



# Constructing Scholarly Ethos in the Writing Classroom

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# 9 CONSTRUCTING SCHOLARLY ETHOS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

*Kathleen J. Ryan*

## OVERVIEW

This essay offers a more robust definition of ethos than the typical definition of credibility to teach students more about ethos. I define ethos as the strategic positioning of the rhetor in relationship to the audience and/or community and then discuss four interrelated parts of ethos that can help students construct their scholarly ethos more effectively. The four parts—name your identity, commit to being a responsible writer, bridge gaps between the writer and readers, and locate your perspective—all emphasize ethos as social, relational, and dynamic. The chapter focuses on using these parts of ethos as interrelated heuristics to help students understand and develop their ethos across a range of writing situations.

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Take a minute and imagine yourself doing each of the following:\*

- Meeting your significant other's parents for the first time and deciding what to wear and what to say to make a good first impression.
- Interviewing for a job and trying to frame your prior job experience and demonstrate your work ethic to persuade the interviewer to hire you for a job you either really *want* or really *need*.
- Applying for a university scholarship and trying to persuade the committee members in a letter that your academic record and future plans make you the most deserving scholarship applicant.

In each of these scenarios, you have to make decisions about how to present yourself well to others by choosing what aspects of your life, work, and academic experiences to share to make yourself appear likeable, hireable, or

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deserving of a scholarship. In a sense, you're changing the face you show the world—emphasizing different aspects of who you are, what you know, what you've experienced, and what you believe—to best meet these different challenges. You're selecting what to say and how to say it. In each of these scenarios, you might share what you're majoring in, but you'll talk about it differently. For instance, you probably won't tell your partner's parents what your GPA is, but you may have to include it in your scholarship application letter, or it may come up in your job interview, especially if the job pertains, even loosely, to your major. You're likely to dress formally for a job interview in an office setting, but less so for one where you'll be doing landscaping or firefighting. When meeting your significant other's parents, you may want to look attractive, but probably not provocative. You're not lying about who you are and what you've done, but you are emphasizing different aspects of your character, abilities, and experiences to best suit the situation.

You may not realize it, but you're thinking about ethos when you're making these decisions. Ethos often gets defined as good character, credibility, and believability—concepts you may have encountered in a high school writing or literature class. And while these words and the scenarios above offer a pretty good start at defining ethos, figuring out *how* to achieve these qualities in a written text can be challenging, particularly when you're negotiating college writing expectations. This essay offers you a more robust definition of ethos, as well as specific strategies for constructing ethos as a part of your writing process. More specifically, I'll introduce you to a definition of ethos that focuses on how the relationships you make with readers in different writing circumstances matter. I define ethos as the *strategic positioning of the rhetor in relationship to the audience and/or community*. I use “strategic positioning” to indicate the way you're making deliberate decisions or taking specific stances in relation to others. I use the words “audience” and “community” to invite you to consider the different relationships you might cultivate with readers. You might imagine yourself writing *to* an audience when writing a research proposal you want approved or you might feel like you're writing *up* to readers who know more than you about your subject, but you're always writing *within* the context of a community, whether it's your actual classmates or an invoked community of writers or perhaps people with a shared interest in an issue or topic. I invite you to use this definition to help you make decisions to best help readers adopt or entertain your purpose more readily.

At the outset, I also want to make two additional points clear, and I turn to Jimmie Killingsworth's scholarship in rhetoric to help me. He

writes, “The author’s position is not simply a personal account of himself or herself. The author is a complex individual who selectively reveals (or creates—or conceals) aspects of character pertinent to the rhetorical work required at the moment” (27).

First, ethos is a construction; that is, ethos is not a representation of your whole self for readers, but a chosen or selected version of a self or persona fitting for that writing occasion. Second, a writer changes how they construct their ethos—what they “reveal,” “create” or “conceal” to fit different writing situations. These two points imply you have the ability to learn to make decisions about how to present aspects of your writerly self to others, much as you might in the circumstances I asked you to think about in the opening of this essay. I want to help you understand and use that power better.

