ABSTRACT
        This paper discusses why student writers have so much
difficulty in writing job application letters that will produce the desired
result. The letter should get the reader interested in the student as a
possible employee enough to look over the student's resume and then interview
him or her. According to the paper, most technical writing students are under
the "expressivist" influence of their first-year writing courses, while what
is needed in technical and business writing courses is instruction in
rhetoric, particularly in the concept of "ethos." The paper contends that the
successful writer of an application letter must imagine a reader who is
interested in the writer as a commodity, a unit of labor that will perform
adequately a particular set of tasks within the company--someone who can fill
the job opening. The paper suggests that teaching rhetoric enables students
to learn the difference between knowing the conventions of a discourse and
knowing that--as Kenneth Burke says--these conventions are established by
societies as ways of acting together. (NKA)

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Imagining the Corporate World: Ethos, Application Letters, and the Student Writer

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In this paper I am going to discuss why student writers have so much difficulty in writing

job application letters that will produce the desired result: namely, to get the reader

interested in the student as a possible employee, to the end that the reader will read the

students resumé and then interview him or her. It is generally understood that the

purpose of the letter and resumé is to get the interview, and that, since corporate

interviewers read many letters and resumés when a job is offered by advertisement, the

individuals who get the prized interviews must generate some interest in them as

individuals.

The consequence of this limited way of thinking about their audience is application

letters that are expressive of the students' individual needs and desires. Based on more

than twenty years' experience as a corporate executive, and ten as a teacher of writing--

especially of technical writing-- I argue that most students and many textbooks and guides to business writing fail to grasp that corporate managers and personnel administrators are not applying the same definition of interest in the writer; in corporate recruiting successful letters attempt to show how the applicant can benefit the employer, not why the applicant is considered interesting to those who know him or her. So that you will see what I mean. I am now going to read some brief extracts from examples of student letters that are well written by academic standards but are unlikely to succeed in getting the corporate reader to respond with a request for an interview, and even recommended sample letters from a popular guide to writing application letters that are not well aimed. [Reads two student letters] Even letters from a popular guide modestly titled Dynamic Cover Letters seem to me deficient. [By the way, you might mistake it for a comic book.] Here are some extracts from letters that this guide graded variously A, B+ or B, and which the recipients would probably have graded F. (There are only two grades in reality: the pile of resumes of candidates for interviews and the other, bigger pile.) Here is a sample of a really good application letter. [Reads] Please note that, although it makes liberal use of the pronoun "I," it refers to the writer only in the context of her ability to provide a potential benefit to the prospective employer. It resulted in an interview and a job offer.

The reason for this common problem of communication is that most students writing application letters in a technical or business writing class have had no writing instruction since their first year writing course, and they continue under the influence of first year writing instruction until they are violently pulled out of it. Many first year writing

programs are under the expressivist influence of Donald Murray, Peter Elbow and others who instruct us in first year writing courses to teach students to have a "voice" when they come voiceless from high school English courses. What do they mean by "voice"? Greg Myers defines it this way:

> Writing with power requires authenticity of expression ("voice") and unmediated realism of perception in which the writer and reader must "see" the object written about.

In other words, "voice" is first and foremost the attempt to make the reader see what the writer sees. More helpfully, I think, C.H. Knoblauch defines the expressivist view as

> celebrating the power of the human 'voice' to organize its experience according to personal needs and to achieve insights . . . that can have the effect of revolutionizing the larger societal as well as intellectual realities . . . .

I place the emphasis on the phrase "personal needs." How this is taught in many first year writing programs is perhaps exemplified by the University of Wisconsin program which describes first year writing as a course "for . . . writers identified as needing composition instruction beyond what they received in high school." The description- this is from Teaching Academic Literacy-goes on like this: "This course was conceived with

the conviction that the starting point for instruction is students' ideas about a given set of issues. . . ."

Whether this is a useful descritption of the first year course or not, I leave to others. But I am certain that, in any case, what we need in technical and business writing courses is instruction in rhetoric, particularly in understanding the concept of ethos, and its role as one of the three pisteis identified by Aristotle. As Ross Winterowd points out, the intention of the writer, in this case to present himself/herself in a particular way for a particular purpose, is where the "concept of ethos enters [an] account of meaning." Related to the meaning of ethos is the term persona. Roger Cherry claims that ethos and persona are opposites, ethos being the "real" person and persona the "fictional" person created for the situation. Of course Foucault and others have problematized these neat categories. I would say that both ethos and persona are "fictional" in the sense that they are both constructed and not, as Cherry says, "real."

Regardless of the difference, if any, between persona and ethos, one must say that the task of the writer of a job application letters is, without straying too far from the facts, and within the letter itself, to construct a persona, closely representing herself that will appeal to the reader at least to the extent necessary to get an interview. Then the successful writer has an opportunity to construct another new persona for the interview. Specifically, what must the successful writer of an application letter do? He or she must imagine a reader who is not at all interested in the writer as a person but as a commodity, a unit of labor that will perform at least adequately a particular set of tasks within the

company hiring him or her, in other words, someone who can fill the job opening. If the position does not require specific experience- this usually applies only to management trainees and other beginner positions-at least it requires evidence that the applicant is motivated to do these particular tasks. I know this sounds hard, and suggests the possibility that I have exaggerated, but-- believe me-- I have not. And this means that talk about the writer's needs and desires is not merely unhelpful, it is actually a turn off for the reader. So, writers of application letters must imaginatively construct a persona that matches that image that its potential readers have of the successful applicant. They must develop an ethos specific to each application.

Xin Gale refers to the compact between the writer and reader, and this is what is missing from many of the application letters I read. If voice is the imagined persona, it cannot be imgained without its dialectical partner, let us call it the "hearing" of the reader. The author's persona is constructed in the writer's voice for the hearing of the reader. It is the reader who must imagine the writer's persona, and it is the writer who must imagine the reader imagining the writer. Thus, the successful letter must be not about what the writer wants to say but about what the writer guesses the reader wants to hear. The better the guess the better the chance the writer will get an interview.

Easier said than done. I have found it difficult to overcome my students' bias toward writing about themselves as the central character in their letters. Despite advice in technical writing textbooks to use "you-centered" language, I find that students interpret this to mean, "I am writing to you but its really about what I need."

Although it is not impossible to instil a sense of the rhetorical nature of business and professional communication, and even of scientific communication, to the fourth-year students I encounter in technical writing, I think it would be easier to do so if first year writing courses spent at least part of their time on teaching the rudiments, at least, of rhetoric. This is not intended as a knock on teaching students to develop an authentic voice or to understand the complex way that language is bound up with communities, cultures and indentities. But rhetoric should be introduced early in the curriculum, not waiting until the second year, as we do at Syracuse University, or not introduced at all, as is the case in many writing programs

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Rhetorical awareness, that is, the knowledge that all symbol using is rhetorical-some might call this critical literacy-enables students not merely to use language to express themselves and their ideas but to use it knowingly as a way to achieve ends. This, after all, must have been the first use of signs, another step up the evolutionary ladder from the amoeba by way of appendages, eyes, tools, and so forth. Teaching rhetoric enables students to learn the difference between knowing the conventions of a discourse and knowing that-as Kenneth Burke says- these conventions are established by societies as ways of acting together. Teaching rhetoric early makes students not only more successful students but, later on, more active, able and productive citizens. And that, I argue, is the purpose of higher education.

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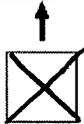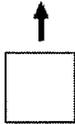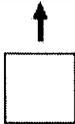
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