



Review of Berkow and Berkow, English Composition: Writing for an Audience

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This series of twenty-six half-hour videos is framed within the tradition of the American college writing class. The videos fall into two groups: thinking and writing strategies, and the writing process. Each video consists of a series of useful tips on college writing delivered by credible sources such as college English teachers and university professors. The series emphasises the role of writing in the world of work beyond the college classroom. It features a wide and inclusive range of professionals including novelists (e.g. Frank McCourt), marine biologists, media personalities (e.g. Michael Moore), comedians (e.g. the MAD scriptwriters), a car mechanic, and a police woman. All stress the importance of reading and writing in their jobs, and show how writing techniques, such as the 'rhetorical mode' of describing a process, support their professional needs.

The series is peppered with enticing writing jargon: 'audience', 'voice', 'discourse communities', 'critical thinking'; and the sociocultural nature of writing is a central theme. The videos present many thought-provoking quotes, such as this one on voice: 'You're not asking what the topic is; you're asking what does this voice say about the topic.' However, the content is disappointingly thin, and much of the advice is reiterative and vacuous. For example, in the video on 'Research' we are advised that 'the key ingredient is wanting to do it!'

Despite the title of the series, the producers do not seem to have defined their audience very effectively. The videos appear to be pitched at students; however, much of the

advice is addressed to teachers. In fact, there is no sense of dialogue with the audience, nor are the viewers invited to participate and interact. This makes it hard to relate to the stream of talking heads.

The series advocates various approaches to planning and editing. But once again, the producers do not seem to be acting on their own advice. Although each video begins and ends with a set of iterative clips showing the main points, there is no definable structure, and the series could well be cut back to a fraction of its length. Furthermore, the occasional written examples are set against distracting background images.

Despite our reservations, some students will find these videos useful. In particular, 'Argument' and 'Reading as a Thinker' could be useful self-access resources. Creative writing students may get some good ideas from 'Freewriting and Generating' and/or 'Finding Something to Say'. (But don't buy both, because there's heaps of overlap in footage.) EAP teachers or foundation course teachers might use sections of the videos; for example, 'Comparison and Contrast' could be useful. However, it is hard to imagine many LAS advisers spending time on screening these videos in group sessions.

In conclusion, it is disappointing that the producers of this series did not exploit the medium of video more effectively. Hopefully the accompanying textbook, 'A Community of Writers' by Elbow and Belanoff, and the two workbooks which have not yet been released in Australia, will be more practical, and will enable students to put into practice the advice which they are served in the video series.

References

Elbow, P. & Belanoff, P. 2000, A Community of Writers, Boston, McGraw-Hill.

Available from Educational Media Australia at \$3660.80 for the series, or
\$176.00 for a single video
