

***ETHOS*: CHARACTER AND ETHICS IN TECHNICAL WRITING**

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Abstract

Technical writing tries to be "objective" and "audience-oriented," but it neglects an element of persuasion known in ancient rhetoric as *ethos*. This concept translates from the Greek as "character," but that English word does not convey the concept's richness. Nor does Latin *persona*, a term sometimes used to describe the narrative voice in technical prose. *Ethos* is the root of "ethics," which tends to objectify values and choices, alienating them from the people making them. In this paper, I suggest that an understanding of *ethos* in all its richness can help writers of technical prose to produce work that, in relation to traditionally "objective" prose, is both more readable and more ethical.

A print version of this article appears in *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, September 1995. [Info about ordering reprints](#): Specify Article Log 13331D.

THE SPECTATOR ATTITUDE IN TECHNICAL WRITING

In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Robert Pirsig characterizes thus the technical description of a motorcycle:

The first thing to be observed about [it] is so obvious you have to hold it down or it will drown out every other observation. This is: It is just duller than ditchwater. Yah-da, yah-da, yah-da, yah-da, yah, carburetor, gear ratio, compression, yah-dah-yah, piston, plugs, intake, yah-da-yah, on and on and on. That is the romantic face of the classic mode. Dull, awkward, and ugly. Few romantics get beyond that point. [1, p. 71]

A romantic, in Pirsig's terms, does not look at the underlying form of things, as expressed in specifications, flow diagrams, and equations. Rather, a romantic looks at surfaces--the curve of a parabolic antenna dish, the sleekness of a console. Pirsig's classicist, on the other hand, hardly sees surfaces at all, being preoccupied with the underlying principles that make things function.

Though Pirsig uses "classic" and "romantic" idiosyncratically, his comment about technical prose resonates even for us who read it and write it constantly. Technical prose, we might say, just lacks character.

Pirsig ascribes the classic-romantic split to a falling away from Quality. This prelapsarian¹ state supposedly existed before Athenian philosophers wielded their analytic knives, creating such divisions as truth/probability, mind/body, philosophy/rhetoric--divisions so deeply ingrained in Western culture that they appear "natural." One consequence of the resulting dualism, as Daniel

¹ Characteristic of or pertaining to any innocent or carefree period. [Source](#)

R. Jones points out in an insightful interpretation of Pirsig's book [2], is a "spectator attitude" toward technology. Spectators are alienated from technology, whether they consume its products or even work with it.

Pirsig notes, early in the book, that the technical manuals he worked on as writer and editor were spectator manuals:

It was built into the format of them. Implicit in every line is the idea that "Here is the machine, isolated in time and space from everything else in the universe. It has no relationship to you, you have no relationship to it . . . We were all spectators. And it occurred to me that there is no manual that deals with the real business of motorcycle maintenance, the most important aspect of all. Caring about what you are doing is considered either unimportant or taken for granted. [1, p. 27]

This is the character of the objective narrative stance, which is calculatedly depersonalized. This stance, according to my colleague Lynn Deming, comes from the difficulties writers in technical fields seem to have

inserting themselves into their scientific and technical documents. . . . They feel the presence of an actor--an "I" or "we" or even a "researcher" or "scientist" or "engineer" -- dilutes or contaminates the objectivity and authenticity of the data or distracts the reader from the real subject--the chemical reaction or the fabrication. This is just not true.[3, p. 154]

In Pirsig's terms, they are spectators too--even as writers.

