The Meanings of "Audience"

As a subject for theory and for the teaching of writing, audience is obvious, crucial, and yet remarkably elusive. In Aristotelian terms "audience" points to the final cause for which form exists, to the purposefulness—or its lack—that makes a piece of prose shapely and full of possibility or aimless and empty. Within certain contexts, most notably those of classical rhetoric and argumentation, audience is relatively easy to talk about. Yet outside those contexts our grasp on it is much hazier than I suspect we would like to admit—especially given the importance the subject automatically assumes in any discussion of rhetoric. The very concept of audience applied to written discourse is itself far from straightforward. As Walter Ong has pointed out, writing can, in a strict sense, have only readers, not the collectivity of an audience ("The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," *PMLA*, 90 [1975], 11). And, in fact, theoretical discussions of the nature of audience in written discourse are relatively rare. Evidently, though, since the term survives and flourishes, it carries important meanings that "readers" does not, although most talk and writing on the subject maintain the distinction between the "audience" and "readers" only tacitly and often ambiguously.

In practice, locating and discussing the audience for a given piece of prose can be frustrating. The familiar question, "Who or what (a suggestively impersonal pronoun) is the audience for this piece?" may prompt a ready answer, but equally often it suggests little, drawing especially blank looks from students. Usually the problem is one of finding or of pinning down satisfactory terms in which the question may be answered: "People who do not approve of X"; "readers of the *Atlantic Monthly*"; "the layman"; "the teacher." Each of these hypothetical answers assumes a different way of conceiving audience, a different principle of definition. How are these different ways of conceiving audience related? What makes one or another more or less useful for discussing a given piece of writing?

A more important question for teachers of writing: How does audience manifest itself to writers writing? The advice, "Consider your audience," may appear to mean that the writer is to concentrate upon some particular person or persons, an implication that is patently far too simple. Only sometimes does

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considering audience mean directly considering particular people; more often it means something much hazier. Writers can attend to a number of different kinds of issues when they think about audience. And, further, for a writer writing a memo to the boss or a writer writing a column for the local newspaper "considering audience" may mean quite different things, not just differences of attending to different qualities of the audience but marked differences in the matters attended to and the ways they are present to the writer. What are the different kinds of meanings "audience" can have for writers writing in different kinds of rhetorical situations?

Full answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this essay, but the questions and the absence of ready answers illustrate the elusiveness of audience in written discourse. The term "audience," old and powerful as it is in the rhetorical tradition, might almost be said to mean too much, to block thought by making us think we know what we are talking about when we often do not. In what follows, I want to open further this problem in meaning, to clarify some of the conceptual traps in the way "audience" is typically used, and to suggest some general reference points that may be useful in thinking about the theory and the teaching of audience.

One quick way to see how many things "audience" means is simply to note how we talk about what writers do. Writers, we most commonly say, adjust to audiences or accommodate them, but we also talk about writers aiming at, assessing, defining, internalizing, construing, representing, imagining, characterizing, inventing, and evoking audiences. Each of these verbs seems to capture some of the truth about audience in different situations or seen from different perspectives, yet the imaginative dynamics they suggest are fascinantly different. Consider, for example, the different implications of two terms even as close together as "assessing" and "defining." One suggests that audience is a given to be carefully observed and analyzed; the other that audience is something unclear to be shaped or brought into clearer focus.

Even though the range of apparent conceptions of audience and of the writer's relationship to it is bafflingly rich, the range does have identifiable extremes. At one end words like "adjust" and "accommodate" convey the familiar notion of audience as something readily identifiable and external, requiring appropriate responses and strategies. Lloyd Bitzer's definition of the rhetorical situation is a useful reference point here, since it so unequivocally presents external circumstances as forming a defining context to which discourse must respond in fitting ways. ("The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric, 1 [1968], 1-15). The audience, in this view, is a defined presence outside the discourse with certain beliefs, attitudes, and relationships to the speaker or writer and to the situation that require the discourse to have certain characteristics in response. In Bitzer's terms the more structured the rhetorical situation, the more precise its characteristics, including those of the audience, the more it determines the specific features and content of the discourse.