Below, I explain in greater detail what it means to define ethos as a positioning of the writer in relationship to audiences or within communities through your writing. You’ll see this definition has four interrelated dimensions: the writer names their identity, commits to being a responsible writer, seeks to bridge gaps between the writer and readers’ values or assert shared values, and locates their perspective in space and place. Becoming familiar with these four interrelated parts of ethos can help you better understand what it means to construct your ethos effectively. I’ve learned from working with my own students that if you have a more robust definition of ethos and more strategies for constructing your ethos in scholarly texts, you’ll be able to understand and use this concept better, and even feel more connected to the writing you’re doing and thus be more successful in your writing assignments.

### NAMING YOUR IDENTITY

Naming your identity doesn’t mean trying to account for your whole identity in any given writing assignment, since you’re crafting what we might call a version of yourself on the page. It does mean offering details about *relevant* racial, ethnic, political, class, gender, and age (and so on) identifications and affiliations, like your membership in an organization, sport, religion or academic status (year, major, specific coursework) in your text. How do you know what is relevant? When one or more of the ways you identify yourself socially or you affiliate yourself with a group or principle pertaining to your topic, your purpose, or your relationship with your audience. Typically, it’s most effective to highlight ways you identify with your readers and ways they can likewise identify with you, pointing out the

ways you and your readers share similarities via what's called consubstantiality or identification. For example, one of my former students identified herself as a native of Libby, Montana, in the context of a research paper on the asbestos poisoning in her hometown; she used this aspect of her identity to give weight to her argument because she has firsthand familial anecdotes regarding asbestos-related cancers in addition to her researched evidence.

Here's an extended example to give you an idea of what naming your identity might look like in writing. One of my former students, Molly Williams, recently introduced me to an issue with wild horses in the western United States in her essay "America's Wild Horse Problem." As I learned from Molly, while the 1971 Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act allows wild horses and burros to roam freely on public lands, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management rounds up wild horses by helicopter to control their population. They adopt them out, auction them off, or slaughter them largely because ranchers who want to graze their cattle on the same land view the wild horses as competition for food. The ranchers have a more powerful voice than those who might speak for the wild horses and burros. Molly wrote an analysis paper about this issue, focusing on an image that shows some of the violence and stress horses face in these round ups. In the paper, Molly didn't mention the particular commitment or identification she has with the issue, but she did write me this note at the end of her paper: "This is a topic of interest close to my heart because I am a lifelong equestrian and have been long immersed in the many facets of the horse world. I am also the proud adopter of two Little Owyhee mustangs." In these two sentences, Molly identifies herself as a "lifelong equestrian" and someone who has adopted two wild horses. That is, she names a particular identity and a personal commitment relevant to the public issue she wrote about. When you're encouraged to think about naming your identity in writing, you no longer need to present yourself as if you're unbiased or uninterested in your scholarly writing; instead, you get to name your identity to help readers understand your perspective more, and you get to express your passion about a topic or issue.

If Molly wanted to keep working on the paper, I'd suggest she bring those sentences into it to appeal to readers who might also be part of the horse community and signal her knowledge and experience for those of us who aren't. For example, in her conclusion she writes, "This seemingly dramatic photo represents a reality in our nation today." This would be a good place for her name her identity in relationship to this "reality" by bringing in the two sentences above, or some version of them. She might

write something like this: “This seemingly dramatic photo represents a reality in our nation today, and it is a reality I know well as a lifelong equestrian who has adopted two Little Owyhee mustangs.” You don’t have to put sentences like these only in your conclusion. In her second and third paragraphs Molly lays out the different groups—preservationists, animal rights activists, and ranchers—who have a particular stake in the issue of wild horses grazing on public lands. Naming her identity when she is identifying the stakeholders in this issue is a good idea; doing so allows her to show her relationship to them.

