

## Writing with Authority: Ethos and the Seminar Essay in English Studies

Elizabeth Vogel

When beginning your first graduate seminar paper, you might wonder how you will be able to write about a topic with only the knowledge of a fifteen-week seminar. In this instant, you are thinking about your ethos. Ethos is the ethical stance of a writer/speaker, but it also conveys authority and credibility. It determines whether or not a reader is willing to read the author's writing or whether an audience is willing to listen to a speaker. Understanding ethos is essential to your academic writing, both as a graduate student and as a future professional in the field.

The concept of ethos originates with Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*. It is one of the three appeals that he deemed necessary for effective persuasion: ethos, pathos, and logos. According to Crowley and Hawhee, ethos was usually conceived as one's reputation and whether or not it was an ethical one. As they point out, writers today may or may not be known, as our communications go beyond small communities. Because our communication circle has grown wider, we may or may not know about the reputation of the speaker/writer. Therefore, writers need to cultivate an "invented ethos."<sup>1</sup>

An invented ethos certainly applies to new scholars. Veteran scholars have the advantage of name recognition and a built-up scholarly reputation. However, ethos is also evident from the paper's content; that is, how the paper is written can cultivate a strong ethos, and that is how a new graduate student must conceptualize ethos.

Writing always reveals the author's knowledge. Thus, if graduate students are new to an academic community, they might be legitimately concerned about their work conveying originality. But while ethos is supposed to communicate assertiveness and authority, it is also

about trustworthiness. An audience is supposed to believe in and trust the writer/speaker. How does a graduate student hold two contradictory ideas at one time—an authentic, honest voice and the voice of expertise—despite being a new graduate student?

Although ethos construction is not necessarily a simple concept, steps can be taken to strengthen it. Ethos ends up being a combination of personal stance, authority, credibility, sincerity, and power through a discourse. In her dissertation, Heather Camp focuses on ethos as an essential part of writing development and identity. She writes that “*Ethos construction* can contribute to scholars’ understanding of writing development by describing the process through which writers balance their personal commitments with the pursuits of their disciplinary communities in their writing” (4). In this way, she unites “writing development” and “identity formation.”<sup>2</sup>

In short, ethos is connected to how a writer shapes her identity within the field of English Studies. How a student perceives her own subject authority helps her understand where she is in her own writing development and in the discipline. As a student’s identity as a writer in the profession grows, so does her ethos and overall authority.

Creating authority when entering a new discourse community is not always an easy transition. In “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae discusses how, when undergraduates are entering college, they must discover a new way of articulating knowledge: “The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community.”<sup>3</sup> Although graduate students aren’t entering the Academy for the first time, English Studies at the graduate level is a new discourse community with its own expectations.

Graduate students are also experimenting with blending authentic voice, experience, and a new level of English Studies. “The student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse,” writes Bartholomae, “and he has to do this as though he were easily and comfortably one with his audience . . . while finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, on the one hand, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline, on the other hand” (524).<sup>4</sup> Many factors are therefore involved in appropriating a new discourse.

Faculty who teach first-year students and beginning graduate students observe similarities in their writing development, as both groups are trying to assume a voice that may not come naturally to them. One of the reasons has to do with actual knowledge and actual expertise: students are approximating an insider voice from a discourse community they have only recently joined.

Although graduate students in English Studies have been writing successfully for many years, graduate school raises their language abilities to a new level. And because graduate students have excelled for years at writing while in school, they may be shocked to discover that writing becomes more challenging in graduate school, with its expectations of a more refined level of discourse.

All this may be surprising and painful for graduate students, as what has been familiar to them suddenly changes dramatically. Donna LeCourt describes the response of students entering graduate school to the added expectations of language: “Graduate students are distanced, feeling as if the familiarity of the discourse has been stripped away in this new context.”<sup>5</sup> Thus if graduate students who have excelled in their writing during their academic career suddenly feel off balance, this is simply part of the developmental stages of being a graduate student.

To be fair, graduate students seldom have the opportunity to read model papers that are exactly at their level of expertise. Most of the time they are reading texts by scholars with doctorates and years of experience. Of course, they are also reading essays or papers that have been polished and refined through many revisions by peers and editors. The comparison is simply unfair. Nonetheless, there is a lack of instruction and information about what an actual seminar paper should look like.

One initial way to become better at cultivating a strong ethos is to understand the purpose of an academic paper. You are not expected to come up with a completely original idea. Instead, your argument should build on previous scholarship to demonstrate that you can be part of the academic discussion, and for this you need to show that you know where the ideas came from.

