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“Alas, Not Yours to Have”: Problems with Audience in High-Stakes Writing Tests and the Promise of Felt Sense

Peter H. Khost

This essay offers a conceptual basis and strategy for teaching an expanded application of felt-sense theory to avoid a standardized approach to written argumentation. Such an approach adopts a limited notion of audience and fails to acknowledge important aspects of the rhetorical situation. In particular, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) now influence argumentation in primary and secondary school curricula and may thereby shape students’ composing habits, consequently determining how they are placed in college (Smith).

My complaint about CCSS-aligned high-stakes testing is that it risks training students over many years to adopt a reductive and potentially unethical attitude toward audiences by privileging a monologic, agonistic brand of argumentation.¹ My essay encourages teachers to take counteractive measures, especially postsecondary first-year writing instructors whose students have been brought up on CCSS tests. While I highlight the application of felt sense theory, to help explain my views, I also offer an heuristic example in the myth of Orpheus. I contend Orpheus could have avoided the failure of his one-tracked argumentative mode by means of a rhetorical/ethical application of felt sense. My strategy is not presented as an outright solution to the deeply embedded problems of over-testing and the removal of curriculum and assessment from teachers’ hands in American public education. Rather, I am offering just one counteractive pedagogical measure among others that teachers can implement.²

After examining problems of audience in the treatment of argument by the Common Core’s writing standards, this essay engages theories of audience from rhetoric and composition scholarship, reviews the concept of felt sense, introduces my proposal for its rhetorical applications, and offers a pedagogical model for reconceiving audience more ethically in written argumentation.

1. The pairing of *agonistic* (meaning competitive) with *monologic* (meaning isolated from engagement with others) may appear contradictory; after all, how can one compete if not with others? But the kind of argumentation I critique makes some of the moves of genuine debate with others in the name of winning (e.g., stating claims, offering evidence) without genuinely engaging anyone. It is a monologue without an audience, let alone an interlocutor. For a good critique of other falseties underlying argumentation as the “dominant mode” in secondary and postsecondary instruction, see DeStigter.

2. I do not object to assessment methods that are replicable, aggregated, and data-driven (Haswell). But scholarship tells us these matters should be entrusted to trained, practicing educators, to the stated values of our professional organizations, and in some cases to our local institutional contexts. While we advocate for this ideal, teachers can and should take pedagogical steps to offset the ongoing pernicious influences of the current high-stakes testing regime.

Some Problems with High-stakes Writing Tests

Although some have praised the CCSS for increasing the importance of writing (Applebee) and argument (Marzano) in K-12 education, many more have objected to the high-stakes tests associated with the standards. The latter group includes a large and growing national “opt-out” movement. A reason for objections is the dubious treatment of audience by the writing prompts of CCSS-aligned tests, which are to be administered—along with multiple interim benchmark assessments—from third grade through twelfth grade in forty-five states. Writing is one of the central foci of these tests, and argumentative writing occupies a “special place” at the top of both the broad “college and career readiness anchor standards for writing” and the more specific grade 6-12 “writing standards” (National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, 24; 41-42).³ Some attention is given to informational/explanatory and narrative forms of writing, but the standards explicitly state that they “put particular emphasis on students’ ability to write sound arguments,” especially in later years (24). According to the CCSS, “argument is a reasoned, logical way of demonstrating that the writer’s position, belief, or conclusion is valid. In English language arts, students make claims about the worth or meaning of a literary work or works. They defend their interpretations or judgments with evidence from the text(s) they are writing about” (23). Students are required to “make claims,” “argue,” and “defend” them, with the purposes being “to change a reader’s point of view, to bring about some action on the reader’s part, or to ask the reader to accept the writer’s explanation or evaluation of a concept, issue, or problem” (23).

But who is this ubiquitous “reader” supposedly receiving millions of students’ arguments year after year, and is there any reason for students to engage this audience in discourse other than being required to do so? The Common Core standards repeat several times that one must give “careful consideration” to the “audience” and write in a way that is “appropriate” to them (41, 63). Appropriateness to audience applies to the grade 6-12 standards for both writing generally and writing literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects (43, 66). Yet the reader is never identified, let alone made real or interesting to student writers. Nor is a context provided for addressing this cipher, other than perhaps the condition of test-taking itself. Under these circumstances, how can one be expected to change anyone’s mind, motivate action, or win acceptance other than by treating the reader as a straw man, which can hardly be considered an “appropriate” rhetorical gesture toward one’s audience? So as students are continually tested on this model under timed high-pressure circumstances, they become accustomed to targeting passive recipients with evidence in defense of arguments that receive no response other than test scores rendered incontrovertibly by an anonymous authority. Seen in this light, the rhetorical situation posed by high-stakes writing tests might aptly be characterized as Kafkaesque.

Let us consider specific language from my home state of New York’s CCSS-aligned ELA Regents Exam, two thirds of which consist of writing argumentatively. In a sample test provided online by the state, part one of the exam entails multiple choice reading comprehension questions about literary texts. Part two, “Writing from Sources,”

3. Henceforth these organizations will be identified by their acronyms, NGA and CCSSO.

prompts students as such: "Closely read each of the five texts provided . . . and write an evidence-based argument on the topic below" (New York State Education Department 21). Part three, "Text Analysis Writing," asks the following of students, which will register to many writing teachers as a form of argument:

Closely read the text provided . . . and write a well-developed, text-based response. . . . In your response, identify a central idea in the text and analyze how the author's use of one writing strategy (literary element or literary technique or rhetorical device) develops this central idea. Use strong and thorough evidence from the text to support your analysis. (36)

As indicated, the standards underpinning these test prompts make big claims about the importance of engaging audiences in significant ways, but the language of the tests themselves belies those intentions by substituting monologic, agonistic routines for genuine communicative exigency. While serving as president of the Modern Language Association, Gerald Graff criticized this kind of assignment for asking students to "say smart things about [literary] works in a vacuum" without "address[ing] the kind of questions that real readers would ask, like 'Does anyone say otherwise?' or 'So what?'" (3).