Sometimes students struggle to feel a sense of authority when writing for professors because the identity of student seems to hold less credibility than the identity of teacher. When I ask my students to write about their identities and the challenges they feel in regard to them, they often write about how being a student or being young deauthorizes them. As a result, they have a hard time confidently contributing to conversations on issues they care about since some people, including their teachers, friends, and family, sometimes assume they don’t know enough about a given topic because they are young or still students. A slightly different way, then, to read Molly naming her identity as a “lifelong equestrian” is that she is asserting a particular expertise in relationship to her topic. Here is an opportunity for Molly to present herself as an experienced equestrian and adopter of wild horses in a situation where she’s not an expert writer. That way readers are aware of her special knowledge and identification and read with increased respect for both her passion and knowledge. Likewise, if you’re majoring in environmental studies and writing an essay about the status of wolves as an endangered species in Idaho or Montana in your writing class, then specifically naming your identity as an environmental studies student can help you build your ethos when your readers lack this specialized background. I often tell students that including a phrase like, “As a scholar in environmental studies, I argue...” is a simple way for them to indicate their special knowledge and commitment to a topic and increase their ethos as knowers.

It’s important to note, however, that, as Nedra Reynolds writes, “Unchosen characteristics—such as skin color and social status—limit an audience’s perception of a rhetor’s *ethos*,” so you do want to be careful about what you choose to reveal to readers (325). Once you tell readers you’re an equestrian or an environmental studies student, they have expectations of you as a result. They may judge your claims and evidence in relationship to their own knowledge of the topic, especially if some of your readers turn out to have more expertise on the subject matter or identify as say, a cattle

rancher and have a different perspective on grazing rights on public lands, or even the status of wolves. You raise the stakes when you claim your identity because you invite others to do the same. But that's okay, because we, your teachers, want you to care about what you write about and write with commitment. It's part of the power and responsibility of being a writer.

While these two examples are chosen characteristics, naming unchosen ones also shapes how others relate to you. You know this from living in the world in your visible, observable bodies—big or small, short or tall, black or brown or white. For example, writing explicitly as a member of a marginalized group, whether as a woman, a Native man, a sex worker, or a trans person, makes you potentially more vulnerable to attack by readers—not necessarily for the content of your writing or the validity of your arguments, but simply because of beliefs and assumptions some readers may project onto you. It's useful to consider how much you want to disclose about yourself in writing to encourage people to listen to you and to protect yourself. Of course, if you are writing to an audience who's very different from you in, for instance, religion or race, it's useful to recognize those differences if only to yourself because doing so will shape how you invent and develop your argument. In some contexts, audiences or communities might be more disposed to read a text where you share relevant aspects of your identity than others because they share or value those characteristics and perspectives, too. Likewise, naming your sexual orientation and/or race can also be an empowering way of naming your identity in order to claim the importance of your particular experiences. When sharing your writing with classmates, they can see some visible evidence of your identity through your body, or they might know about your interests as a peer, but as a writer whose readers are removed from your immediate context, you get to think carefully about the identities you name as a way to help you create relationships with readers, to create a scholarly ethos. Ultimately, naming some aspect of your identity can be a both a powerful and vulnerable move.

### BEING RESPONSIBLE

Naming an aspect of your identity to readers may well, as I've suggested, encourage you to claim responsibility for that perspective. Ethos, Reynolds writes, is “a way of claiming and taking responsibility for our positions in the world, for the ways we see, for the places from which we speak” (336-7). I love this quotation because it teaches us that we are answerable for what we write, for the positions we take in arguments and for the stories and

reflections we share in personal essays. You must strive to be a responsible knower, holding yourself accountable (as your readers will) for what you know, what you write, and how you write about it. Doing so will reinforce the power of offering your written perspective. A writer can persuade others to consider new perspectives or better understand where they're coming from, so you want to make sure you do this work thoughtfully. Did you notice, in the example above, that if Molly names her commitment to wild horses and her position in the paper, she assumes a responsibility for that position that goes beyond her paper? When I wrote that Molly raises the stakes in her relationship to readers if she brings those sentences about being an equestrian and owner of wild horses into the paper, I mean that she's accepting this responsibility in a writerly context. In naming her identity as an equestrian and owner of two wild horses, she is also claiming her responsibility as a wild horse advocate.