The problem that Pirsig ascribes to the absence of Quality and Deming to problems in narrative stance looks somewhat different from another perspective, that of Aristotelian rhetoric. The Aristotelian perspective has been used forcefully by Arthur E. Walzer and Alan Gross [4] in their analysis of accounts of the Challenger disaster. They found these accounts conforming to one of two perspectives: positivist² or postmodernist.³ Positivist accounts emphasize a failure in communication--the disaster occurred because engineers and managers failed to transmit or receive all the facts. Postmodernist accounts stress differences in interpretive frameworks that cause engineers and managers to draw different conclusions from the same data. "The positivistic perspective . . . attempts, in effect, to minimize deliberation and circumvent ethics. . . . Since the postmodernists have been forceful critics of the positivists, it seems even more

² 1) the state or quality of being positive; definiteness; assurance. 2) a philosophical system founded by Auguste Comte, concerned with positive facts and phenomena, and excluding speculation upon ultimate causes or origins. [Source](#)

³ A general and wide-ranging term which is applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and cultural and literary criticism, among others. Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal. [Source](#)

surprising that their analyses of the Challenger case all but dismiss ethics as irrelevant and virtually deny the possibility of rhetorical deliberation reaching consensus"[4, p. 431].

From a rhetorical perspective, there are two sorts of deliberation that could have taken place: those contributing to technical knowledge for making **engineering decisions**, and those contributing to normative understanding for making **ethical decisions**. When the technical arguments cannot produce a clear consensus but a decision must be made anyway, deliberations need to become normative--to ask, as Walzer and Gross do for Challenger, "What rules ought to guide our decision in the absence of knowledge of how the O-rings will perform?" [4, p. 427]

In such circumstances, neither the spectator status conferred by positivist focus on "objective facts" nor the insulation afforded by immersion in a particular profession's interpretive framework serves the public interest. With Walzer and Gross, I regard Aristotelian rhetoric as offering a method for conducting public discourse, one that could improve the quality of public decision-making. Yet a part of Aristotelian rhetoric, the artistic proofs, appears to support the radical individualism that is part of the positivistic culture of professionalism. I think in fact that such support is only the result of a fallacy of translation. Aristotle's *ethos* is usually translated as "character," a quality we conventionally ascribe to individuals. But *ethos* is a richer concept, involving the individual in a deliberative community and thus having, as the Greek root implies, **an ethical dimension as well as a transactional one.**

***ETHOS* IN THE HISTORY OF TECHNICAL WRITING**

The idea that **technical writing** involves rhetorical transaction at all has only become utterable within about the last 20 years. It **was initially resisted by a prevailing view, still common, that language is merely a package for information a transparent medium in which clarity is the highest value.** Yet, as Mary B. Coney has pointed out [5], as the history of experimental science has come to be understood in terms of how communities construct knowledge, "No longer can one assume that meaning is something developed by independent researchers, encoded into messages, packed into containers, and sent off to readers who are isolated from these processes."

Information as message packets is another manifestation of spectatorhood, which stands in the way of effective communication so long as documents focus solely on the technical. Fortunately, the emphasis of technical writing has been shifting late in this century from "technical" to "writing." This history can be explained through the paradigm of the "communication triangle" implicit in Aristotle's artistic proofs (Figure 1), which regard not only reasoning (*logos*) as a persuasive element, but also the condition of the audience (*pathos*) and the character of the speaker (*ethos*).

Before there was a professional field called technical communication, technical writing was done by technical people.⁴ Like Pirsig's classicists, they cared mostly about such matters as design and

⁴ Note that because of downsizing, technical writing is now often performed by employees that may not be specifically technical writers.

function. In terms of Aristotle's triangle, these folks thought only of *logos*, content and reasoning.

Did their writing therefore escape the claims of *pathos* and *ethos*? No: often their prose created such obstacles to understanding, through its jargon and density, that it created the *ethos* of the expert: one whose esoteric knowledge makes him-- and it still was mostly him--a member of a priesthood, a wizard whose mysteries aren't supposed to be understood by the uninitiated. The *pathos* dimension could be summed up in the sentence, "If you're smart enough to understand this, fine; if not, too bad." Call this dominance of *logos* the objectivist model (Figure 2).⁵

The perils of the objectivist model are summed up well in a 1946 book written for technical specialists, ironically with a point of view that objectivizes its readers:

The greatest mistake in the preparing of reports is that the technician does not put himself in the place of the audience or the readers, and does not give them what they want. He sees the subject too much from his own point of view, not enough from their point of view. This comes from being too close to the subject and from lack of imagination. This criticism can scarcely be repeated too often. It is exceedingly important. [6, pp. 66-67]

