

An Activity for Teaching the Purposes of Discourse

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Almost all ESL students know that to write effectively is a source of power. However, many do not fully understand that the way we employ language affects our discourse. As ESL/English teachers who constantly focus on developing strong writing skills in our students, we must also alert our students to the ways in which language can change when considering audience and purpose. Most of us stress the importance of having something worthwhile to say, but we need to remind our students that how we deliver the message is equally important.

The following introductory lesson, "The Purposes of Discourse," was designed for a freshman-level, college ESL course whose students possessed a 550 TOEFL score. However, this approach could be adapted to suit others, such as secondary or adult language learners. It is best to have 12 or more students to participate in this exercise.

- Preparation time:
 - 10 minutes
- Supplies needed:
 - Index cards, a pen and knowledge of what interests students
- Activity time:
 - 45 minutes
- Purpose:
 - To illustrate via the students' own words how language changes when we consider purpose and audience. The four primary aims of discourse are to persuade, to inform, to discover for one's own needs, and to create.

Using your school campus and a popular musical group (or any other event with which students can connect), prepare four index cards with one of the following:

1. You just heard that your favorite band is playing at the college center on Friday. Unfortunately, you are scheduled to work at your part-time job. In a letter to your boss, explain why you need time off on Friday.
2. Your friend plans to meet you at the college cafeteria before seeing the concert. However, this friend needs directions since he is does not know the campus. In a note to your friend, explain how to walk or drive to the school and where to meet.
3. You have just seen a fantastic concert at the college center. You want to capture the experience in your diary. In a journal entry for yourself, describe the show and your feelings.
4. You saw the concert on Friday. Your English teacher wants you to write a creative story about the experience. It could take the form of a brief story, dialogue, or poem. In a short paper for your class, write your creative response to the experience.

Each group of 3 students receives one card and must work collaboratively to respond to the assignment. After students have completed the task, ask groups to share what they have written with the entire class. While listening, record pertinent words and ideas that the group has employed to adapt its language to the task and the audience. Discuss the strategies used by the writers and illustrate how the groups' written work varies. This open discussion of student-generated writing makes a perfect springboard to launch a more formal exchange about discourse, tone and style. Students can also evaluate others' effectiveness by analyzing the clarity and conviction of the written work.

Another caveat is that this activity illustrates the importance of collaboration, an essential ingredient in any course; understanding the benefits of collaboration is especially helpful to the peer editing process that occurs in the drafting of English/ ESL written works.