Few people want to write such texts under such circumstances or, for that matter, want to read them. Yet this writing and reading proliferates in Common Core tests, regardless of the inauthentic relationship to readers these tests force upon writers. So unwanted, inauthentic writing may often be the result, lending support to the familiar slogan: "Standardized tests produce standardized students." A less catchy but more befitting revision might be: "Standardized writing tests (re)produce unethical rhetorical situations." I say *unethical* rather than unrealistic, empty, or unsound because I believe a constant regime of monologic, agonistic writing not only subjects students to go through continual, anxious motions, but also conditions them to disregard the vital roles of introspection and social interaction in academic communication. At the least, they learn to regard writing in this context as somehow exempt from the attention to others and to oneself that one naturally pays in other contexts. This includes listening, responding, and speaking with an authentic voice (Monahan).

A disclaimer and clarification of terms are in order. I acknowledge how conflicted the concept of *authenticity* is—or realness or unrealness (Bitzer 11), or genuineness (Petraglia 19)—especially where human subjectivity is concerned. In fact, authenticity and audience in this context may be largely indeterminate phenomena whose insinuation of essentialness or singularity contradicts their constructedness and plurality in rhetorical situations. However, writers may be more likely to determine (and/or construct) at least a better working "*sense of audience*" if their experiences of motive, purpose, and responsiveness emerge from willful engagement in discourse with responsive others (Park 487, emphasis added). So in speaking of audience, I suggest something closer to interrelationality or transactiveness.⁴ *Audience* can suffice here as shorthand for the mercurial nexus of purposes, motives, and negotiations that circulate in discourse. In speaking of *unethical* or *inauthentic* situations, then, I mean something closer to compulsory engagement in writing contexts in which there exists no interrelationality with

4. Notwithstanding Louise Rosenblatt's distinction between these terms, I use them interchangeably for present purposes (xvi, 26).

others or no desire to engage in such. Under these circumstances, students enjoy little or no opportunity, let alone motivation, to dwell on audience and the related issues they may otherwise try to untangle, such as why they write in the first place, how the implication of readers affects their performance, or what these issues do to influence one other.

Furthermore, *argument* in the CCSS really means a particular brand of argument, which carries certain assumptions about and stances toward audience that seem natural or indisputable. This is argument seeking to change readers through fact-based reasoning that ignores other means of persuasion.⁵ As the CCSS state, “logical argument,” the kind required by these tests, “convinces the audience because of the perceived merit and reasonableness of the claims and proofs offered *rather than either the emotions the writing evokes in the audience or the character or credentials of the writer*.” The Standards place special emphasis on writing logical arguments as a particularly important form of college- and career-ready writing” (NGA Center and CCSSO 24, emphasis added). Constant rehearsal of this kind of arguing may very well teach students that the audience’s “emotions” and the writer’s “character or credentials” have no “perceived merit” (24).⁶

Catherine E. Lamb describes as “monologic” (13–21) the kind of argument critiqued above, and one of her respondents refers to it as “agonistic” (Farrar 493), as have others (e.g., Long 222; Ong 18). Such an approach to discourse foregrounds competition for control and dominance through logocentrism. As the CCSS’s favored mode, this brand of argument comprises the bedrock of what the standards hail as “the foundation for *any* creative and purposeful expression in language” (3, emphasis added). But obviously such a skewed emphasis hardly accounts for the many different kinds of rhetorical encounters with others to be experienced in school, the workplace, and life generally. As Russell Long points out, in “almost every writing ‘mode’ . . . we find repeated examples of workable prose which are not developed upon the assumption of an adversary relationship with the reader” (223–24). Even within the area of argumentation alone, there are many other methods and motives than just logically convincing an opponent of one’s own point of view. These include Carl Rogers’s emphasis on common ground (Kiefer), Kenneth Burke’s collaborative expectancy, Lakoff and Johnson’s argument as dance, Jim Corder’s argument as emergence, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin’s invitational argument, Cheryl Glenn’s rhetoric of silence, Krista Ratcliffe’s rhetoric of listening, and Arabella Lyon’s recognition and deliberation.

5. See John Edlund’s blog post for a good place to begin learning more about the longstanding, ongoing debate that distinguishes argument from persuasion.

6. In a 2011 speech at a New York State Education Department event, CCSS chief architect David Coleman said: “The only problem with [personal] writing is as you grow up in this world you realize people really don’t give a sheet [*sic*] about what you feel or what you think. What they instead care about is can you make an argument with evidence. . . . It is rare in a working environment that someone says, ‘Johnson, I need a market analysis by Friday, but before that I need a compelling account of your childhood’” (10). Expletive aside, note the nature of the rhetorical audience that Coleman poses in this statement. His first hypothetical entails “care” on the audience’s part; the second involves interaction between an audience and a writer named Johnson. Apart from dismissing personal or argumentative writing, Coleman assumes a foundational value in a writer’s authentic relationships with audiences, yet under CCSS testing conditions, students must write for nobody at all, let alone for somebody with whom they care to engage, as “Johnson” does.

Ryan Hays, an institutional administrator, sees a need to counterbalance what I'm calling the monologic, agonistic mode. He worries that first-year college students lack experience in listening and dialogue across differences because of the ease of living today in "silos" or "bubbles." Hays proposes that "we first have to engage the minds we would change: our own as well as others." To take part in such "real debate" is "to find a sense in which we're in it together," or else, "if an 'us vs. them' dynamic prevails, everybody loses. In this way, dialogue is equally pledge as practice: it urges us to uphold a sense of community above all." A pledge to community, however, does not match—in fact, it somewhat opposes—the Common Core's underlying ideology: "competitiveness and prosperity in the age of globalization" (NGA, CCSSO, and Achieve, Inc. 5) and "workforce training" (Common Core State Standards Initiative 4, 60).

The tests affiliated with the CCSS and other such exams manage to maintain a widespread public misperception that they are paramount measures of some singular notion of *performance*, a fact that makes the writing practices and the stakes involved in these tests seem self-evident and even justified in causing children and teens considerable anxiety. By yoking high-stakes tests inextricably to student's advancement through school and thereby to the successes that presumably follow, our culture affirms for its young people that the kind of writing done for these exams is the most important kind. What does and does not count in this context becomes apparent to students as quickly as the tasks determining these values become rote and resented. Writing thus seems to students not to entail engaging with authentic, responsive interlocutors because of a shared sense of exigency, but rather, sweating out a quick defense of a decontextualized literary interpretation that will be evaluated by an unknown reader who may turn out to be a machine (see Human Readers).

