their capabilities:

Once we know something about the psychodynamics of the oral mind, we can recognize that primary orality, at least in residual form, is still a factor in the thought habits of many of those to whom we are called upon to teach writing. Such recognition does not automatically solve our problems, but it at least enables us to better identify them. Our students from oral or residually oral cultures come not from an unorganized world, but from a world which is totally
organized, in ways which now can be at least partly understood. ("Literacy and Orality in Our Times" 44)

Audience plays a large role in composition, and understanding how students of composition perceive their audience, as well as helping the students expand their current perceptions of audience, inherently help them to increase the growth and maturity of their writing.
Appendix A

1) How often do you believe you write?
2) To whom do you usually write?
3) When you don’t write to anybody in particular, do you imagine anybody reading your work?
4) Who would you describe as your favorite audience or person to write to? Why?
5) Who would you describe as your least favorite? Why?
6) At what point do you begin to think about audience in the writing process?
7) What do you think is the difference between speaking and writing?
8) Describe the role that spoken language plays in society?
9) If you could re-invent language, what would you do differently?
10) What do you think some of the purposes of writing are?
11) What are the benefits of writing?
Appendix B

1) What is the meaning of audience?

2) Has this meaning changed during the course of the semester?

3) What is the meaning of the word "audience"?

4) Please describe any difference between writing and speaking.

Please answer the following questions concerning the essay "I Want a Wife."

5) To whom is Ms. Brady writing this essay?

6) At what point do you identify with this essay?

7) What emotions do you feel as you read this essay? What sentences triggered these emotions?

8) At what point do you trust the writer? Cite specific sentences.
NOTES

1Since all cultures are somehow influenced by the act of writing, it is impossible for a
culture to return to a state of primary orality. My use of the term "highly oral culture"
should not be confused with Ong’s term "primary oral culture." While Ong’s term denotes a
state of primary orality that existed before the invention of the written word, my term
denotes a culture that, although affected by the written word, still retains many of the
characteristics that were associated with a primary oral society.
WORKS CITED


