

“LIKE DANCERS FOLLOWING EACH OTHER’S STEPS”:
AN ANALYSIS OF LEXICAL CUES IN STUDENT WRITING
FOR DIFFERING AUDIENCES

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ABSTRACT

This empirical study examines the role of lexical priming in first-year college student writers’ abilities to consider multiple audiences. The writing topic assigned to all 165 first-year students is identical except for the audience: one-third of the students wrote a persuasive letter to an authority figure; one-third wrote a persuasive letter to a close friend; and one-third were not given an audience assignment, but were instructed to write a persuasive essay. Their responses were analyzed for evidence of Audience-Sensitivity Traits and of lexical priming, i.e., phonological strings that can indicate awareness of audience, a theory based on work by Michael Hoey and David Kaufer and colleagues.

Although some specific variables yielded inconclusive results, overall, it can be concluded that student writers effectively “primed” their readers to read as the writers directed, that they effectively used lexical priming to write within assigned genres, and that most of the writers did not display overt egocentrism. These results also confirm hypotheses regarding audience intimacy behavior such as those proposed by Bracewell, Scardamalia, and Bereiter; Barry Kroll; and Vincent Puma.

Further, this study furnishes evidence of the usefulness of computerized text-tagging software (DocuScope®) to aid the rhetorician in textual analysis, even as it exposes some problems with such software.