At the other extreme, with verbs like "construe" and "invent," is the notion that Walter Ong explores at length in "The Writer's Audience is Always a Fiction." However real the readers are outside the text, the writer writing must
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represent an audience to consciousness in some fashion; and the results of that "fiction" appear in what the text appears to assume about the knowledge and attitudes of its readers and about their relationship to the writer and the subject matter. Particularly in cases where no clear structure, no readily identifiable audience exists—the situation free-lance writers and composition students face all the time—the writer must, in some sense, invent an audience. More accurately, the writer must create a context into which readers may enter and to varying degrees become the audience that is implied there. An article, let us say, on how to plant asparagus roots may evoke as its audience the dedicated home gardener filled with enthusiasm for hard work and fresh vegetables. Particular readers may fit this implied audience well; they may tolerate the definition to get the necessary information; or they may read out of idle boredom as casual spectators amused at the eager enthusiasm of the implied audience. Readers may, in other words, be the "audience" to varying degrees, or not at all. In this sense the audience may be said to exist in the text—if it can actually be said to exist anywhere.

The meanings of "audience," then, tend to diverge in two general directions: one toward actual people external to a text, the audience whom the writer must accommodate; the other toward the text itself and the audience implied there, a set of suggested or evoked attitudes, interests, reactions, conditions of knowledge which may or may not fit with the qualities of actual readers or listeners.

The first, most literal direction of meaning for "audience" more often than not occupies the center of attention because it is so concrete. After all, the basic image from which the concept of audience derives is that of a speaker addressing a group of people in some fairly well defined political, legal, or ceremonial situation. The group of people, the audience, listens intently because they have some specific involvement in the situation. They have a part to play. The speech shapes itself around the fact of their presence and their involvement. This basic image is powerful, easy to hold in mind, and therefore useful. But it also opens up a conceptual trap by making it easy to associate "audience" simply and literally with the people listening—all those folks out there in chairs. And in its most common, mundane sense that is all that "audience" means. Yet obviously one can listen to a speech or read a work of prose without being in any rhetorical sense a member of the audience. "Audience" as we use it in discussions of rhetoric means much more. Its essential rhetorical meaning is something like people-as-they-are-involved-in-a-rhetorical-situation. Further, that idea of people-as-they-are-involved has to do with final and formal cause—what a piece of discourse sets out to do and how it is shaped to accomplish that end. So "audience" really uses a very concrete image to evoke a much more abstract and dynamic concept. Whether we mean by "audience" primarily something in the text or something outside it, "audience" essentially refers not to people as such but to those apparent aspects of knowledge and motivation in readers and listeners that form the contexts for discourse and the ends of discourse.

Probably, it is precisely because "audience" has acquired so much abstract meaning that it is retained, however ambiguously, in discussions of written as well as of spoken discourse. "Readers" is too obviously literal. "Audience" by
its literal inappropriateness is free to carry a much richer set of meanings. Note that we speak of how a discourse may affect its readers or of what a discourse assumes about its readers; but we speak of the audience of a discourse, by which we often mean an ideal conception, something akin to an informing principle in the work. For this reason we often speak of the audience impersonally as a thing: “What is the audience?” Even when we mean by it people outside the text, those people make up a collective entity, exist as an audience, only in terms of their relationship to the text and the relationship of the text to them.

Of course “the reader” has come, especially in literary criticism, to carry the abstract rhetorical meaning of “audience.” Note Wolfgang Iser’s “implied reader” and the many recent discussions of the reader of the work. The overlap of different meanings in two terms that are often used interchangeably allows great confusion, especially in the classroom where an instructor might easily be using “reader” or “audience” in a largely rhetorical sense without being fully aware of it, while the students might be interpreting the terms in much more literal ways.

To specify the range of meaning a bit more at this point, the two general directions of meaning of “audience”—outside the text and back into the text—divide into four more specific meanings:

1. Anyone who happens to listen to or to read a given discourse: “The audience applauded.” This meaning is inextricably rooted in common usage, but it is useless and misleading in serious rhetorical analysis.

2. External readers or listeners as they are involved in the rhetorical situation: “The writer misjudged his audience.” This meaning of “audience” comes into play in analyses of the historical situation in which a given discourse appeared or in studies of the actual effect of discourse upon an audience.