In addition to being responsible for what you argue, being responsible also means not being arrogant or oppositional in expressing your beliefs and composing arguments, but rather treating your readers with respect and compassion: "Aristotle defined ... good will as 'friendly feeling towards anyone as wishing for him what you believe to be good things, not for your own sake but for his'" (Pittman 44). Having good will doesn't mean agreeing with perspectives you disagree with. It means disagreeing respectfully and knowledgeably, not, for example, using logical fallacies like *ad hominem* appeals that make personal attacks on others or simply attacking others' perspectives with the kind of derision we see so often on social media. Molly shows her respect towards ranchers in her paper by acknowledging their concerns: "Mustangs are costing ranchers money and hindering industry growth." Had Molly made a sweeping generalization about all ranchers deliberately harming wild horses and burros, or even ignored why ranchers see the wild mustangs as competition in her paper, she might have alienated this audience, including classmates who grew up on ranches with wild horse populations nearby, and would have shown readers a lack of awareness of the multiple perspectives on this issue. In other words, lots of strategies your teacher can share with you about making sound arguments help you be responsible towards potential readers and towards the issue at hand.

This past semester my students and I discussed a term that is relevant here: intellectual humility. Intellectual humility, according to science reporter Brian Resnick, invites us "to be thoughtful in choosing our convictions, be open to adjusting them, seek out their flaws, and never stop being curious about why we believe what we believe" (Resnick). Practic-



ing intellectual humility describes a way to be ethically responsible as a writer and researcher. It invites you to interrogate your blind spots, do research to test your ideas and claims, but also think about how you write up that research. This kind of commitment extends to working honorably with sources, particularly being accurate with the evidence you use. Teachers dwell on the proper use of citations in texts and in works cited pages because citing, paraphrasing, and summarizing sources accurately are all ways of demonstrating you're a responsible writer when it comes to representing and talking about your source material. Developing a scholarly ethos entails recognizing the values of the academic community and engaging them as a writer. You're showing you take your responsibilities as a thinker and writer seriously. Being responsible means working to research and argue about issues you care about, like wild horses, with care and attention towards what you write and how you write it.

### **BRIDGING GAPS BETWEEN WRITER AND READERS**

When you are deciding how to name your identity and commitments and demonstrating your responsibility in an essay, you are considering the relationship between yourself as a writer and your readers—the audiences you write to and the communities in which you engage as a writer. When you start to write a paper, there often seems to be quite a gap between your aims as a writer and the real or imagined readers of your paper, whether your audience is your classmates, teacher, other members of your campus community, or some other group of people. Thinking about your scholarly ethos is a way to help bridge the gaps in beliefs, values, and identities between yourself and your readers to help you be more persuasive. For example, if you're writing an op-ed to propose your campus community support a proposed smoking ban on campus grounds, you need to try to move readers' opinions and actions to be more in line with the position you advocate. And whether you claim the identity of former smoker, the grandchild of a tobacco farmer, or a nonsmoker who wants to avoid the dangers of secondhand smoke, you are claiming a relationship to your text and building a relationship with your readers.

Let's look more closely at how you might bridge this gap between writers and readers using the example of writing an op-ed to argue for a smoking ban on your campus. My campus instituted a smoking ban a few years ago, and it was a subject of classroom debate at the time. Once you have determined your position and purpose, you can think about the audience for your paper and your relationship to that audience. Who is your audi-

ence? What do they likely know and value about your issue? The audience may be your classmates or, if you want to publish your op-ed in your school paper, you might expand your audience to include students more generally, staff, faculty, and administrators in order to reflect the campus community more broadly. You might invoke a wider readership of students for your op-ed even if you do not publish your work in the school paper. Doing so invites you to think about the different identities of the student body and their diverse experiences, from residential to commuter status, or to their place of origin, which may include regions in the U.S. where tobacco is grown or other countries where smoking is more culturally acceptable. If you're thinking about the entire student body, chances are some of your classmates are smokers, and so you need to think about why, with all that we know about the health risks of smoking and secondhand smoke, people still smoke. What social issues or factors are in play for these smokers? What health risks might they be underestimating? Questions like these invite you to consider what roles your potential readers might play in how you select and shape the content of your op-ed as you think through their potential identities, values, and experiences.