A similar teleology affects new primary and secondary school teachers these days, whose job security may have more to do with high-stakes test scores than with whether students can improve their abilities to conduct frequent low-stakes writing, engage in peer review, treat genre markers as indicators of social activity, conduct independent research, transfer their writing knowledge to digital environments, communicate ethically and across differences, or even just enjoy writing meaningful texts. These are all practices that will ready students for college composition that are not effectively engaged by standardized tests, though the Common Core Standards' introductory language acknowledges few of them (7). Nor do high-stakes writing tests engage students in the eight "habits of mind" that professional organizations in composition studies nationally endorse in the *Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing*: creativity, responsibility, engagement, metacognition, persistence, curiosity, openness, and flexibility (Council). It is not hard to understand, then, why a 2014 Gallup pole found that 72% of the 854 surveyed U.S. public school teachers did not support standardized tests as measures of student performance, and 89% objected to linking CCSS-aligned scores to teacher evaluations.

Along with readiness for college, career readiness is the other grand principle the CCSS and its high-stakes tests strive to uphold. But just as the values of actual college writing instructors are misrepresented by such tests, it seems the needs of employers of college graduates may not be well-represented either. According to a 2014 study sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities that annually surveys

400 organizations hiring new college graduates, the postsecondary learning outcomes rated as most important to employers are, in order, effective oral communication, working effectively with others in teams, effective written communication, ethical judgment and decision making, and critical thinking and analytical reasoning (Hart Research 4). By putting so much stock in standardized exams that mischaracterize written communication and ignore collaboration and ethical decision making, our test-obsessed culture seems not to prepare them very well for entry into the professional world.⁷ After all, how effectively can one communicate, either orally or in writing, without establishing an authentic relationship with one's interlocutors or paying close attention to them? How can one work well with team members and treat people ethically if one has been conditioned to address others primarily as anonymous sounding boards for monologues that lack emotions and credible ethos?

The problem I have identified here will not be overcome easily; that effort will require advocacy at the political, public, and institutional levels. But teachers' greatest influence is still arguably exerted in their classrooms. For this reason, one of the many potential pedagogical steps we can take to counteract the systemic mistreatment of audience by high-stakes writing tests is to introduce students to the basics of audience theory and encourage them to employ felt sense as an ethical rhetorical gesture, which is what the next sections of this essay address. These steps may or may not help students on high-stakes tests, but they should help students to break out of test-based routines once they reach college.

Audience in Composition Studies Theory

Formal theories of audience go back to at least Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and have sustained a consistent area of scholarly inquiry for thousands of years. The subject has generated enough attention to make impossible a comprehensive review of the literature produced in composition studies even since the 1980s. In fact, audience may be one of the most disputed concepts in the field, partly because the subject overlaps with the concerns of a number of schools of thought, each with its own agenda and point of view, including recently, social constructionism, genre theory, and activity theory—to say nothing of wider applications in linguistics and philosophy that sometimes find their way into writing studies scholarship.

What will suffice for present purposes is a quick tour through some major trends concerning audience in more recent composition and rhetoric theory. My position is that students brought up on constant high-stakes writing tests ought to learn about and accept the complexities and significance of audience theory in order to mindfully engage in their own holistic musing on and transacting with audiences. First of all, teachers can make students aware of the audience for which they have been unwittingly trained. The ones who read their tests, students may be shocked to learn, are often temporary hires

7. Today, high-stakes tests and their attendant high-cost preparatory courses play significant influences on the placement into schools, programs, and even jobs for many Americans. Consider the respective 2010 and 2014 *New York Times* reports on a burgeoning “test-prep industry for 4-year-olds” (Winerip), and on businesses screening post-undergraduate job applicants by their SAT scores (Dewan).

with no teaching experience, recruited on Craigslist for \$12 an hour to score a per-day quota of Common Core-aligned tests that must meet a designated distribution of outcomes on a six-point scale (DiMaggio; Farley; Ravitch; Rich). Students will see that this situation does not reflect the rich variety of dynamic relationships that writers and audiences share in other contexts, including in the activities of *college and career*.

When writers write, they usually address audiences who are not present or not interactive with them in the given moment. In fact, even the physical or responsive *presence* of a reader far from guarantees a writer accurate awareness of that reader's responses to a text. The absence of immediate or accurate information about the reader has caused a great number of enlightened minds to speculate—collectively and inconclusively—about whether the rhetorical audience is singular or multiple in person or perspective; real or not real, or to what degree, or how to determine realness; active or passive in the making of meaning, and if active, then collaborative or antagonistic, or to what degree; outside or inside the text; and, to introduce a key set of terms, addressed or invoked. In 1984, Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford introduced the field to their addressed/invoked framework, which accounts for competing sides of an ongoing debate about whether the audience exists independently or is constructed by the writer in a rhetorical situation.

Aristotle is the champion of the audience-addressed school of thought, with his ample classifications of types and states of human beings, to which rhetors should refer in making identifications and issuing corresponding strategies toward a desired effect. As the theory is popularly received today, if a given readership appears inclined toward logical reasoning, for instance, then one does well to appeal to them with logical evidence. Or if the occasion calls for sympathy or outrage, then one does well to appeal to their emotions—and so on. A good deal of writing instruction has conceived audience along these lines, and likeminded scholars have followed Aristotle's lead in providing their own taxonomies in support of the audience-addressed view. For example, Ruth Mitchell and Mary Taylor offer their "audience-response model" for application to "all writing for all audiences," represented as a cyclical process of writing, feedback, and response in which audience functions to "challenge" writing into this circulation of give and take (250). Mitchell's and Taylor's model promises to classify a text "according to its effects, not according to its conformity to extrinsic standards" (250-51). Shortly after that model appeared, Fred R. Pfister and Joanne F. Petrick published their "heuristic model," a checklist for writers offered as "a comprehensive probe of [the audience's] basic social, educational, and ethical identities" meant to help writers grasp the influence of readers' relationships to them and to the subject of their composition (216). If one belongs to the audience-addressed camp, one considers (consciously or not) the reader to be determinate enough for the tailoring of a persuasive text that will yield intended effects.