3. The set of conceptions or awareness in the writer’s consciousness that shape the discourse as something to be read or heard. We try to get at this set of awarenesses in shorthand fashion when we ask, “What audience do you have in mind?”

4. An ideal conception shadowed forth in the way the discourse itself defines and creates contexts for readers. We can come at this conception only through specific features of the text: “What does this paragraph suggest about the audience?”

The last two meanings are obviously the most important for teachers or for anyone interested in forms of discourse. They also identify the aspects of audience that are the most elusive and that give rise to the questions posed earlier. What are the different considerations in writers’ minds in different rhetorical situations when they come to terms with audience? What are the features of texts that we most appropriately use to define and discuss audience in different rhetorical situations?

Any systematic answers to these important questions will depend upon keeping in constant view the essential abstractness of the concept of audience. In the
case of what Bitzer calls highly structured situations, this abstractness can be
easy to miss because the more concrete referents of audience are so available:
Ronald Reagan cuts subsidies for mass transit; a committee of mayors drafts a
letter to argue for continued support. It is easy to say that Reagan is the audi-
ence for this hypothetical letter. But it is not Reagan as Reagan that the letter
addresses but Reagan in his position as President and as representative of a set
of attitudes on the subject of mass transit. Whatever other notions or knowledge
of him as a person the writers may have in mind will have to be screened out as
irrelevant. The conventions of the formal letter, levels of diction, tone, them-
selves help with the screening. As Walter Ong points out, such conventions es-
tablish roles for writers and for readers. Then within the limits of those roles, the
mayors will proceed according to their estimation of Reagan’s attitudes and polit-
cal position. And more than that, they will try to create in the letter an image of
their audience, the President, as they would like him to be—receptive, open-
minded, concerned about the cities. So although it is easy, even inevitable,
speaking in shorthand fashion, to identify Reagan as the audience for this letter,
doing so tells us little. The audience as it exists in the writers’ consciousness and
as it shapes the text is a complex set of conventions, estimations, implied re-
sponses and attitudes.

In the case of unstructured situations where we would call the audience “gen-
eral,” where no simple, concrete identifications of audience are possible, the
whole concept becomes much more elusive. Consider a hypothetical article for
the Atlantic Monthly. One might say that the audience is readers of the maga-
azine, but this external identification says little except perhaps as it suggests
certain demographic characteristics—social class, level of education, broad cul-
tural attitudes—which form a vague outer boundary of possible contexts. One
might go further and talk about the Atlantic Monthly Reader, an obvious fiction
something akin to the Marlboro Man. This is a way of evoking the traditions of
the magazine itself and, through that, the expectations readers have come to
have of its articles. With some magazines, of course, such as the New Yorker,
these traditions are strongly defined. But in the particular case of the Atlantic,
the conventions of the particular article—literary essay, investigative reporting,
political analysis—seem likely to be more determining.

Then, within the specific article, one must consider audience in terms of the
particular contexts the writer will choose and shape. Here it becomes clear that
“audience” is merely a rough way of pointing at that whole set of contexts. One
can represent all that in shorthand fashion by saying that the audience is people
who believe such and such, or who are interested in such and such, or who have
a certain level of background knowledge. But a precise analysis of audience
would have to examine, point by point, what is being assumed as understood,
what is elaborated, what is assumed as the readers’ range of attitudes or precon-
ceptions about the subject at hand, and so on. And, in fact, expository prose
written in unstructured situations often works by taking a series of bows in vari-
ous directions, toward one set of possible attitudes in readers, then toward
another, by assuming one set of understandings at one point and by filling in
background information at another. Writers work, I suspect, on the basis of in-
tuitions about the range of what most readers are likely to know. Individual
readers match the assumptions of the discourse to varying degrees, overlooking
or ignoring what does not fit or is not comprehensible. Seen from this perspec-
tive, the idea of the audience is not just an abstraction but essentially a
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contexts. It evokes the form of the discourse in the guise of a set of ideal
readers or listeners. But this image is itself only a fiction. Except to dramatize
some major aspects of the rhetorical situation—"This piece is written for the
layman"—there is little point in trying to actually describe the audience as an
entity. Powerful as the idea of audience is, it may block thought to the extent
that it presents as unified, single, locatable, something that, in fact, involves
many different contexts dispersed through a text.