In reaction to this "objectivist" neglect by specialists of the needs of readers, managers and bureaucrats, who needed to understand technical material well enough to make decisions about damsites and weapons systems, sought (sic)⁶ to find technical writers who could explain technical matters. Thus began technical communication as a discipline. Sometimes these writers were technical folks themselves, perhaps engineers who did some reading outside their own field and who had a knack (but not a heuristic⁷) for writing pretty well. Others were liberal arts majors who had the interest and patience to understand and explain technical matters, but who also lacked a heuristic since rhetoric had largely disappeared from college curricula around 1900. I was one of the latter: thirty years ago, I parlayed⁸ a master's in literature and some Navy electronics background into a technical writing job.

As the field (of technical communication) gained momentum, two complementary things happened, both on the *pathos* corner of the triangle. First, books on technical writing, such as Houpp and Pearsall's [7] and Mathes and Stevenson's [8], began stressing audience needs and ways to analyze them; such books, used in college technical writing courses, began to chip away at the "objectivist" model. Second, with the growing use of computer software, the field of **usability testing** developed. Bringing the audience into the design phase brought much new and productive thinking about how documents should be organized, text chunked for easy access, and graphics used for information and access.

⁵ The emergence of 'Plain English' – instead of jargon-based language – is paramount here: The current focus on writing/language is to make such communication accessible to as many people as possible... experts and non-experts alike.

⁶ "sic": usually written parenthetically to denote that a word, phrase, passage, etc., that may appear strange or incorrect has been written intentionally or has been quoted verbatim

⁷ The science or study of helping someone to learn

⁸ To use (one's money, talent, or other assets) to achieve a desired objective, as spectacular wealth or success. [Source](#)

ETHOS AND THE TYRANNY OF AUDIENCE

Yet the empowerment of audience still leaves out something crucial. Last October at the annual meeting of the Council of Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication, one of the discussions surfaced some feelings that there is by now a "tyranny of audience" brought about by too much attention to what the audience wants and too little to what the audience needs, the latter question involving the *ethos* dimension. This is the situation described in Figure 3 (Note: Figures unavailable).

The tyranny of audience may be seen most clearly in the current fashion of considering it as "users." Users are implicitly conceived of as being somewhat infantile: They want specific bits of pragmatic knowledge (e.g., "How can I get my system to stop crashing when I have three programs open at the same time?"), and they want it now. How this tyranny might be undermined has been shown humorously by Marilyn Cooper [9], who put together a short manual conflating cartoons from Michael Paul McLester's *Beset by Demons*--a bloated spider singing, "Every blade of grass you see, every flower and every tree . . . Everything belongs to ME!--and parts of a chain saw manual."

Cooper's "manual" makes it hard for the user to be a spectator: "Yes, indeed, your new chain saw is not only a precious commodity but is also instrumental in the effort to transform the natural world for the market. In purchasing and using this chain saw, you have chosen to participate in this effort." Cooper also forces the user to be aware of being part of a community with experiences in common: "Perhaps because of its awkward position, the spider has cut off part of its left foot. Never allow any part of your body to touch the rotating chain. You know chain saws are dangerous. You've seen chain saw massacre movies."

The dimension Cooper brings in is the *ethos* still missing in Figure 3. It's an *ethos* situated within the cultural context of the late 20th century in America, not floating disembodied outside time and place.

ETHOS AND PERSONA

Ethos is sometimes treated as a synonym for *persona*. Cicero sometimes used *persona* (in Latin, "mask") to translate *ethos* because Latin has no exact synonym. Thus, according to Sharon Crowley, "Roman rhetoricians who relied on Greek rhetorical theory sometimes confused *ethos* with *pathos*. . . . This lack of a technical term is not surprising, because the requirement of having a respectable character was built into the very fabric of Roman oratory"[10, p. 85]. That is, character was conceived in social terms--who you were, and thus your built-in credibility as a speaker, had to do with your station in society as well as your living up to the expectations of that role. This is a point to which I shall return shortly.