Another school of thought considers the rhetorical audience to be an unreachable entity whom writers invoke by strategically leaving them textual cues to follow or assigning them roles to perform in such a way as to yield intended effects. The best known representative of the audience-invoked point of view may be Walter Ong, whose 1975 article declares all audiences to be fictions created by writers out of an inability to know or interact with the absent reader. In this way, the writer is different from a speaker: "He is writing. No one is listening. There is no feedback. Where does he find his 'audience'?"

He has to make his readers up, fictionalize them” (11). One of Ong’s examples analyzes the opening sentence of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, in which the author invites readers to play the role of “companion-in-arms” by means of specific usage of definite articles and demonstrative pronouns: “In the late summer of *that* year we lived in a house in a village that looked across *the* river and . . . *the* mountains” (emphases added). The reader presumably knows which year, river, and mountains these are and/or that what matters about them is not their facticity but the feelings they “recall” through the sense of already having been there with the author as his “boon companion” (12-13). Twenty-five years earlier, Walker Gibson (an admitted influence on Ong) proposed the similar idea of the “mock” reader, a fictionalized version of oneself who plays roles posed by texts in order to experience them in certain ways. Both theorists suggest that readers will generally play along with roles assigned to them, as long as the writer has convincingly constructed them.

We can imagine exceptions to both the addressed and the invoked approaches to audience. For example, sometimes a writer cannot determine very much about an audience to whom they must write, such as in composing a statement for the famously inaccessible U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, or in emailing a complaint to a major corporation’s headquarters. Also, it is not uncommon for a reader to resist or reject the role assigned them by a writer. For example, some readers would not wish to play the part of Hemingway’s bosom buddy. Scholars have noted that assignments such as *Make an argument and support it with evidence* often ask students to write to no one in particular or to no one authentic, given that the teacher as default reader is quite unlike nearly any other audience. A teacher is paid to be a “watchdog” (Reiff 418) and a critic of a given composition (Long; Miller). Jasper Neel claims that most writing done in response to such assignments (or, I would add, to high-stakes tests) does not effectively engage readers, making these texts “nearly impossible to read” (94-5). Joseph Petraglia criticizes writing of this kind as “pseudo”-realistic and “unauthentic” because no genuine reader is engaged—and no one is actually persuaded by the argument (21).

Alternatives to the addressed or invoked binary were soon developed. Ede and Lunsford argue that writers perform *both* of these actions: addressing what they know of real audiences outside of the text and invoking roles for imagined ones within it, while establishing themselves as readers of their own texts during revision. Additionally, readers play an active role in this “creative, dynamic” scheme, “whereby writers create readers and readers create writers” (169). Ede and Lunsford conclude: “In the meeting of these two lies meaning, lies communication” (“Audience” 169). James Porter proposes a variously collaborative or communal writer/reader relationship, in which constructions of these “blurred” roles are subsumed by the discourse community of which each is a part (114). Mary Jo Reiff synthesizes a number of other theorists (cf. Park; Rafoth; Selzer) in deconstructing the addressed/invoked binary and, along the way, critiquing Ede and Lunsford (421) and Porter (411), whose pat solutions to the binary seek too much to “stabilize” or “subdue” the audience rather than “enlarge and complicate our understanding of this concept” and “encourage students to see that writing often entails a negotiation among various and multiple readers” (422). Reiff cites compelling examples of detailed, heterogeneous constructions of audience in workplace writing (414-21). This collective discussion contradicts the vague, homogenous approach to audience taken

by CCSS writing tests in supposed alignment with students' prospective academic and career needs.

So it seems that after millennia of theorizing on the subject, scholars still cannot definitively identify the nature and role of audience in rhetoric, let alone agree on how writers can most effectively engage readers. If, as the aggregate of modern audience theory suggests, readers are multiple, changeable, heterogeneous, constructed, participatory, or in any number of other ways unstable or unknowable to some degree, then a rhetoric tailor-made to audiences seems impossible to muster or manage. I suggest, then, that writers would be well-served to develop their abilities at guess work, trial and error, and seeking out and responding to feedback. They should also practice engaging with difference in significant ways, opening themselves up to possibilities of connection, and accepting their participation in an ongoing mystery. In other words, I want young writers to be aware of and to accept the audience's indeterminacy and—when a genuine desire occurs in them—to do their best to engage with readers anyway, no matter how little may be known about them. A key takeaway from audience theory is that although audiences may be variously indeterminate, writers can and do intuit and develop mutual relationships with them. As Lyon defines what she calls recognition, these are "acts where two people understand a connection between them—not a connection of dominance, identification, or projection, all of which deny difference, but simply one of a shared communicative act" (53).

This relationality is where the concept of felt sense can be of use.

Felt Sense

Felt sense is a term that psychologist and philosopher Eugene Gendlin coined to refer to a bodily awareness of meaning that comes prior to language—and I would add: or otherwise incidental to language. As the theory goes, some knowledge exists within one's body in the form of feelings and sensations apart from one's conscious and linguistic understanding of it. A felt sense might originate in impressions of the internal or external and past, present, or future. It is not an emotion but an embodied perception of one's interaction with the world. This perception is initially something unclear or vague that exceeds one's descriptions but which can eventually emerge and be known explicitly. Since the 1960s, Gendlin has developed and taught a process by which he has clients concentrate deliberately on their felt sense. In this process, called *focusing*, a person pays close sustained attention to the pre-lingual, inchoate sense of a feeling. Words are tested to see if they match the felt sense, until the person arrives at a tangible internal shift in which language emerges that feels right. Gendlin takes care to specify that "felt sense is not a mental experience but a physical one. *Physical*. A bodily awareness of a situation or person or event" (*Focusing* 32). Some examples I have used to explain this concept include the feeling of a blocked word or name on the tip of your tongue, or a lingering sensation that you have forgotten something until the unknown content finally emerges, or knowing that you have used an incorrect word but not being able to explain why it isn't the right choice. How does one know—on one's own, without resources—that an imprecise word has been chosen among a number of synonyms, for example? "It's just

a feeling,” one typically says in such an instance in which one doubtless possesses the knowledge in question and yet cannot fully account for that knowledge.