To learn how to systematically analyze audience in discourse, therefore, it
seems best to avoid the metaphor, to replace the question, "Who is the audi-
ence?" with a set of more precise questions as to how the piece in question
establishes or possesses the contexts that make it meaningful for readers. These
contexts may perhaps be thought of as a set of overlapping boundaries which
together delineate the territory we identify as the audience.

The outermost of these boundaries must involve a range of given conventions,
from what must be some very fundamental assumptions underlying modern ex-
pository prose to more specific conventions governing, say, modern academic
prose in the humanities or in the sciences, to even more specific matters such as
editorial conventions for form and subject matter in particular journals, PMLA,
Sports Illustrated, National Geographic. Some of these conventions are so to-
tally accepted as to be invisible; some are more obvious; some explicitly artifi-
cial. All, as part of the occasion of "publication," help form the ground on
which writers and readers meet with some shared understanding of means and
ends to be served. Walter Ong describes them as defining in basic ways the
nature of the relationship between writer, subject matter, and reader (pp. 16-19).
For writers they provide some given which can be assumed about readers' at-
titudes, even knowledge; for readers they define appropriate expectations. They
are, therefore, inextricably involved in the definition of "audience" for a given
piece of discourse.

For example, what Chaim Perelman identifies as the Universal Audience is
clearly a set of conventionally accepted assumptions about the proper nature of
argument: that it be controlled by reason, that all parties place a premium upon
disinterestedness and tacitly agree that respect for truth is a prime measure of
persuasiveness.1 And behind these assumptions obviously lie others about the
proper role of discourse in society—assumptions which place writers and readers
under strong obligations. A reader who will not conform to these assumptions is

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trans. by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press,
1969), pp. 31-35.
not, in the most fundamental way, part of the audience to whom the work is directed.

Within the various boundaries of convention, then, occur the more specific audience contexts for any particular piece of discourse. These are the contexts that derive from the relationship of writer and readers to a particular subject matter. How these contexts take shape depends a great deal upon the contexts already established by the outer boundaries of conventions. In the above example, for instance, the conventions of the Universal Audience define some basic assumptions about the nature and social purpose of argument; and it is against the implicitly understood background of those assumptions that a particular argument will address the attitude of its audience on a particular subject. In some cases the occasion of publication itself can establish contexts that are quite specific to subject matter. Specialized magazines such as Sunset Magazine, for example, operate on the basis of a high level of interest in or knowledge concerning a particular subject. Accordingly, the articles appearing in such magazines can be seen to assume that certain elements of audience are givens, even though other elements of audience remain to be shaped and explicitly addressed.

To some extent, then, the task of analyzing audience is a matter of identifying the nature of the contexts that are already given by some aspect of the occasion of publication and of understanding the relationship between those that are given and those that must be more explicitly defined within the discourse itself. Another part of the task is understanding how particular contexts are created within the discourse. In general, the process is, as Walter Ong describes it, one of creating fictions. More specifically, in public prose, it is a matter of shaping into a rhetorical situation the potential bits of opinion, knowledge, motives for interest that lie about in the public domain in no particular form. The writer invents, so to speak, their significance and, in so doing, creates an audience. Often, especially in scholarly writing, an article will carefully define a public attitude or state of knowledge in the way that best creates an exigence for the argument to follow. And generally readers tolerate these fictions as long as they are not too obviously contrived or too much at odds with the real state of affairs as the readers perceive it.