In late Roman times, and again after the rhetorical reforms of Peter Ramus in the sixteenth century, when rhetoric became reduced mostly to questions of style, style became the means of creating *persona*--of giving the prose personality. Merrill Whitburn wrote an article almost twenty years ago [11] that discussed personality in technical writing. Like T.A. Rickard in his

1908 *Guide to Technical Writing* [12], Whitburn was mainly interested in improving technical documents by better prose style.

Style and authorial voice are strongly linked, but strong persona is not necessarily a plus in technical writing. For example, humor might not be appreciated by the harried computer user as she consults "help" to figure out why a program function isn't working, and it seems almost unimaginable in an operating manual for a nuclear power plant.

Ethos is not, however, at all the same thing as persona, described thus in the last two editions of the venerable *Reporting Technical Information* by Houpp and Pearsall:

Writers make important decisions about content and style based upon consideration of the audience and the persona the writer wants to project. Persona refers to the role the writer has or assumes when writing. It relates to, among other things, the position of the writer and his or her relationship to the audience and the situation. [7, p. 18]

This view acknowledges that persona and audience are in some way fungible⁹—interchangeable, in the sense that the speaker seems at one with the audience and the audience is drawn into the speaker's perspective. This fungibility is also implicit in the egocentric method of audience analysis used by Mathes and Stevenson [8, pp. 32-48]: when the writer positions herself at the center of a series of circles representing various levels of audience, she is implicitly positioning herself to take a narrative stance appropriate for her several audiences. The audience as analyzed has individuals with particular "operational," "objective" and "personal" characteristics, and the writer has a purpose: to authorize, propose, recommend, request, instruct. But the fungibility remains implicit, because the writer remains a black box, an unknown--a spectator. And from fields like advertising and public relations, we're all too aware of the possibility of using persona in ways that are ethically dubious.

Aristotle too treats *ethos* and *pathos* as fungible, and character as something that can be crafted for particular audiences and situations:

Since all people receive favorably speeches spoken in their own character and by persons like themselves, it is not unclear how both speakers and speeches may seem to be of this sort through use of words. [13, p. 168]

In the part of Book II of *Rhetoric* where this passage appears, Aristotle first gives a catalog of human emotions, then a catalog of characteristics appropriate to persons of certain ages and stations in life. Here, however, the fungibility of *ethos* and *pathos* comes from the fact that in Aristotle's time, *ethos* did not correspond to what we would now call personality, but rather was more like the public reputation one acquired by habitually acting in a particular societal role. In modern terms, *ethos* is the public image one acquires, say, from acting habitually as an engineer among engineers, or as a banker among bankers.

⁹ (esp. of goods) being of such nature or kind as to be freely exchangeable or replaceable, in whole or in part, for another of like nature or kind. [Source](#)

What I am describing as fungibility strongly resembles Kenneth Burke's principles of identification and consubstantiality [14]. As one works as an engineer or a banker, one identifies his or her interests to a large extent with those of the group, and through habituation acquires the group *ethos*. Consubstantiality¹⁰ comes into play when the engineer, while remaining an engineer, becomes "substantially one" with a banker in creating a common sphere of interest through a business proposal. Or does in successful proposals.

To the extent, then, that one is not born a banker or an engineer, the *ethos* one has is partly acquired and partly invented. Under the circumstances shown in Figures 2 and 3, *ethos* in technical prose was largely unconscious. Yet, as James S. Baumlin notes, "More than an expression of individual psychology or an intersection of social forces, *ethos* is, as Aristotle himself suggests, quintessentially a linguistic phenomenon" [15]. Such a view of *ethos* seems to justify Houp, Pearsall, and Tebeaux's treating, in the passage quoted earlier, the relation of persona and audience as something that can be done consciously--that is, one can invent a persona appropriate to a particular document's intended audience.