Relatively little rhetoric/composition scholarship focuses specifically on the concept of felt sense, though the subject is tangentially connected to a somewhat broader body of work (e.g., Cunningham; Doherty; and Mancuso). The phrase “felt sense” has become familiar enough for casual referencing among composition scholars, which is not uncommon since the field’s affective turn. Regular readers of *JAEPL* may be about as familiar with felt sense theory as anyone other than psychologists and philosophers who use Gendlin’s work. For these reasons and for space constraints, I will make quick work of accounting for the literature on the subject in composition studies. Most work on felt sense pertaining to written communication is attributable to Sondra Perl’s writing on the subject, and nearly all of it is primarily pedagogical in nature. Beginning in the 1980s, Perl began to adapt Gendlin’s theory (“Understanding”) and eventually developed her Guidelines for Composing exercise, which she disseminated in 1989 (Elbow and Belanoff) and 1994 (“A Writer’s Way”), and expanded in 2004, including an audio-recorded version. Additionally, in 1995 Steve Sherwood explained applications of felt sense in the Writing Center; in 1996 Linda Miller Cleary investigated felt sense’s influence on the roles of gender, purpose, and audience in student writers; in 2001 Randall Popken theorized connections between felt sense and students’ genre acquisition processes; in 2002 Robbie Clifton Pinter explored links between felt sense and listening; and in 2003 M. Elizabeth Sargent described her teaching of felt sense in relation to invention and metacognition.

Perl’s Guidelines consist of a series of questions focusing on felt sense, meant to help writers mainly during the invention process of composing, such as generating ideas, developing a subject matter, or getting in touch with the feelings at the edge of one’s thought. In summarizing the estimated stages of the Guidelines exercise, Perl notes first that “Felt sense occurs—is located—in our bodies,” then we can “dispel” this sensation’s murkiness by paying close attention, and then the process will culminate in words “that will help us express” the developing feeling and put us “on the right track” (*Felt Sense* 4-5). Perl and others speak of a relieving “A ha” moment when one’s felt sense emerges in the form of language (i.e., the culminating “right track”). Early in his career, Gendlin explains the idea of arriving at a so-called “that” in beginning to address a problem through felt sense; this inchoate idea is something to attend to, an identifiable point of reference, or “a grip on” one’s felt meaning that allows one to begin focusing (*Experiencing* 74). Later, the idea of “that” becomes symbolized graphically as “.....”, which indicates what Perl describes as “a space that is open but not blank,” which contains “all that awaits implicitly before words come” (*Felt Sense* 50-1).

As concerns one’s felt sense of *the audience*, however, this “A ha” experience might not occur if the audience is in fact indeterminate in nature. If posed by the genuine (i.e., irreducible, unsubsumed) otherness of an audience, the open space in one’s felt sense graphically represented by “that” or “.....” may need to remain *indefinitely* open. Yet language must continue to come forth into the space of (or posed by) the audience if verbal communication is not to cease. Clay Walker has theorized an ecological agency emerging from similar conditions, which he imagines as “feedback and feedforward

loops between ourselves and the world in which we act . . . emphasize[ing] potentiality or unpredictability over intentionality" (9).⁸

Sustaining ongoing contact with one's felt sense would be an advisable practice to engage in for learners of rhetoric who seek to maintain abiding, non-appropriative relationships with their audiences. That is to say: not considering one's "grip" on words the culmination of a discrete intention but rather just one of innumerable related points within ongoing discourse. Indeed, Gendlin's and Perl's theorizations of felt sense call for recursive attention to one's developing feelings and continuous revisions of the corresponding language for these feelings. But the idea of recursiveness seems not to get its due in pedagogical applications of felt sense theory. Compositionists have tended to apply felt sense primarily as a method for eliciting conscious knowledge out of unconscious embodied experience, or in other words, for deriving language from feeling and then moving on, for example, by employing felt meaning to generate topics for writing and then writing about them. The intention in such cases is to eventually arrive at—or *to shift attention to*—language per se. That's the outcome as well as the point at which writing takes over, and the focus on feeling subsides. Many students and teachers have benefited from this application of felt sense.⁹ But I wish to expand upon it.

My approach is neither as scientific nor philosophical as Gendlin's is, and it also varies somewhat from most pedagogical uses of felt sense. Perhaps it can be called rhetorical, which neither discounts it from pedagogical classification nor positions it very far from the philosophical. In short, I see no reason to limit the process and function of focusing so that one experiences a feeling, then focuses on it, then arrives at language, and then moves on. The relationship between feeling and language may also operate in the reverse order, or by a different arrangement, or by means other than linear sequencing altogether. For instance, in focusing on felt sense, the experience of feelings and emergent language may coexist in balance, or emphases may oscillate between them, or their nature may change in process, thereby prompting a different but related direction. In other words, felt meanings and the language generated from/for them by focusing do not necessarily correspond to an orderly process of evocation, and in some cases there may be considerable back and forth before arriving at a resolution.¹⁰ For that matter, in at least some circumstances, no amount of emergent language will settle the matter of audience indeterminacy with finality.

Probably few felt-sense practitioners would admit to seeking such an orderly process of focusing on feeling as that just described. In fact, a noted early description of felt sense by Perl characterizes the phenomenon as prone to "break apart, shift, unravel, and become something else" ("Understanding" 365).¹¹ Yet for all its potential chaos, felt sense still seems to be celebrated by writing teachers mainly as a stepping-stone toward

8. Editors' note: see Rysdam and Johnson-Lull's discussion of "feedforward," this volume.

9. I am included in both categories. Like many other composition instructors, I use Perl's "Guidelines." I first experienced the exercise as a graduate student in Professor Perl's class as she was refining the Guidelines for her book.

