

A Writer Breaks Bread with a Reader

Whether it be a sold out, sardine-packed theater of which I take the stage, or a faceless literature critic for a bottom-tier newspaper, the reader and the audience are an intrinsic part of my writing. The question is, do I give them power over my argument? If taking the easy way out, I'd say no. Of course, my instinct is to tell you that I write for my own pleasure and individual thought, in fact that's what I'd like to believe myself. But, when I take into consideration the edits I've made and the things I've been too afraid to say on accounts of other people, I can't deny that in many cases I have surrendered myself to the powers of audience approval. Author Peter Elbow believes that certain audiences can become "powerfully inhibiting," (Elbow, 51) to the point which they possess the writer entirely. This leads me to the question at hand; am I a good writer, or am I good at telling my audience what they want to hear?

An important thing to keep in mind is that writing is a power I hold over the audience, not the other way around. At the end of the day, I carry the pen and have the capability to let the audience affect me in whatever way I please or ignore them completely. Elbow believes that this is the ideal way to approach writing, through ignorance of the reader. "As soon as we get out of their presence, all the things we wanted to say pop back into our minds." (Elbow, 51) Does this mean that the writer lives in fear of their audience?

Yes. I'd say the reason writer's hold back words and don't take risks on accounts of the reader comes from the fear of being rejected and thrown away. And it's not just the writing being tossed out, but rather a deep-rooted and personal truth manifested through

self-expression. The fear of that argument being ridiculed by someone else is strong enough to make us compromise our language.

A situation in which I let the audience have power over my writing is for web content. I write music reviews for The Young Folks, an online magazine targeted at college students interested in modern culture and the underground music scene. I keep this audience in mind when using colloquialisms, slang, and overall tone. If I write something that's too mainstream or not young enough, my editor will change the content entirely, or in some cases scrap the article.

When writing for the consumer, it in many ways has to be a compromise. An agreement between the two parties, writer and reader. There has to be an understanding between the two of you. The writer understands what the reader wants, and how much of it they must incorporate into their own work in order to be successful. The reader understands their influence on the writer, but that the argument is ultimately individual.

The very nature of writing is reliant on a second party. We write to articulate thought, and in many ways that thought is not "real" until the presence of audience is introduced. I say "real" because writing doesn't become an active piece of reality until it is read. The rhetoric cannot inspire action until it is met with a reader with free choice to do with that argument what they will.

At the end of the day, the writer is a social animal, despite the countless tropes of introvertedness they wear on their shoulders. Without an audience in effect, there would be no one to enable the existence of written language. Writing as a practice came to be popularized based on the bond between reader and writer.

It's a bond that will continue to exist in conjunction with language. You cannot separate an author from her audience, and maybe that's not as bad as Elbow makes it out to be. No matter what measures we take to ignore our reader, or to rebel against them entirely, there is always going to be a looming influence on the page. I say this because of the large role which audience has played in the development of writing. Our system of writing, as we know it today has been built upon the decisions of the reader. For many years, the reader has determined what writing has been successful and canonized, and what writing has fallen off the face of contemporary culture. If there's one thing you need to know, it's that even though there is an unavoidable relationship shared between the writer and the audience, it doesn't have to be a toxic one.

Works Cited

“Closing My Eyes As I Speak.” *Everyone Can Write: Essays toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*, by Peter Elbow, Oxford University Press, 2000.