Now, there's a virtual industry that depends on persona. It provides software instruction to the uninitiated by writing in a breezy, you-oriented style with humorous authorial asides. An example chosen at random [16]: "That 8 MB of extra memory that Quattro Pro would like could cost you as much as \$400. (That's almost \$3700 in dog dollars.)"

So, though persona is part of *ethos*, it is not the whole. Killingsworth and Gilbertson summarize well the relatively few articles on the primary character in technical writing, which, they say, follow three general theoretical trends:

1. They confound the concepts of *ethos* and persona.
2. They recommend the adoption of personae, but without being clear about the ethical responsibilities of the author or the general relation of writer to reader.
3. They recommend an aggressively personal approach to *ethos* without being clear about the technical means or possible outcomes of such an approach. [17, p. 110]

ETHOS AS CONSTRUCT

If *ethos* is not identical with persona, neither is it, because of its ancient association with reputation, identical with formal ethics. For persons, the ethics/character link is easier than for written documents, where **the ethical dimension can only be inferred from the prose**. In reading literature we are used to filtering "truth" out of the utterances of unreliable, self-serving, or incompetent narrators, fully aware that the narrative voice is a fiction, a construction, and that the ethical probity of the narrator need not reflect that of the author.

But in technical writing, the narrative voice is also a construction, not just a transparent window on truth. (I suggested something of the sort in an earlier article on engineering style [18].) It is even more obviously a construction, in that it is likely to be either a corporate or a generic voice.

¹⁰ Participation of the same nature; coexistence in the same substance. [Source](#)

Killingsworth and Gilbertson [17] assert that the poststructuralist notion of an author submerged in a network of intertextuality applies even better to technical writing than to literary works. That is, text is the medium by which ideas are mediated and compromises reached. The narrative voice of corporate documents, how they are developed and maintained and how they sustain a corporate *ethos*, is a subject worthy of study in itself.

Construction of *ethos* is the flip side of writers' constructing audiences. *Ethos* stands in relation to persona as Mary B. Coney's constructed audiences stand in relation to the empirical audiences of the technical writing textbooks. Coney has argued that writers usually require readers to read in a variety of roles, **so that a reader-in-the-flesh has to adapt to the role theorized for her by the writer**. Coney's article [5] anatomized the ways technical readers construct the meaning of technical texts. Coney provides an alternative to regarding readers as static empirical subjects, analyzable in terms of their roles, backgrounds and biases. Instead, she looks at the roles readers are called upon to play as they are reading--how the text call the reader to fill the roles it requires.

This way of looking at readers reading technical texts represents an advance: It treats reading as an active part of a rhetorical transaction that has the potential to change both the writer and the reader: "roles are always transforming themselves in the course of the reading process: what started out as a naive user on page 2 of a manual is transformed *by the very act of reading* into a more sophisticated chooser of options on page 72" [5, p. 61, emphasis Coney's].

Many people of a certain age could vouch for such transformation by a manual. John Muir's *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive* [19], now available in a 25th anniversary edition, illustrates very well both Aristotle's adaptation of speaker to audience and of Coney's providing a role for the reader. Muir hypothesized an audience who, like him, wanted to be able to fix their Volkswagens in out-of-the-way places and who, like him, were willing to get their hands dirty. And he found that audience. The authorial persona was prominent but not dominant; mainly it established a dynamic with the reader. As a result, people otherwise technically innocent became technically adept, unafraid of adjusting their valves or even replacing the whole top end under a shade tree.

***ETHOS* AND THE GENRES OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION**

One thing that should be apparent by now is that relations among *logos*, *pathos*, and *ethos* are not static, but dynamic, and that all are constructed in the act of writing. These dynamic relations also construct the lateral relations among the dimensions I (or we), *ethos*; you or *pathos*; and it, or *logos* to give us the typical genres of technical communication (Figure 4). It's significant that two of the genres depend heavily on *ethos*. In fact, Killingsworth and Gilbertson [17, p. 113-119] have derived a whole series of subgenres based on the permutations of I, you, and this, which I adapt here:

- **The manual.** Maybe it shouldn't surprise us that *pathos* was revalorized at the same time there was a growing need for usable documentation. Manuals work hard along the *logos* - *pathos* leg of the triangle, trying to establish a strong bond between product and user: "Here's what it can do for you." Traditionally, the *ethos* in manuals is Platonic, or

seemingly transparent--the reader is unaware of a narrative voice. But as the Cooper and Muir examples suggest, *ethos* could mediate powerfully between the technical material and the needs of the reader--particularly in answering the questions so often neglected in manuals, "Why would I want to use this feature in the first place? How could it relate to my needs? Would using it affect the dominant practices of my professional community?"