10. Insert here any preferred metaphor: loop, spiral, Möbius strip, tangent, fractal, et cetera.

11. Both Jeffrey Carroll (66) and William Strong (25) quote this passage, otherwise making minor reference to felt sense.

achieving a more orderly subsequent state, namely, some form of sensible verbal expression. In other words, focusing on felt sense is often seen as a temporary condition, a means to an end, something one does first rather than maintains throughout writing. Elbow calls felt sense “a kind of blueprint for a precise meaning” (Perl ix), which suggests felt sense is different from the meaning itself (i.e., the structure that the blueprint plans out). Sargent calls felt sense one of the “tools” in her student “writers’ tool bag” (57), which suggests felt sense is different from the thing that is built with the tool. Sherwood calls felt sense a “faculty” used “to cultivate and finetune [a student’s] ear,” which suggests felt sense is different from the mind’s ear itself (12).¹² Anecdotal accounts of classroom usage of the Guidelines for Composing suggest that achieving functional written language is indeed the desired end product of this process that begins in one’s feelings. This seems to confirm the notion of a presumed sequence as described above: feel first and write second. Note, for example, the directional emphasis on order in Sargent’s subtitle: “Felt Sense in the Composition Classroom: *Getting the Butterflies to Fly in Formation*” (emphasis added). Readers know what she means to suggest by the metaphor, but butterflies do not fly in formation. This fact partly accounts for the beauty of actual butterflies and for Sargent’s appeal to figurative ones. If people convert their figurative butterflies into something orderly, logical, or definitive, then these converted feelings lose the status of butterflies, just as actual butterflies lose their appeal when they are pinned and mounted. Luckily, feelings during writing do not have to be pinned down.

The great value achieved by attending to one’s felt sense in the context of rhetorical situations exists in both the written product of this process *and* in the experienced feelings themselves. In other words, the language produced by dwelling on felt sense is only one of the uses of engaging in the practice. Other benefits include gaining a deeper sense of one’s feelings for their own sake and for their relevance to a communicative context, as well as for perhaps developing a corresponding non-verbal capability through ongoing practice. This last point can be thought of as a fluency in embodied rhetoric. Such a capability would be especially desirable where the indeterminate audience is concerned since the *aporia* of audience is arguably irresolvable, yet communicators need to engage with/in/across it anyway. So other people are always in some respect *other* (i.e., different), and no amount or quality of language can fully fill this gap (i.e., make them same). But if one still continues to communicate with these others, then one may wish to develop a workable sense of audience relationality. So, ironically perhaps, one finds the other *within* oneself or, better, senses the breaking down of such geographies into a state of engaged openness. It would seem advisable to generate an explicit awareness and acceptance of the fact of indeterminacy, which involves both verbal and embodied fluency.

To rephrase the point again, at least insofar as audience indeterminacy is concerned, remaining alert to one’s felt sense over the full course of a rhetorical encounter seems preferable to merely attending to one’s feelings at first and then downplaying or disregarding them once language has begun to flow from them. The nature of audiences and of one’s perception of them will often shift during communication, even while addressing hypothetical readers. Therefore, one’s feelings and corresponding language will also

12. These characterizations stray somewhat from Perl’s Guidelines. She writes: “Seen from this [mechanistic] angle, the Guidelines are another tool But when they are connected to felt sense, they offer us a way to examine larger issues of composing” (*Felt Sense* xvi).

shift. So writers should remember that dwelling on felt sense can help them to achieve both verbal and embodied knowledge, and that the value of felt experience lies not only in how it helps them to find a right topic or word to begin their composing, but also in experiencing through the body a continuous sense of something beyond conventional awareness. This is an experience that is somewhat separate from language, even if it eventually or partly yields to language. Both Gendlin and Perl acknowledge this aspect of felt experience in terms of the "edge" of meaning, where something inside and unknown may come into articulation. Gendlin refers to this coming to words from the edge of meaning as "carrying forward." I wish to add to this concept the idea that where indeterminacies of audience are concerned, one can constantly return to one's feelings so that the *direction* of one's "carrying" may be "forward" only in terms of endless circular revolutions.¹³

To emphasize the simultaneous and ongoing nature of this dual felt and verbal phenomenon, I replace Gendlin's term *focusing*, which may highlight the endpoint of the process in cognition, with the term *dwelling*, which insinuates the sustained return to physicality I describe above.¹⁴ *Dwelling* suggests a spatiality that seems appropriate for emphasizing continued feeling, an indefinite thing—as distinguished from *focusing*, which seems to bring about a final point in reasoning: once something comes into focus, one stops dwelling; one has focused. The difference might be likened to that between the imperfect and preterit tenses. Both of these experiences and their respective descriptors are necessary, to be sure, but the indefinite experience of feeling deserves its due compared with the greater attention paid to rational verbal outcomes of felt sense exercises. My interest here is in keeping the focus on feeling as well as on "linguaging" (Perl 60), so as to draw attention to the recursive rhetorical relationship prompted by audience indeterminacy.

Toward this end, the phrase *come to terms with* will be instrumental in making my example case from the myth of Orpheus in the next part of my discussion. This phrase conveniently maintains a concurrent dual interpretation, as just specified above: one literal, "come to terms," as in *to arrive at language* presumably after an interim or process, and one figurative, "come to terms," as in *to accept*. The former of these interpretations suggests the verbal product of dwelling on felt sense; that is, conceiving words after working through an experience of speechlessness. The latter interpretation suggests the physical products and processes of dwelling, which correspond to the notion of embodied fluency. The following section of the essay interprets a well-known mythical/literary text in order to provide a compelling example of a communicator who struggles to come to terms (in both senses) with audience indeterminacy. This character's circumstances arise from having been displaced from conventional, routinized assumptions about rhetoric and audience, specifically by experiencing stifling uncertainty about his auditor's receptiveness, state of being, and presence. This interpretation demonstrates the complications of choosing suitable approaches to audience and should inspire contemporary

13. Again, or loops, spirals, Möbius strips, tangents, fractals, et cetera, metaphorically speaking.

14. See Michael Polanyi's related notion of *indwelling*: "When we learn to use language, or a probe, or a tool, and thus make ourselves aware of these things as we are of our body, we interiorize these things and make ourselves dwell in them" (10).

rhetors to seek awareness and acceptance of audience indeterminacy, and not to fall back on rote behaviors, by dwelling in their felt sense.

Orpheus and Audience Indeterminacy

To demonstrate the application of felt sense to audience indeterminacy, I turn to the myth of Orpheus, regarding this character as a rhetorical agent. Orpheus's method of engaging his audiences favors certainty over ambiguity, sameness over difference, singularity over plurality, and competition over collaboration. His method resembles the standard argumentative essay assignments common in high-stakes writing tests, and his mythical experience sheds light on why writers should explore broader and richer approaches to rhetorical situations.