In this analysis of potential audience members, Tita French Baumlin recommends you keep in mind that “ethos necessarily shapes itself in accordance with dominant ideologies” (231). In other words, commonly shared values in your campus community inform what values are at play for your potential audience members and whether the values you hold in writing in support of a ban will be easily accepted or significantly resisted by readers. Understanding the relationship between your values and your audiences' values gives you good information you can use to build connections between yourself and your readers in order to encourage them to listen carefully to your position. This kind of analytical work helps you determine possible relationships you might make with readers; for instance, if you're writing as a former smoker who understands the allure of smoking socially, what kind of rapport can you build with peers who smoke or vape and might be against such a ban based on values you once shared with them? Or, if you're a nonsmoker, how do you show your readers who are smokers that you're attentive to their perspectives, experiences, and values? On many campuses, international students tend to make up a significant percentage of smokers since their cultures may stigmatize smoking less; whether you're writing as a former smoker, smoker, or non-smoker, how you name your ethnic identity and your stance may then discourage or encourage some of your readers' willingness to be persuaded due to their cultural identifications. Additionally, many people say they smoke

to reduce stress, so how might you talk about the value of reducing stress in relationship to not smoking on campus? As you can see, naming your identity and claiming your responsibility towards an issue requires you to think carefully about the metaphorical distances between you and your various readers, the values you may or may not share, and how you'll work to bridge those distances.

### LOCATING YOUR PERSPECTIVE

As the opening scenarios imply, you're always making decisions about how to construct your ethos in context, in spaces and places. Think also of Molly constructing her ethos as an equestrian in the context of the wild horse problem in the western United States, or how you might construct your ethos in taking a position on smoking bans, or even the feasibility of enforcing them, on your particular campus. Not only are the gaps in values, experiences, and knowledge between writers and readers metaphorical spaces, but identities and affiliations are also kinds of bodily spaces and locations you occupy. They are places you "stand" and positions you "hold." For example, as a white woman, my gender and whiteness are social positions I hold that inform my worldview, and the fact that I live in southwestern Montana also shapes my perspectives and interests. This may be evident to you in the examples I choose to share, which tend to focus on issues at stake in my southwestern Montana community. Rita Applegarth writes that in this way, "*place* itself offers a crucial resource that rhetors can use strategically to signal their participation in particular communities" (49). "Place" can refer to metaphorical relationships, individual positions, and geographical locations. When you construct your ethos, you locate yourself, your perspective, and your relationship to readers in the text; your text is a place where you and your audience or community come together. Michael Hyde describes the idea of a text as a meeting ground this way: you "invite others into a place where they can dwell and feel at home while thinking about and discussing the truth of some matter that the rhetor/architect has already attempted to disclose and show forth" (xxi). Texts—paper or electronic—are places where writers and readers meet, and, in the process of constructing your ethos, you're trying to help readers feel welcome in your text. In other words, you want them to feel willing to keep reading and learning from your writing. Naming your identity, claiming your responsibility, and trying to bridge gaps between you and your readers are all ways of trying to engage generously with your readers.

Genres can also be understood as places, and writing well in a particular genre also helps your readers feel comfortable in your text and with your ideas. Applegarth goes on to say that genres, quite simply “...[are] *places* where rhetors invent, communicate, and act” (44). Just as being in specific, physical places, like a studio or a writing classroom, help you know how to dress and behave, knowing what genre you’re writing also cues you to ways to present yourself and craft your ethos and also teaches your audience about what they might expect about your text and gives them cues about how to engage your ideas. Knowing the form of a text helps us understand where we are and thus what some of the expectation for that form include. This is why we know that a line of sympathy cards that includes jokes about the deceased wouldn’t be a very good marketing strategy. The jokes would disrupt the expectation of sympathy cards as a site for expressing condolences.