Your seminar papers are academic moments that might eventually lead to a Master's thesis or a doctoral dissertation. In researching and writing a dissertation, students must master the large amount of scholarship they use to situate their ideas. This involves much more work than what goes into a published scholarly book, as a major purpose of the thesis or dissertation is to demonstrate insider status. The seminar paper also requires students to use these kinds of steps in order to claim insider status.

How does one speak from a place of authority without actually having a great deal of it within the subject of study? That is, how does one become an insider in a discourse community without actually being one? Creating ethos occurs in conceptual ways and also via practical steps. As discussed, mindshifts occur when one learns a new field, but an academic writer can also use practical, more stylistic means on the page to communicate authority and establish trust between author and reader. There are a few strategies that help a student make the leap from outsider to insider status.

Make sure that you know as much as you can about the texts you are using. Go back to the readings again and again. If you have already started a seminar paper and you begin to feel stuck, return to the original text. Your interpretation of and engagement with the reading will get you thinking of things to say and ideas to write down. When you read the texts, do you feel as if you need more information? Do you need to find another article on your topic? This is a sense you will learn to cultivate over time, but one indication that you need to do more reading or to find additional texts is that you've run out of things to say.

If you are really at a loss, you can always begin with Ann Berthoff's concept of a double-entry journal.<sup>6</sup> On a piece of paper, take notes that are compelling on one side and then respond to them on the other. This can be a laborious process, but it will show you that you do have things to say about a topic. And if you trace where these thoughts fall into patterns, you can follow these patterns toward a subject that you want to write about.

Another challenge will be the overall belief in yourself and in your ability to actually formulate a literary analysis or argument from a blank page. Of course you're capable of writing a literary analysis: you did so during your years as an undergraduate. That being said, you need to ignore any thoughts about what so-and-so, or your professor or peers, will think. During the early stages of the writing process, expending energy imagining what others will say or think about your writing is wasted energy and will interrupt your writing process.

You should also refrain from stating that no one has ever written on a topic. It's possible you simply don't have the knowledge to make this claim. Perhaps there are studies on the topic that you're unaware of. One easy solution is to avoid making claims about the amount of scholarship on your chosen topic. There's no reason to use such absolute terms as "never" or "all" or "no one." Since you have complete control over how you frame your argument, there is

no need to point out that no one has ever done research on your topic. Moreover, it's also not necessary in terms of the strength of your argument. Even if many scholars have written about your topic, you are going to make a claim that comes from your own perspective and yet is situated within previous scholarship.

Writing a critical essay does not imply spending the entire paper criticizing other authors, even though you will probably not agree with all the scholars you consult. Joseph Harris's (highly-recommended) book on the rhetorical moves academic authors use to make their claims, *Rewriting: How To Do Things With Texts*, includes an entire chapter on the notion of "countering," that is, going against certain scholars to support your own argument. In this chapter, Harris recalls being a graduate student and writing an entire paper devoted to articulating ideas against other scholars.<sup>7</sup> However, one must remember that arguing against another scholar is not enough. The most important point is how these ideas will move your argument forward and further your ideas.

Moreover, cultivating an antagonistic tone actually diminishes a writer's authority. Yes, you should create a tone of confidence—but without denigrating another scholar's every idea. In fact, since you are entering the field and these scholars are becoming your peers, it is in your best interest to encounter and counter their ideas with a generous spirit. And although you will probably read articles whose authors sometimes use an outraged or antagonistic tone, keep in mind that even if they have insightful ideas, this kind of stance makes them appear insecure and actually weakens their argument. A confident tone strengthens a writer's ethos, while an antagonistic tone can weaken one's credibility.

In addition, you really can't worry about knowledge that you don't yet have. Also, you need to realize that your professor's expectations should correspond to your graduate school

status. No one expects you to write like a scholar who already has a Ph.D. and has been studying for twenty years. We tend to forget that we are in graduate programs to learn something that we didn't know before. If we knew how to write a perfect paper (impossible!), we wouldn't be in graduate school.

In short, you need to have faith in your own writing voice and knowledge. That being said, your scholarly voice will be an approximation of a voice, as you are 'trying on' the voice of a discourse community you have just entered. Thus, you will need to cultivate an imagined ethos, a created persona.

When a scholar knows her material in depth, this expertise comes through on the page. If you have only studied the material for one semester, your expertise will be of a different level—and that's fine. This may be a reach for some of you and you may feel you're wearing a strange coat or a mask. Your communication of expertise may feel uncomfortable at first, but eventually your imagined ethos and your real knowledge will merge, and writing from a place of authority will become a part of your natural writing voice.