We do not, I think, know enough to do either aspect of the task of analyzing audience as well as it might be done. The general importance of conventions in prose has been well described in general terms by Walter Ong and by James Britton in The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18) (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979), pp. 59-62; but, as far as I know, no one has tried to describe for ordinary expository prose what the exact conventions are and how they work. Nor do we know in any systematic way about the strategies by which specific contexts are created in expository prose—although every skilled reader knows intuitively and can do an ad hoc analysis of a particular piece of prose. Even though the variety of strategies is enormous and every piece of prose is, to some extent, unique, it ought to be possible, through critical analysis of a large sample of different kinds of prose, to describe a series of categories and models which would illustrate the range of possibilities and thereby serve as a frame of reference for the analysis of any given piece of discourse.
Identifying more systematically how many different issues lie within the metaphor of audience should also allow a clearer understanding of the subject from the writer's perspective. For writers writing, all things germane to audience can perhaps be described as a field of awareness that can manifest itself in different ways in different rhetorical situations. For example, writers are not, I am quite sure, fully aware of many of the conventions that govern a piece of writing. For a writer, operating comfortably within a given set of conventions is often a matter simply of being on sure ground, of being able to conjure up the right kind of voice, of knowing intuitively that that voice and way of proceeding have "listeners." Such an intuitive sense is surely describable as a sense of audience; we describe the apparent absence of it in a piece of prose as lack of a sense of audience. Yet that kind of intuitive grasp of convention is very little like a conscious focus on the imagined reactions of specific people. In fact, as William Irmscher suggested in a 1979 CCCC paper, a sure intuitive grasp of the appropriate conventions may allow a writer not to be overly concerned with and therefore inhibited by worries about audience. It may allow a more easy concentration upon the subject at hand. On the other hand, some aspects of convention such as specific format are very much a matter of conscious concern for writers, and such formats have a lot to do with audience in that they help identify and fulfill readers' expectations. But, again, writers in thinking about format are likely to be concentrating not upon audience in the conventional sense but upon following the format correctly.

I would guess that as a general rule it is only in highly structured situations or at particular times that writers consciously focus on audience as a discrete entity. Much more often writers, I suspect, think primarily in terms of shaping the material for appropriateness, clarity, accuracy. In so doing, they rely upon partly conscious, partly intuitive knowledge of common strategies for shaping contexts. Much of writers' actual deliberate "audience" analysis probably takes the form of attention on contexts for specific issues, as in the case of much scholarly writing, in which a great deal of analysis goes to determining and then operating within the context of what has been said before on a specific issue.

I would also guess that the crucial issues for a writer approaching a writing task can be categorized in terms of which of the contexts are given and which of them remain to be invented or given further shape. For example, some ways in which aspects of audience may be given, say in argumentative writing, put the writer in the position of responding to or appealing to audience; other ways in which they may be defined allow the writer to assume tacitly, such as with certain aspects of knowledge or motivation. On the other side, some ways in which aspects of knowledge may not be given put the writer in the position of explicitly defining motives for readers to read, or contexts of knowledge or attitude or even justifications for the act of writing itself.

Although the whole question of how writers perceive audience in the process of composing does not seem susceptible to highly detailed description, it ought to be possible, through introspection, interview, and case studies at least to describe the kinds of issues writers deal with consciously, as opposed to intui-
tively; to describe the kinds of questions writers ask themselves about audience and the kinds of solutions they propose in different rhetorical situations.2

Aside from its considerable intrinsic interest, the sort of mapping of the territory of audience described above should be of considerable practical usefulness. Most teaching of audience in composition courses is, I would judge from experience and from textbooks, relatively unsystematic, weak upon theory, heavily dependent upon ad hoc examples. We need to be able to approach the subject more systematically and precisely. But carried just to this point, the preceding analysis suggests some useful observations about the teaching of audience.

The major observation is simply that as teachers of writing we are too often unaware of the rich ambiguity of the term “audience” and depend too heavily upon the concrete image of audience as the readers external to the text. For example, teachers of writing often discuss the merits of using members of the class or the teacher as the audience for student papers. The former strategy, of course, means that students write knowing that their papers will be “published” in the classroom. This practice has obvious powerful effects on how students see the act of writing, but it can be said to provide an audience only in the commonly used sense of external listeners or readers. Students’ reading of one another’s writing does not provide that crucial ingredient, people rhetorically involved. The student writing for members of the class still has the problem of finding or inventing appropriate rhetorical contexts. In fact, useful as this strategy is, it may also create problems. Some discussions I have had with students in an advanced writing course suggest that their awareness of specific critical readers not sympathetic to the rhetorical situation they wish to create-readers who will not readily become their audience—can be inhibiting and complicates rather than simplifies the problem of dealing with audience.

