Audience Analysis and Persuasive Writing at the College Level

A Research Article Critique

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In the article “Audience analysis and persuasive writing at the college level”, Black (1989) reports on the effects of college students’ knowledge of their audience on their level of persuasiveness in related writing prompts. The focus of the study is to build on previous research on the role of audience awareness in effective persuasive writing by measuring activities constituting audience analysis and examining the relationship between those activities and the level of effectiveness in audience persuasion. The goal of this critique is to analyze the research methods used in this study and the conclusions drawn by the researcher to determine the validity and applicability of the study.

Before providing the results of her own research, Black does an excellent job of summarizing previous research and explaining how the new study either fills in the gaps of previous research, improves on previous methods, or supports the conclusions taken from previous research. According to Black, the role of audience analysis (defined appropriately here as “consciously using ideas about an audience to create or revise text” (p. 2)) in persuasive writing has not been adequately examined through previous research. Her references to previous research support this claim and justify the current study as having the potential to add important new information to the literature. As Black claims, teachers of persuasive writing need to know “if students who have information about their audience can adequately apply audience analysis to their writing using adaptive strategies and if having this representation actually results in recognized qualitative differences in their persuasive writing” (p. 2).
While Black’s hypothesis is never specifically stated, her apparent goal is to answer the following questions: “Are problems in persuasive writing due in part to a lack of knowledge about the information, values, attitudes, goals, and intentions of the readers, or are they due to a difficulty in using rhetorical strategies based on this knowledge?” (p. 3). These questions do not constitute an actual hypothesis, nor are they definitively answered by the study. However, from these questions, one can deduce a possible hypothesis of the study: that providing a student with detailed information regarding his audience and asking him to analyze that audience will have a quantifiable effect on the audience persuasiveness of that student’s writing.

Using the information provided, the study can best be classified as a randomized pretest-posttest control group design, using matched subjects. In the first part of the study, all participants were asked to complete an initial audience analysis based on an assigned audience, write a persuasive paper, and complete a self-analysis of their writing. These pre-test elements were then rated and participants were grouped into a low, medium, and high performance group based on the results of the pre-test ratings. These three groups were then split in half and assigned to either the treatment (audience-cued) group or the control (non-cued) group so that there were equal numbers of low, medium, and high performing students in both the control and treatment groups. The treatment involved providing the audience-cued group with specific information about the audience that would be helpful in terms of their persuasion topic. Both groups were then asked to write a second persuasive paper and self-analysis as part of a six group post-test. The post-test was then analyzed to track three dependent variables: “the total number of arguments, appeals, and adaptations; the mean level of audience adaptation; and the
quality of essay persuasiveness” (p. 17). The research design itself was well documented and easy to follow. While the hypothesis of the study is vague, the actual research design is clear.

The sample group for the study was made up of 104 college students between the ages of 18-22. All 104 participants were enrolled at the same small private college in the Midwest. According to the research article, the students’ ACT English scores ranged from 8 to 28 with a mean score of 20.4. All but two of the students had completed a minimum of one of the three freshman composition classes required by the college (Black, 1989). One can infer with some degree of certainty that this was a random sample, as all of the participants were volunteers and not enrolled in a particular class; however, this is never specifically stated and there is no mention of how the participants were recruited.

For the second part of the study, it is known that the students were specifically divided into three separate groups based on their performance in the pre-test. These three groups were then divided equally into the control and treatment groups. Again, it can be inferred that the groups were randomly assigned to the control and treatment groups, but it is never confirmed. Overall, the sample appears to be a suitable representation of typical college students enrolling in persuasive writing courses. To better grasp how reasonably the findings can be generalized, it would be important to know the specific population the researcher intended to generalize to and how representative of the population the available sample was. Because this information is not provided in the study, it is difficult to posit how suitable the sample was for the desired purpose of the
study. It might also be appropriate to reproduce the study at a number of different institutions encompassing the different types of colleges/universities.

The instruments used to collect and rate the data are clearly described in the article; several of the instruments used are included at the end of the article as appendices for more detailed review. Data was collected from the participants through their persuasive papers and two additional instruments, an audience analysis worksheet adapted from one developed by Bridwell-Bowles (1985) and a self-analysis instrument adapted from a technique developed by O’Keefe and Delia (1979). Both instruments were clearly defined for the participants and seem appropriate for the study, allowing the writer’s thought process to be assessed and rated in order to understand their actual conscious audience analysis instead of inferring from their papers.

