

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RHETORICAL DEMANDS OF COLLEGE WRITING FOR PLACEMENT

Speaker: *Kathryn Fitzgerald*, University of Utah
Introducer/
Recorder: *Linda Jorn*, University of Minnesota

Kathryn Fitzgerald gave participants attending this session a chance to analyze student writing in terms of rhetorical evaluation criteria developed at the University of Utah. These criteria are intended to do the following:

- (1) describe the rhetorical situation college students face when asked to write an essay that will be assessed and used to place them in a freshman writing course;
- (2) assert that the evaluation of the rhetorical situation provides valid criteria for placement of students into various levels of freshmen writing courses; and
- (3) shape the discussion

of the student writing by providing a holistic view of writing.

Before handing out samples of student writing, Fitzgerald discussed the theoretical background for developing the rhetorical criteria. She also reviewed some of the common problems of holistic scoring, emphasizing the fact that holistic scoring does not consider the different purposes of writing. (for example, persuasive vs. self expressive writing). The rhetorical evaluation criteria developed at the University of Utah were designed to alleviate some of the problems encountered when using holistic scoring. The criteria help readers consider the purpose of students' writing and identify the internal and external purposes of the writing situation.

Fitzgerald pointed out that students' internal and external purposes complicate the writing situation for them. At the University of Utah, faculty feel that the purpose for students' writing needs to come from the students (i.e., internal), but in academia the purpose often comes from the instructor and is motivated by grades (external). The student has to think up his or her purpose for writing and must shape this purpose to serve the academic external purpose. Therefore, the student's purpose is always dual. These internal and external purposes are in essence the rhetorical situation and they need to be taken into account when faculty evaluate writing, particularly when this evaluation is used to place freshmen into English courses. Students' ability to handle this complex rhetorical situation informs instructors of the students' readiness for college writing.

Next Fitzgerald described how the rhetorical expectations of University of Utah professors were determined and used to develop the rhetorical evaluation criteria. These criteria consist of the following categories:

Category 1: The writer's relationship to college readers and writers. Expectations: The most proficient writers recognize that any single piece of college writing is part of an ongoing written discussion about a topic and that they are expected to make a contribution to the discussion. They recognize that an authority (i.e., professor, test giver) identifies issues for discussion.

Category 2: The writer's relationship with his or her subject matter. Expectations: College writers control their subject matter, pressing it into service to support their internal and external purposes.

Category 3: The writer's relationship to the conventions of the genre. Expectations: College writers employ syntactical units appropriate to their thought, precise vocabulary, and the mechanics and spelling of standard written American English.

University of Utah students are given placement essay

directions that explain the external rhetorical situation; and they have 45 minutes to plan, write, and revise their essays.

After reviewing the theoretical background and the criteria, participants used these criteria to evaluate and discuss some student writing. Fitzgerald pointed out that readers are told to pay attention to content and reasonability, that there are no hard and fast rules, and that judgment is a balancing act of various criteria and expectations of each institution. Readers at the University of Utah look at the quantity of student writing as relative to every piece of writing. In summary, Fitzgerald stated that these rhetorical evaluation criteria force readers to evaluate writing for its purpose, help readers define good college writing, and address the need to teach students about the effect that the rhetorical situation has on their writing.