The Orpheus myth provides an apt conceit for presenting my case since this character is well known to be a persuasive genius who nevertheless fails to come to terms with his most famous expressive challenge. I propose that we instruct writers to be mindful not to repeat Orpheus's regrettable overreliance on certainty, sameness, singularity, and competition, but to dwell on our felt sense as a preferable or supplemental means of accessing more diverse and appropriate rhetorical approaches. As did this tragic mythical figure in his moment of utmost crisis, contemporary writers may find themselves engaged with audiences who are partly or mostly indeterminate to them, with considerable stakes on the line. So it can help students to remember what Orpheus failed to grasp: that not every communicative occasion calls for the same approach, despite the false consistency suggested by standard high-stakes argumentative essay prompts. Instead, a greater awareness of one's felt sense in rhetorical situations might help to negotiate the audience indeterminacy that is inherent to them.

Orpheus's tale incidentally allegorizes—or *rhetorizes*—the condition of a writer whose intentions are mainly or only predicated on monologic, agonistic argument. In the myth, whenever his rhetorical task is certain, same, singular, and competitive in nature, Orpheus's persuasive powers remain dominant. But when the context for rhetorical engagement suddenly becomes uncertain, different, pluralistic, and collaborative in nature, then the great poet's language tragically fails him. This distinction offers opportunities for exploration and instruction on the nature of audience, the significance of felt sense, and the corresponding aims of (teaching) composition. Writers should be aware to avoid defaulting to such single-minded argumentative rhetoric as Orpheus constantly employs.

The most common version of the myth goes as follows. After the untimely death of his young wife, Eurydice, Orpheus employs his remarkable argumentative powers to rescue her from the afterlife. He charms his way into the underworld and convinces the gods to release her from death, but they set a condition on this unprecedented deal: Orpheus cannot look backward during the couple's ascension from the underworld. Nearing the surface, in a moment of panic, Orpheus doubts Eurydice's presence and famously turns around only to see his wife fade away into the darkness below forever. Afterward, Orpheus's rhetoric fails to convince anymore. He wanders around mourning for seven months, neither able to argue his way back into the underworld for another rescue attempt, nor to negotiate a confrontation that leads to his own death.

Orpheus is an accomplished argumentative rhetor whose tactics seem to work because he always succeeds in convincing audiences (e.g., even inanimate objects in nature, as well as the various guardians of the underworld). But this is true only as long as the situation calls for monologic, agonistic rhetoric (i.e., changing the guardians' minds, controlling rocks and trees). The quality of these outcomes is measured in terms of appropriative intentions: they are meritorious achievements only because *Orpheus gets what he wants*. But convincing others of one's intentions is hardly the only reason to engage in rhetorical exchanges, nor does success in this aim often occur in the non-mythical world. Inevitably, Orpheus encounters a situation that confounds his usual intention and method, just as students will encounter rhetorical contexts that call for other kinds of writing than the argumentative essay, and other reasons to communicate than passing a test. Such situations call for different and deeper awareness of the nature of the communicative act. Orpheus's challenging encounter is primarily characterized by doubt, plurality, and audience indeterminacy, all of which render ineffectual the mythical character's singular intentionality and competitive tactics. We certainly do not want the same to be true of real world writers for the sake of insufficient engagement in authentic rhetorical situations.

The most important part of the Orpheus myth to the present reading is what Helen Sword calls "the turn," the moment when Orpheus looks back without a word and loses his wife forever, left to mourn his now-double loss of her. It can be said that in this unprecedented moment of speechlessness Orpheus has lost his senses, or his *sense of audience*. He never asks his wife if she is there behind him during the ascension, nor does he express his feelings of doubt to her. It does not occur to him to collaborate as such. In fact, Orpheus does not ask a single question of anyone throughout the entire story. One key effect of an interrogative rhetoric is to include others in the discourse as legitimate participants in the making of meaning, instead of merely as passive recipients of one's arguments. In so doing, the other might be engaged as truly other rather than as merely an instrument for gratifying one's own self-oriented worldview.

One can infer (or project) a possessiveness in Orpheus' regard for his wife, as in Virgil's telling: "he looked back toward *his own* dear Eurydice." Then Eurydice, already fading away into the shadows, laments: "alas not *yours to have*" (Anderson 490, 498, *emphases added*). There is nothing unusual about a couple referring to each other in such terms as one's *own* or *yours* to have (e.g., marriage vows that specify "to have and to hold"). But if taken for its rhetorical implications and coupled with Orpheus's denial of Eurydice's alterity and agency, the turn demonstrates at least an appropriative rather than collaborative emphasis in the exchange between the spouses. A collaborative approach might have included an exchange of dialogue and the terms *our* and *ours*, instead. W. S. Anderson also notes these pronouns: "Orpheus tried to make Eurydice 'his' rashly and prematurely; therefore, she has ceased to be 'his' forever" (30). Overeager to claim his victory, he fails to comprehend (and to claim) what he would have won had he taken a more appropriate rhetorical stance. That is, a relationship, which is better understood in terms of interaction than of acquisition. Even if Eurydice's life had been restored, Orpheus would still not have *possessed* her; he would only have earned opportunities to collaborate with her as a spouse, largely through verbal communication.

Orpheus's rhetorical error at the point of the turn denies Eurydice any chance to play an equal—or for that matter, *any*—role in achieving her resurrection. In terms of ethics, Orpheus has reduced his wife's significance to merely a negative role opposite himself, ironically even as he seeks to rescue her from death. The turn represents the mistake of denying (or ignoring) an audience's agency in a rhetorical situation—a misapprehension of otherness as well as an overemphasis on self and sameness. We can and should learn from this example, and expect better from students and ourselves. Orpheus is not wrong to feel anxious during the ascension, just as writers are not wrong to feel insecure about appealing to their audiences. But Orpheus lacks the rhetorical flexibility to explore these feelings with his wife rather than resorting to his monologic, agonistic routine. He is so intent on conquering opponents that he misconstrues his own feelings as adversaries, as if he were losing a battle to his doubts. But in fact, these feelings are an opportunity to build community because Eurydice must also have been feeling anxious. The point of the husband's endeavor was to come together with his wife, so his rhetorical stance should have been open, engaging, and interrogative. In other words, dialogue with Eurydice rather than his wavering assumption that he had won his argument with the gods would have been the appropriate means of communicating in this case.

