Learning to Read Your Readers' Minds

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Introduce a new genre—in this case, the abstract—by imagining readers' expectations.

> Writing Focus: *thesis, motive*
> Project Stage: *developing an argument*
> Teacher Preparation: *medium*
> Student Preparation: *low*
> Estimated Time: *60-65 minutes*

EXERCISE

Prep Work: Prepare a handout of four samples of the genre under analysis, in this case, academic abstracts in science and engineering. One abstract should be an impenetrable example, two others should be effective and persuasive, and the fourth example should both be mediocre—poorly structured and/or missing at least one key element—and yet seem accessible. One purpose of the mediocre example is to discover if the group can overlook the disciplinary familiarity and instead analyze rhetorically.

Step One: (5 minutes) Launch the discussion by asking, "What do you know about abstracts? What were you taught?" Get that on the board, then shift the question from form to function and from writing to reading: "As a reader, what are you trying to *do* when you read an abstract?" Because most readers are trying to decide on the basis of the abstract whether to read the entire article, it's possible to assess the quality of an abstract by its effect on readers. A perfect abstract allows its readers to self-segregate accurately and confidently into two groups—those who must read the article, and those who can afford to skip it.

Step Two: (15 minutes) Divide the class into small groups to answer the following questions: "What information do you as a reader need to have in order to decide confidently and correctly whether to read the article?" Let the groups talk among themselves for 5-7 minutes, then return to a full class discussion, putting their responses on the board. Be sure the discussion includes not only the information needed but also the rationale for needing it, as well as how a reader would recognize the information; the goal is not simply to name the information but to derive it by thinking pragmatically.

Get the key elements (or alternative terms) on the board. My students usually propose terms like the following to describe the information they feel they need from an effective abstract, which I connect to terms from the writing lexicon:

> Orienting information to the field or to previously established knowledge (Orienting)
> Problem/unknown/question (Motive)
> Purpose (Thesis)
> Approach (Method)

> Results (Evidence/Analysis)
> Conclusions/Interpretation/Implications

Often students will come up with additional abstract qualities, like "significance" or "novelty." Although such abstractions indeed concern readers, after some discussion we usually decide that these qualities are judgments derived from other information, not the specific elements needed for an informative abstract. Keep these abstractions on the board alongside the elements, but separate from them.

Step Three: (25 minutes) Now circulate the handout and test the framework against the four published abstracts. Put students back into groups of 3-4, with the following charge: **Read** the abstracts; **Rank** them from best to worst; **Compare** rankings within your group; **Discuss** and analyze your judgments using the terms we've developed. I write on the board "Read, Rank, Compare, Discuss" to keep them focused on their task.

Step Four: (15-20 minutes) Reconvene the full class and compare the groups' results with one another. **Expect limited consensus**. It is in sorting out the different responses that the group learns to read each other's minds.

Since there's usually near unanimity around the least effective abstract, start the analysis there with these questions:

> Which elements of effective abstracts are present?
> Which elements are missing or incompletely developed?
> How does the analysis above account for your assessment and ranking?

As students respond, ask them to point to specific passages in the abstract and read them aloud so that everyone is able to compare individual interpretations within the context of the group. Make a chart on the board showing which elements are present and which absent or incomplete. By the end of discussing this first, deficient abstract, you will have both validated the group's consensus and analyzed it by reading closely.

Turn next to the opposite pole, asking which abstract was ranked highest.

With every new example, use the same questions above as you analyze and debate the elements of a successful abstract. For each abstract be sure to keep charting the student responses on the board so the class can compare these charts as they go.

REFLECTIONS

Precisely because this lesson plan leads to productive dissonance and chaos, it works on multiple levels with many kinds of genres and documents. Its explicit goals are to make visible the otherwise tacit expectations of readers and to map those expectations to particular elements of structure and substance. I commonly use scientific abstracts, but the procedure works equally well for abstracts in the social sciences or humanities as well as for other generic forms—

introductions, conclusions, figure legends, cover letters, proposals. Because some genres need more work to bring the expectations to the surface, the workshop may need a longer set-up to orient the group to the demands of the situation, especially if participants do not have much experience reading the particular genre.

In parallel with these explicit goals, the exercise models effective writing process *in class*. The class starts with reflection on what we know, then turns to brainstorming to imagine what else might be important. We then shift from the comprehensive and spacious imagining of brainstorming to more focused prioritizing of our criteria. Finally, we test our priorities against both other texts and the responses of other readers to arrive at a deeper and clearer understanding of what makes a strong abstract.

Discussing how to rank the abstracts usually produces common areas of disagreement that are interesting and productive since they can ultimately help us understand how and why readers differ. In particular, the two strongest abstracts in the batch often split the vote. What quickly emerges is that 1) both effective abstracts include all the necessary elements, and 2) readers disagree because they value those elements differently. For example, readers in highly quantitative fields such as geochemistry often prefer an abstract with quantitative data to a more qualitative abstract. Or, readers from outside a field may prefer an abstract with a broader research question, whereas readers from within the field gravitate to more specific but pointed questions. The discussion makes visible the consensus that contributes to genre level expectations while allowing for the diversity of individual readers and their interpretations. The mediocre abstract in the bunch often also initially has its proponents, but testing it against the criteria tends to reveal its weaknesses and the proponents usually change their rankings. In many cases, they come to see that their familiarity with the field led them to fill in the blanks and assume the abstract was more coherent and informative than it really was.

Most importantly, this iterative process of reflection and discussion allows writers to compare the reactions they imagine from readers with those of actual readers in the room. Because reading is solitary, readers rarely have the opportunity to compare their interpretations of a passage: they easily assume that everyone else reads as they do. This exercise tests that assumption; readers quickly discover that even seemingly straightforward texts elicit a variety of responses. Students compare their analysis and interpretations to those of their peers, and the group as a whole refines its standards for analysis. An added benefit: the instructor becomes simply one reader among many—a more experienced reader, perhaps, or a more skillful reader, but not the authoritative reader.

As a follow up to this exercise, have students bring drafts of their own abstracts to class. Divide students into groups of three or four to workshop one another's drafts, reminding them to refer back to the criteria for effective abstracts they had generated during the exercise with professional samples. For the final step, reconvene as a full group and ask students which elements of the several abstracts they discussed seemed especially effective, and why. Then ask which elements they are still struggling with and facilitate a troubleshooting discussion. This follow up workshop not only sets students on the path to productive revision, but also makes real for them that the audience for their writing is wider than they may have imagined.