- **The proposal.** The emphasis here is along the *ethos* - *pathos* axis, the primary relation being distillable to "Here's what I/we can do for you." Logos comes into play because without content, a proposal goes nowhere. ***Ethos traditionally results from the way proposers bring ideas to bear upon prospective clients' needs.*** And though the *ethos* of a proposal is crucial to its success, many proposals seem to rely primarily on abstract discussions of methodology and secondarily on "quals," canned blurbs describing key personnel and previous projects. (Granted, it is hard to develop a consistent *ethos* when a proposal is being written by sixteen people all following faithfully the demands of a poorly written RFP.)
- **The report.** The main relation is "Here's what I/we found out about it." Reports' credibility is largely gained through the handling of *logos*. Good ones, of course, also acknowledge the needs of readers through focus and organization. But in foregrounding "it," technical reports often sidestep the ethical dimension.

***ETHOS* AS STRUCTURAL ELEMENT OF ARGUMENT**

The ethical dimension in argument could be defined as a dynamic relation among a set of external conditions (situations, facts, laws, commonplaces) and a narrative voice and reader as roles constructed in the text by the writer. That's a fairly abstract definition, but the relations are shown very well by Scott Sanders [20] in an article that illustrates how a model of argument derived from the psychologist Carl Rogers employs the constructs of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* to "place" writer and reader in relation to a set of facts. For his demonstration, Sanders uses a poem of William Carlos Williams and an oil-company memo.

In this Rogerian form of argument (derived from Young, Becker, and Pike [21]), *logos* comes first as a neutral statement of the facts of the case, then comes *pathos* as an acknowledgement of the reader's perspective. Finally comes *ethos*, which conveys not only the desire of the writer but the relation in which reader and writer may stand to one another after the reading. This method of argument is particularly useful when it's as important to establish a relationship as to convey information, as is the case in proposals, job-application letters, and customer-relations letters.

For example, suppose that a customer has ordered a specific hydraulic valve from a wholesaler. The wholesaler has sold all of them, and the manufacturer has substituted a design that is functionally the same but physically different. A faxed letter giving the customer the bad news might go like this:

Dear Customer,

Last week you ordered from us an XYZCo 12- 7336 solenoid-operated valve. This valve is no longer available. The manufacturer recommends substituting a 14-7339 valve,

which has the same throughput capacity but is physically 3" shorter and 1" larger in outside diameter, and requires a 24-volt actuating pulse instead of 12 volts.

We realize that this substitution may cause you some problems. You may have to redesign parts of your piping and electrical systems. That's a real pain, particularly if you're on a short schedule. If you chose a supplier who could get you a valve with the right specs on short notice, we'd understand.

But we do have the 14-7339 in stock, and we can have it to you tomorrow by 10 a.m. so your engineers can quickly find out how much modification you'd have to do. If it works for you, we'll bill you as usual. If not, send it back. Either way, we'll work with you. We value your continued business.

The structure of this letter creates an *ethos*, one hopes, of a company that is reliable (it doesn't shy away from unpleasant facts), understanding (it has empathy for the reader's situation), and accomodating (it will do all it can to keep its customer happy). It is also ethical in giving the customer options rather than recommending another valve that would less clearly meet the customer's needs, or worse yet, sending a substitute valve with no explanation.