We can interpret the moment of the turn as a missed opportunity for Orpheus to have dwelled on his felt sense in *coming to terms with* an indeterminate audience that included Eurydice as well as the gods. In his moment of panic, this hero may have been more heroic to have paused, breathed, and become aware of his feelings, allowing them to exist, dwelling at their limits, letting language emerge naturally from that source, and returning intermittently to this practice. If Orpheus had only dwelled as such on what was bothering him, on his felt sense of that moment and his intuitions, then he would likely have discovered a solution to the crisis that did not include the need to look at his wife. Even with her dying breaths, Eurydice manages to speak to Orpheus: "alas not yours to have." Bringing her back again is something he never manages to do, despite his ability to sing of his wife's loss for seven straight months after her death. While it may be fitting to be eulogized in death, Eurydice would likely attest that it is better to be spoken to in life. But to a rhetor such as Orpheus, who has learned to objectify audiences in order to win monologic arguments, this difference does not register.

All audiences, visible or not, are unpossessable, unknowable to some degree or one way or another. Someone as accomplished with language as Orpheus is should have been aware of this, yet his panic at the turn reveals the opposite of awareness. Dwelling on his felt sense could have eased the husband's worrying considerably, or reminded him to ask Eurydice a question, or yielded a number of creative expressive alternatives to turning around. But he had not developed a sense of his feelings (let alone that of others) when confronting audiences whose interests also matter in an exchange's outcome. Eurydice does not require convincing at the point of the turn, nor is she apparently mute. Indeed, as an allied interlocutor, she could have assured him of her presence and even corroborated the difficult conditions of their ascension (or pointed out their temporary status), had Orpheus informed her of his feelings. Unfortunately, he did not.

Conclusion

Students brought up on the CCSS's high-stakes writing tests may misconstrue audiences as passive recipients of monologic, agonistic arguments in academic contexts and the workplace. This conditioning may convince learners to narrowly regard the power and purpose of rhetoric only in terms of attaining preconceived outcomes of one's own, reflecting an ethic that minimizes or dismisses the inherent differences among people. Student writers must learn that other people cannot be *gotten*, per se, through discourse. Audiences are not theirs to have or make same. Though a reader's attention can be engaged, there many different modes and reasons for doing this, all of which involve active participation on the part of the reader, who necessarily occupies a different point of view than the writer's. Preparation for this inevitability ought to be a central part of rhetorical education, which must entail more than just training in a single form of argument. As Ede and Lunsford suggest, it is often preferable to cooperate with the differences one faces in communicating than it is to combat them by arguing for sameness ("Collaboration" 363).

This lesson can be effectively taught by referencing Orpheus's tragic oversight, to help students learn and remember to dwell on their felt sense in accepting audience indeterminacy. If Orpheus's true goal was to help restore Eurydice to her own being, rather than as a condition of his being—which is to say, if he could attend to the collaborative rather than the appropriative dimension of his rhetorical engagement with her—then the uneasiness that Orpheus feels at the moment of the turn would not necessarily be unusual or unbearable to him. For if he had ever before dwelled in the felt sense of his wife's otherness, then the experience at the point of the turn would not have been especially foreign to him. He would already be familiar with the uncanniness of engaging others who are accepted as truly other. Orpheus can be forgiven for his good intention to save his wife, but we must learn from his error that on a rhetorical level, our interlocutors cannot and need not be saved from their difference. His wife's first death is unavoidable; she is mortal. Eurydice's second death is attributable to her husband's folly. It represents his refusal to accept and engage her difference.

Students come through the high-stakes testing obstacle course without becoming insensitive and competitive in all acts of expression. But many seem to hold low expectations of their written rhetorical encounters in academic writing and to possess little regard for audiences in that context. High-stakes tests are not the only cause of this problem, but as the most unified, consistent, and prominent measures of writing quality that are presented to students, these exams play a significant role. One way to estimate this impact would be to employ and compare an alternative mode of pre-college writing assessment whereby, for example, students reflect on a body of compositions they chose to do, identifying the effects this work had on others as well as the strategies they used to accomplish those effects. Such a method would probably call for students to communicate with others about their portfolio and analyze the feedback, which would make for a kind of autoethnography of their lived rhetorical situations with a socially-constructed and dynamic point of view. Such self-assessment should help students to become increasingly aware of the wide diversity of audiences, purposes, and tactics that they would encounter in other disciplines, in the workplace, and in their lives generally.

Postscript

Because I do not want to taxonomize what should be a unique, personal, and spontaneous practice, I hesitate to provide specific instructions for evoking students' felt sense of the rhetorical audience. But this essay's readers may want guidance along these lines. The following questions are adaptations and additions I have made to some of the Guidelines for Composing created by Sondra Perl (36-42). These questions can follow on Perl's introductory instructions and focusing techniques in the same way the originals do (34-5).

Who is on your mind? Is there a person or a collective audience you've been thinking about lately? Who else are you thinking about? Are there memories or future projections of audiences that strike you as interesting or compelling? Who else are you overlooking, not just specific people but types of readers, moods they may be in, expectations or biases they may have? Ask yourself: "Which one of these readers or audience types draws my attention right now? Which one could I engage through my writing for now, knowing that they are not actually my audience, or if they are, that there is so much of their experience of my topic about which I will not know?" What things do you know about the situation in which you are engaging your audience? How do you know? What things do you not know?

Ask yourself: "What is the nature of my energy associated with my sense of an audience?" When you imagine yourself engaging that audience, where do you locate that energy? Is it in your hands, in your head, or heart, or stomach; floating in front of you; a combination; or somewhere else? However you describe it, wherever you may locate that connecting energy, be aware that you will not know the whole of your audience's impressions. Go to the place where you sense the edge of this reality and dwell there, sitting calmly, breathing naturally. How does that make you feel? What would it mean for you to accept the incompleteness of your sense of audience? What would it take for you to do that? To whom can you appeal, or where can you go to ask for feedback, knowing that this will be a partial, temporary, and not necessarily representative collaboration with your audience? Why would someone want to read your composition? Why wouldn't they? How does that affect you? What can you do about that? What is likely to change? Ask yourself: "How is my mind affecting my sense of audience? How is my body affecting it? How about my spirit? My environment?"



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