Audience

By now, you have all spent a lot of years in school and you know your way around a classroom pretty well. With this in mind, I have a question for you. Who is the most important reader of the paper that you are writing? Think about it. The more idealistic amongst you might reply that it is yourself—that ultimately all that matters is that you are satisfied with the finished product. Well said. This is a valid response. The complicating factor in this response is that you cannot give yourself a grade. Others might say that it is the teacher. After all, he or she has the gradebook and you want the grades. While practical, that answer is less valid in the sense that it does not do anything to help you produce a better finished product. "On the contrary," you say, "If I know what the teacher wants and I give it to him or her, I will get a good grade!"

There are a couple of problems with this approach: a) It doesn't give you good skills to take to other classes, unless you have developed a very twisted plan of study in which you (heaven forbid) take all of your classes from the same teacher; b) You know very little about your teacher; and c) audience is the single most important shaping and organizational device you have available to you and it would be a shame to try to read your teacher's mind when you could be constructing an audience that would help you to focus and refine the logic of your paper.

"Create an audience" you say? "You mean I can make up somebody to write to?" That is exactly what I mean. Think of your average daily interaction. You behave in different ways depending on the company you are keeping and the situation at hand. If you spend a summer night dragging the Boulevard in your car or throwing water balloons at innocent joggers and return after your curfew, you are going to tell a different story to your parents the next morning than you are to your friends. Are you lying in one situation and telling the truth in the other? Not necessarily. You are shaping and
including and manipulating facts depending on the needs of yourself and the audience and on the purpose of the situation. The words themselves, the presence or absence of slang, your attitude, the tone (compassionate, angry, condescending, joyful, sarcastic, flippant) will signal to your reader which audience you have targeted. For your parents, from whom you hope to get the car again, you emphasize the defensive driving skills you utilized in your high speed chase; your tone is respectful, formal and careful. For your friends, from whom you want proper deference to your cool self, you will emphasize the radical new acquaintances you made and the adventure; your tone will use slang, references to pop culture and exaggeration. Imagine switching tones. How would your parents react to the cool version and how would your friends react to the sanitized one?

Without a defined audience, you have no context in which to write and without a context it is going to be very hard to define just exactly what you mean. Abstractions such as nice, mean, beautiful, free, interesting, are going to have very different meanings for these different audiences and have very little meaning outside of the specific situation posited between you and your audience. Remember the nice boy/girl your mother wanted to line you up with? Her definition of "nice" was/is very different from yours, because her purpose in setting you up with a date was different from your reasons for wanting to go on a date.

Have I convinced you? I hope so. When setting out to create an audience, you need to consider your purpose, what you hope to accomplish by writing about a particular topic, and which audience can best accomplish that purpose. Then, you need to ask yourself why your audience feels the way that they do. For example, you might choose to write about the issue of students loans. A high school dropout who is perfectly contented with his or her job might be put out that you are suggesting that loan schedules of payment should be more lenient or that students should not have to
pay them back at all. In this person's mind, that amounts to elitism or favoritism on the part of the government. You would have to approach this person in a very tentative, careful way in order to convince them about this topic. A fellow student, however, or an educator would be much more apt to listen to even your most radical arguments.