ETHOS AND ETHICS

From the generic relations discussed earlier, it seems that *ethos* does have a real ethical component. Whether the constructed *ethos* originates in a person or in a committee, if those responsible for the writing don't consider their own stance vis a vis¹¹ the audience and the material presented, they may wind up being ethically remiss. In the interpretation of the Challenger disaster by Walzer and Gross [4], the ethical remission was not in a failure to consider or convey all the facts, but in the lack of an appropriate deliberative model for proceeding in the case of indeterminate technical data.

Part of the ethics problem are the very codes that are supposed to describe ethical behavior in professional settings. Like the manuals Pirsig complained about, **codes of ethics objectify behavior, alienating it from the people who are behaving through their writing**. This problem is discussed well by Brown [22], who notes that the STC Code for Communicators' "vague and abstract language . . . makes adherence a problem" and that the Code's "metaphor of 'bridge' turns the writer into a conveyance, one implicitly neutral." Brown worries that writers in institutional settings "implicitly assume the privatized sphere of an organizational *ethos* rather than that derived from personal ethics or the public good."

If writers do implicitly assume an organizational *ethos* (which would be like trying to adhere to an objectified ethical code), it may be because they and their organizations still operate under a model in which organization is hierarchical and power flows down from the top. Yet even in such organizations, documents that convey the organizational *ethos* emerge from a process of negotiation--**the organization can speak to its customers or the public with one voice only after it has resolved differences among many internal voices**. That may account for the character of much organizational prose: it represents a lowest common denominator, and those

¹¹ In relation to. [Source](#)

who are supposed to turn out the prose--writers and editors--are often the people with the least influence in shaping the message.

Those with more clout, the scientists and engineers and managers, often insist on writing in the same way no matter what the audience. Scientists may think it unethical to present their work in anything less than the full complexity it has for them, or to tailor presentations to nonspecialist audiences. Engineers often want to drag the audience through all the details of a technical analysis. Managers may think it undignified to use ordinary language and instead prefer an emptily sonorous, abstract prose.

One might well ask, though, how ethical it is not to be aware of, nor to adapt to, the audience's prior understandings-- to risk either snowing them or talking over their heads.

Here, we might take a hint from Coney and look at organizational prose in terms of the kind of audience it seems to imply. Then we could compare the description of that audience with the characteristics of the audience we're actually trying to reach.

Another dimension of this exercise is to look at organizational prose in terms of its implicit attitude toward its audience. Attitude is the aspect of *ethos* defined partly by purpose or motive and partly by choices of content and style.

Purpose is the guise of *ethos* in composition books in this century, borrowing Alexander Bain's 19th-century ideas of purpose as narration, description, exposition, and argument. Purpose is usually stated quite explicitly in technical prose. Motive, however, is another matter. As Kenneth Burke suggests, motive may be conveyed by tonality, described as

a barely detectable inflection . . . which unmistakably implies, "This is the slant you have too, if you have the proper slant." If [the teacher] explicitly mustered the arguments for that position, he would risk freeing the students of his limitations, by enabling them to become critically aware of those limitations. [14, p. 98]

The situation Burke describes is an underhanded *ethos*, conveyed as he says not on the editorial page but in the headlines. It is the conveying of attitude by code words, as in promotion of "neighborhood schools" in Boston in the 1960s as a way of opposing school desegregation, or in Rush Limbaugh's current demonizing of "liberals"--or for that matter, in dismissing arguments by labeling them "positivist."

Attitude may show through content and style in several ways. Prose may pander to the audience by telling it only what it seems to want to hear. It may ignore audience by paying no attention to its level of understanding or its needs. It may convey an attitude about the audience through the choice of words and information, like online help that, by repeatedly belaboring the obvious, evidently considers its audience dimwitted.

In summary, it is time we explicitly theorized the *ethos* component of technical writing. We need to recognize that *ethos* is a construction, not a function of personality, and that writers can ethically construct a variety of ethoi just as readers, according to Mary Coney, customarily read

in a variety of roles. Until we pay the kind of explicit attention to *ethos* that we've given *pathos* and *logos*, our technical rhetoric will continue to be a spectator's rhetoric.

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