As a writer, you can learn about a particular genre by collecting examples and describing and analyzing the patterns you see. Doing this helps you understand what kinds of expectations the genre sets up between you and your readers. Let me give you an example based on a fairly common first year writing assignment: a review of a movie, an event, or a product. Last year one of my students, Jake Purlee, had an internship at Stone Glacier, a local backcountry hunting gear company, and he was thrilled to get this opportunity because he’s an avid outdoorsman. As a writing major, he has written extensively about his experiences and ethics as a hunter, especially a bow hunter, regularly naming this identity and exploring and studying hunting ethics in a variety of projects. As Stone Glacier’s public relations intern, Jake wrote press releases for new products, but let’s flip that to think about how writing a product review can help you think more about genre as a location, or place, that helps you construct your ethos. As you may know from researching possible purchases or even writing your own, product reviews include criteria for judging the product as well as reasons to explain your evaluation of it. Personal experience and even comparison to similar products often form the content of the review. If you’re writing a product review of a specific multi-day expedition pack intended for hunters who hunt on foot in the backcountry, then you need to consider what evaluative criteria matters, like comfort, design, and quality of materials. You need to be comfortable in and confident about your gear if you’re ten miles in the backcountry scrambling up a scree field in the snow, hunting deer, elk, or sheep, and hoping to carry out some meat for your freezer. In this genre, mentioning your personal experience with the product signals your knowledge of and investment in the activity the product is

used for. You might mention your own experiences wearing the particular pack for a multi-day expedition as a way to describe its excellent design that allows for quick access to your rifle, spotting scope, and tripod, or its comfort even when carrying heavy loads, like when you hiked out with a mule deer last fall.

A reader's expectation, then, of a product review is that you know that you need criteria and reasons for your evaluation of the product, but also that you can talk about the product with some authority as someone who has used it. As someone who isn't a hunter, I could probably write a passable review of this kind of pack because I know the genre well and because I can at least draw on my experiences with backcountry camping. However, Jake would do a better job, once he has successfully studied the genre in the ways I describe above, for a few reasons: he has a lifetime of experiences hunting in the backcountry, using different brands of packs, and making decisions about the best gear for his needs. He intimately knows the kind of weather, terrain, endurance, and skills needed to hunt with a rifle or bow in the backcountry, so he knows what he needs from his equipment. He personally knows the criteria hunters would use to judge a pack as well as the language they'd use to evaluate one, because he is one. That is, the genre teaches him what kind of content—criteria, reasons, evaluation—matters for a product review, while his own experiences help him determine what those specific criteria and reasons for liking or disliking a specific multi-day pack are. The genre therefore helps him locate and draw from his experiences in a particular way, quite different from what he might write in a press release or essay about a particular elk hunting experience. While the backpack might figure into a personal essay about a hunting experience as a detail, its quality takes center stage in the product review.

Taken together, these four interrelated aspects of ethos construction—where the writer names their identity, commits to being a responsible rhetor, seeks to bridge gaps between the writer and readers, and locates their perspective in space and place—constitute a robust definition of ethos. While this definition of ethos as a positioning of the writer includes the more familiar notions of good character, good will, and intelligence, these concepts are reframed to account for the fact that a writer constructs their ethos in relationship to their prospective or actual readers, and that no single rule for having good ethos works in all circumstances. For each writing assignment you do, you need to consider what kind of scholarly ethos is best suited for that particular assignment and your interpretation of its purpose, audience, and genre.

Now that you are equipped with an elaborated definition of ethos, I want to draw your attention to two key principles that undergird this definition and may help you better understand it:

1. *Ethos is social.* You always construct your ethos in relationship to others, namely your readers. When you're making decisions about how to establish your ethos, you must do so with an understanding of your audience, whether it's comprised of your classmates, a readership your teacher assigns, or a community an assignment or genre invites. Molly wrote to her classmates, assuming they were unfamiliar with the wild horse problem, and even though she was writing as a wild horse advocate, she paid attention to the fact some of her peers likely grew up on ranches and might have a different perspective. When my class talked through the smoking ban on our campus, we considered the different kinds of students in our community when thinking about our different relationships with the issue and our diverse hoped-for outcomes. And even when writing a product review of a backpack, you're thinking about what your reader cares about and needs to know about the backpack. In this case, you can assume that they care about comfort, quality, and durability, and that readers would welcome your experiences with the pack as a fellow hunter. What counts as "good" ethos depends in part on your audience or community. Anticipating or analyzing your readers' knowledge, experiences, and dominant values as they relate to the subject of your paper and the perspective you share can help you decide how to construct and forward your ethos.
2. *Ethos is dynamic.* You don't construct your ethos once for all time. It changes across time, space, and place; relationships with different audiences and communities; and different aspects of your identity and commitments that you highlight for different projects. While Molly's equestrian background figures in significantly in her argument about wild horses, it's not relevant to her other projects on the vaccination debate or on making sourdough bread. The day Jake told me he got his first elk while bow hunting, he emphasized how much he appreciated the credibility it gave his hunting-related writing. As his hunting experiences change and develop over time, the ways he names his identity and talks about his commitments and responsibilities will also evolve. How you express your ethos shifts as you move from one genre to another and as you move about the world gaining new experiences.

Consciously practicing strategies for constructing your ethos can, over time, become habits of mind—that is, ways of thinking that are so familiar that they have become integrated into your writing process. I encourage you to think about how you might name aspects of your identity, commit to being a responsible writer, bridge gaps with your readers, and locate your perspectives in genres as you work on your writing assignments. I hope you can see, too, how learning about how to craft your scholarly ethos for different writing assignments can also help you think about how to show your best self to your significant other's parents, how to present yourself and your experiences to have a successful job interview, or how to best share information about your past academic successes and your future goals to get that college scholarship.

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## TEACHER RESOURCES FOR CONSTRUCTING SCHOLARLY ETHOS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM BY KATHLEEN J. RYAN

### OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

This essay grew out of my experience working with new teachers who largely defined ethos as credibility and didn't have access to more interesting scholarship on ethos with students. I want to offer teachers an article they can read with students that draws on ethos scholarship from the 1970s and 1980s by scholars like Arthur Miller, Michael Halloran, and Nan Johnson and then from the 2000s by Michael Hyde, Nedra Reynolds, and Coretta Pittman. I've found scholarship on ethos as social, strategic and relational is so much more pedagogically compelling than the static ways ethos as credibility gets defined. My hope is to make ideas from ethos scholarship available to students in a usable way, so that they have a heuristic for constructing their ethos in a range of writing assignments or projects as they move through their composing processes in your classrooms.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Write for 10 minutes about your personal connection to and/or personal interest in a current writing project. What difference does it make to think about your personal connection to writing that is more formal and academic?
2. Find an assignment you wrote for another class, past or present, and write about how you constructed your ethos in that assignment (consciously or not). What might you do differently now that you know more about ethos? What changes would you make if you were going to rewrite that assignment?
3. The author indicates that constructing your ethos is a powerful and strategic move in writing. How is constructing ethos empowering? What kinds of power issues are involved in crafting your ethos for a writing assignment?
4. How does the author of "Constructing Ethos in the Writing Classroom" construct her ethos? Discuss particular places in the text where she names her identity, demonstrates she's being a responsible scholar, and builds bridges with you as a reader. To what degree are these moves successful in engaging you as a reader? Explain your response.



5. Read an academic article in your major and write an analysis of how ethos functions in that article. What do you observe about the place of ethos in that field and genre? What kind of relationship is the author or authors creating with you as a reader?
6. Define scholarly ethos in your own words. How are you working to demonstrate your scholarly ethos in a current writing project?

### ACTIVITIES:

The following are invention and drafting activities students might do as homework or in class. The activities are drawn from different textbooks I've taught as well as scholarship I've encountered in my ethos research.

#### **INVENTION ACTIVITY 1. NAMING YOUR IDENTITY AND LOCATING YOURSELF IN THE WORLD.**

1. List your racial, gender, ethnic, political, class, age, religious, geographical, and historical identifications.
2. List your primary commitments, desires, and interests as a student and in your personal life (including work and leisure).
3. List organizations or communities you belong to.
4. List special knowledge or abilities you have.
5. Write a few sentences elaborating on your experiences with some of the items in your lists.