Students writing for the teacher alone have a similar problem. Some students do make the teacher the exclusive audience in the essentially rhetorical meaning of “audience,” but only when the prose becomes nothing more than a personal monologue on paper with all the context for the monologue assumed as given—“You asked me the question, and here’s the answer”—or worse yet when the paper becomes a personal letter. Britton’s study of audience in The Development of Writing Abilities has examples and descriptions of these sorts of situations (pp. 120-21). Obviously, by the time a student reaches secondary and post-secondary writing courses, teachers expect something more, even if that something remains implicit. They expect situations in which the student writes within some kind of rhetorical context and in which the teacher serves not as audience but as editor and judge of success.

Usually that something more is described, when it is noticed at all, as writing for other audiences, or wider audiences, or a variety of audiences. But it should

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2. The possible fruitfulness of case studies for such research is suggested by the amount of material concerning audience. Linda Flower and John Hayes, "The Cognition of Discovery: Defining a Rhetorical Problem," College Composition and Communication, 31 (1980), 21-32.
be clear that these terms hide an enormous range of possibilities, of different kinds of rhetorical situations, of different problems for the writer. At this point, most teachers and textbooks rely upon a range of examples to convey to students the general idea of writing for an audience, and most often the examples tend to be—like mine of the hypothetical letter to Reagan—examples of highly structured situations where the contexts are relatively well defined and external to the text. But the writing tasks which can grow from examples tend to be limited to hypothetical cases: "Imagine that you are. . . ." Aside from the inherent limitations of such assignments, the fact is that most of the time we want students to learn to write for a "general" audience. That is to say, we want them to write in relatively unstructured situations where little is given in the way of context and much remains to be invented by the writer. And this is where most teaching about audience becomes the most ineffective.

The truth is that we demand from students—often without making it clear to them or to ourselves—a considerable rhetorical virtuosity in dealing with and inventing audience contexts. But beyond the rich connotations of "audience" we do not have a precise notion about the nature of that virtuosity. Case by case, assignment by assignment, paper by paper, we may be able to come up with useful suggestions. But what we need is the map of the territory of audience proposed above. We need to be able to place specific assignments or tasks of audience analysis within a larger frame of reference. We need to be able to break audience problems down into specific issues, to identify for students the ways and the strategies by which audience contexts exist in different kinds of prose. And we need to be able to give them better advice about what writers really do when they "consider audience" in different kinds of situations. How far all this is possible is hard to tell without more critical analysis of different kinds of prose and more research into the composing process.

The above analysis also raises a more fundamental issue for the teaching of audience in composition courses. It is not enough to talk only about specific strategies for dealing with or creating contexts for audience. Those contexts take shape against the background of the conventions appropriate for given kinds of writing. Much of the time it is not possible to separate a sense of audience from a sense of genre and convention. The student who tries to write with no clear sense of the kind of thing to be done, its social function, and the conventions appropriate to it flounders in a terrible vacuum. The results will be chaotic in many ways: limping "history of the world" introductions, scattered organization, and hollow diction. But the instructor who recognizes the problems as somehow symptomatic of a problem with audience may still not be able to help the student by talking about audience in any of the more obvious ways. The problem lies deeper than the metaphor "audience" implies.

Probably writers come to have an intimate sense of audience as convention by being readers of that kind of prose. I doubt that it can be taught directly or very quickly. But, in any case, the whole question of kinds of writing to be done is one that composition courses seldom face directly—partly because our profession has not studied seriously the conventions governing nonliterary prose, partly because composition courses do not descend strongly from the rhetorical
tradition and have tended to be conceived as teaching general writing skills rather than particular kinds of writing. This conception is defensible, but I believe that it more often serves as a defense against the difficult questions that arise when one asks what kinds of writing are to be taught and what their different values and functions are.

At this point the subject of audience goes beyond the scope of this essay into questions of the history and sociology of our profession. But it seems important to note that audience is elusive in much teaching of writing not only because the concept itself is difficult. A fully serious art of rhetoric and a concomitant sophistication with audience—like that found in the classical rhetorics—must grow from a clear understanding of the kinds of discourse to be served and their purpose in society. Our composition courses generally do not operate with such an understanding.