The data collected from the students was measured both quantitatively and qualitatively by four different groups of raters. The first pair of judges assigned a score for a quantitative assessment of the audience analysis worksheet. The second set of three judges created a scoring rubric based on a procedure developed by Myers (1980) to qualitatively analyze the audience analysis worksheet. Another pair of judges rated the student’s self-assessments using a scoring system developed by O’Keefe and Delia (1979) to be used with their self-assessment technique. Finally, the student’s papers were rated for persuasiveness using a rubric developed by the Student Development Council (the intended audience for the papers) after undergoing training based on the procedures developed by Myers (1980). The instruments used in both collecting and assessing the data are described in detail. The purpose of each instrument is clearly defined and each
seems to be a viable instrument in collecting data suitable to investigating the research questions.

In general, the procedures used to conduct the research are clearly defined and mostly appropriate for the research. However, the failure to ask the control group in the second part of the study to fill out an audience analysis worksheet created an additional important difference between the control and treatment groups other than the intended treatment. This turned the audience analysis worksheet into an external variable that could have had significant, indeterminate effects on the results of the study.

In certain areas, the researches took significant measures to ensure internal validity. Steps were taken to ensure that no instrument decay occurred and these steps are carefully detailed in the article. However, there are number of questions left unanswered: How were the participants selected?; How representative was the resulting sample of the entire population?; Were the sample selection and later division into treatment and control groups randomized?; When were the control and treatment groups tested in relation to one another?; and Who administered the treatments? These questions, among others, represent potential threats to internal validity if they cannot be answered satisfactorily. For example, while the data collectors themselves seem to have appropriate characteristics to accurately assess the data, it’s unclear what steps were taken to remove the possibility for data collector bias (other than on the part of the Student Development Council’s members whose bias was partially being measured for the study).

To analyze the data, the Pearson Product-Moment Coefficient was used to determine correlations between the dependent variables measured in the study. Step-wise
multiple regression was used, “to determine to what extent and in which order of
collection the variables helped predict ratings of persuasiveness” (p. 10). Analysis of
Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine if there were any significant interaction
effects between the variables. These statistics appear to have been used appropriately and
accurately to determine correlations between the various data points. While the results
seem to be generalized to the entire population of college students, which is not
warranted, the individual statistics provide meaningful information and allow logical and
valid inferences regarding the sample to be drawn from the data. The inclusion of tables
with the specific information for each statistic adds credence to the inferences made. The
author adds additional credence to the study by recognizing and acknowledging at least
one point where the data shows a flaw in the research design (i.e., a Scheffe procedure
used for a follow up test pointed to the weakness of the study in assessing the students
initial skill levels as part of the pre-test). However, the article does not provide the reader
with information regarding improvement from the pre-test to the post-test, which leaves
an important area of information unknown.

The study shows that providing students with detailed, specific information about
their audience produces a significant, measurable effect on the students’ ability to
persuade that audience. However, it is unlikely that students (even when writing for a
real audience) will have ready access to this level of information regarding their
audience. While the study is useful in showing that consciously writing for a specific
audience strongly correlates with the level of persuasiveness in writing for that audience,
it doesn’t solve the actual questions posed at the beginning of the article.
In addition, by not asking the control group to fill out an audience analysis form, the researchers left open an external variable that could have had a strong effect on the study results. The data clearly shows that the treatment group performed significantly higher than the control group at each level. However, the reader can't be sure that this is the result of the treatment alone. It is entirely possible that the control group would have performed better if they had completed an audience analysis before writing their paper, even without the cues. The lack of information provided regarding improvements from the pre-test to the post-test further clouds the results. This gap makes it impossible to determine if the improvements in persuasiveness came exclusively from the treatment, or from a combination of cued information and the audience analysis worksheet.

Even if the change in the treatment group’s performance was entirely the result of the cue, it must then be asked how applicable that information is to the classroom. It is rare that students will have access to that level of detailed information regarding their audience, even when writing for a real-world purpose. While the study provides valuable information supporting the correlation between audience consideration and success in persuasive writing, it is not feasible for students to expect to be provided with that level of detail regarding their audience in all writing situations, nor is the importance of the availability of this information adequately proven by the study. More research will need to be done to determine practical methods of teaching students how to make accurate inferences regarding their audience and use those inferences effectively in writing.
References