Once you've gotten started with a current writing assignment, return to this list and note which aspects of your identity most relate to your current project. Do a focused freewrite on those aspects of your identity that tie into the topic, question, or ideas you're exploring.

#### **INVENTION ACTIVITY 2. BRIDGING GAPS THROUGH AUDIENCE ANALYSIS.**

This activity is adapted from the audience guide in Janice Lauer, Gene Montague, Andrea Lunsford, and Janet Emig's *Four Worlds of Writing*, a textbook I used as a doctoral student. I like reframing this audience analysis as an exercise in thinking relationally about writers and their readers.

1. Who are your potential audiences? What do they know and value?
  - What kind of background and experience do members of my audience or community have? How does this relate to the issue I am exploring?

- What does my audience value most? How do these values relate to my issue? To the way I'm naming my identity in this assignment? How strongly does my audience hold them?
2. What reader role will I call forth, or invoke, for my audience?
    - What knowledge and experience characterize that role?
    - What are the values connected with that role?
    - What does my readers' role help me learn about my research question or the issue I'm studying? About what I need to discuss in my paper?
  3. What does my role imply for my writing of the paper?
    - What is my relationship to the audience I will invoke? Am I a peer? An expert? A critic? A student? A concerned member of some shared community?
    - What gaps between my identity and location and my readers' will I need to bridge?

### INVENTION ACTIVITY 3. GENRE ANALYSIS.

I love Anis Bawarshi's *Genre and the Invention of the Writer: Reconsidering the Place of Invention in Composition*, and this activity is drawn from an activity he modified from a collaborative book he was writing at the time. This adaptation brings in ethos as an aspect of genre study and invites students to consider what aspects of ethos some genres call upon.

1. Collect and study the situation of a particular genre.
  - Where does the genre appear? What contexts? What issues, ideas, or questions does this genre address? Who uses this genre? What identities or commitments matter to people using this genre? Why is the genre used? What purposes does the genre fulfill for them?
2. Identify and describe patterns in the genre's features.
  - What content is included or excluded? What counts as evidence? How are the texts in the genre organized? What are their parts? What layout or appearance is common? How/do writers name their identities? In what ways are writers demonstrating that they are being responsible? What kinds of things do writers

reveal about themselves and why? What do you observe about the language?

3. Analyze what these patterns reveal about the situation.
  - What do the patterns show you? Why are the patterns significant? What do participants have to know, value, or believe to understand or appreciate the genre? Who is included/excluded? What values, beliefs, goals, and assumptions are revealed by the patterns? What content is considered most important? What actions do the genre help make possible? What attitude towards readers is implied in the genre? What attitude towards the world?
4. Explain how the genre patterns shape ethos.
  - What expectations does the genre set up in regard to the relationship the writer has with readers? What kind and degree of content related to ethos is most/least appropriate to the genre?

### **DRAFTING ACTIVITY 1. PRACTICE NAMING YOUR IDENTITY**

1. Add one to three sentences to a draft of a persuasive paper to see how you can more strongly position yourself in your text. Share an aspect of yourself that is relevant to the topic at hand and reference a value you share with readers related to your topic as a way to both open your paper and set up your ethos.
2. Try to compose a parenthetical reference like “as a \_\_\_\_\_” and fill in the blank with a relevant phrase drawn from your listing invention activity (see above) to concisely share with readers some aspect of your experience or background that can help them identify you and consider how who you are helps them engage your text. You might also point to the role you see readers playing using a phrase that cue readers into the kind of role you are asking them to play: “Like readers who care about \_\_\_\_\_, I \_\_\_\_\_”. These are two concise ways of placing yourself in text.

### **DRAFTING ACTIVITY 2: GETTING ETHOS**

#### **FEEDBACK FROM READERS**

1. How do you describe the relationship I’m trying to create with readers? What in the text makes you think this?
2. Are there places in the text where you’re confused or offended as a reader? Please explain.

3. How well do I use specific details to explain my perspective?
4. In trying to name my identity, have I shared information about myself that seems irrelevant? If so, where?
5. On a scale of 1 to 5 (one being the worst and five the best), how well have I done in constructing a good scholarly ethos for this assignment? Please explain.