Nonetheless, it's a good idea to write a rough draft early on and give yourself lots of time before the deadline. One way to revise your draft is to read it while thinking about how you are communicating in terms of your authority. Ask yourself if your writing voice sounds confident but not arrogant.

While it may sound surprising, even minor choices can affect ethos. Since you are entering a profession, you should adopt the conventions of that profession. While making sure your MLA citation style is correct might seem secondary, your ability to use that style correctly shows your reader that you are part of the community of English Studies. If a different citation style is required, adjust your work accordingly. Working within required parameters is a small

but important signal to the reader that you are a professional and that you take your work seriously.

Here is a list of ways an author can communicate authority without overstepping that authority:

- Word choice. Try not to repeat the same words or expressions. Novice writers tend to repeat language. This is both a stylistic problem and a conceptual black hole. Repeated language is clunky, but it also keeps the ideas from moving the argument forward. One recommendation is to circle repeated language once a draft is finished in order to become aware of how this repetition affects your argument.
- Know the texts you are discussing. Take notes on the texts you are using.
- Know the quality of the scholarship you are using. Make sure you are using credible sources.
- If you are discussing a particular topic, try to read ‘works cited’ or ‘references’ sections to discover which scholars should be consulted. Read and include them. This process will teach you the essentials of academic discussion.
- Structure your paper properly so that your argument is clear.
- Avoid words such as “never” or “always.” These are claims that you probably cannot make.
- Try to cultivate a belief in what you have to say. Your scholarly expertise and confidence can feel like a developmental leap at this stage in your professional career—but that is to be expected.
- Write well! Just the overall quality of your writing can help you establish your ethos and convince a reader to read your words.



One concrete example of imagining or inventing ethos is the dissertation proposal. When graduate students write a dissertation proposal, they must imagine they are as knowledgeable about the topic at the beginning of the writing process as they will be at the end of it. The dissertation might take one or several years to complete. Because of the research writing process, the person who defends his/her dissertation is an expert on the subject matter. The person writing the proposal must imagine that he/she knows as much about the material as the person at the end of the process.

As academic writers know, changes occur over time during the research process. Some ideas are discarded and some are expanded. Chapters in the dissertation may be altered during writing and researching as the writer becomes more knowledgeable about the topic. Certain chapters can be eliminated entirely. This is all an expected part of the process.

If the finished dissertation ends up being different from the proposal, and if the writer doesn't know everything about the topic before writing that proposal, how does she cultivate sufficient ethos to write the proposal?

As we have been discussing, this is a perfect example of invented or imagined ethos. The writer must write "as if" she were writing from the place of the finished dissertation. She must imagine that she has already read, sifted through, and analyzed the material and is the expert on the topic. She must catapult her imagination to the end product.

To accomplish this authentically seems a daunting task. This author needs to be sincere, trustworthy, authoritative, and credible—all without having an all-encompassing grasp of the material. The student must undertake as much research as possible to obtain knowledge of the subject matter and then apply the stylistic indicators of authority discussed above. The student

must then imagine and act “as if” she knows all the required knowledge that will be available at the end of the dissertation, even at the outset.

Creating a strong ethos will become integral to your writing voice as you obtain more knowledge of English Studies. After a few years of writing scholarship, you may not have to think about it at all. Until then, you can make rhetorical choices in your writing that will strengthen your authority and impact your readers. Eventually, expressing yourself in a confident, scholarly voice will become second nature to you and inform how you think and write.

Having an established ethos does get easier, but what the example of the dissertation proposal illustrates is that this is also a lifelong process. While having the ethos of an expert does become part of your writing voice, scholars must act “as if” prior to undertaking all new writing projects: when writing a conference proposal, book proposal, or new draft. As the research writing process is recursive, writers learn about their subject matter as the work progresses.

Creating an ethos is necessary for many writing expectations for English Studies. For example, writers must write a conference proposal with the stance that the research has warranted valuable findings. If a scholar writes a conference proposal on a study of students in an English literature class, the study may or may not have been completed; however, the proposal will probably be due many months in advance. Therefore, the author must write in a tone that is confident, even though all the results of the study may have not been completely analyzed.

Even if the conference proposal is only on literary texts, the author may or may not have done all of the work necessary for the project by the conference deadline. Given the timing of

applying for conferences, it is usually unlikely that an author will finish his/her paper before turning in the proposal.

This is especially the case for book proposals: when writing a book proposal, the book may not even be finished yet! Academic writers often send in a proposal, a table of contents, and a sample chapter in order to obtain a book contract. This is another moment in an academic's career when he or she is propelled into the role of an imagined ethos. Even with two excellent chapters in hand, the book is not finished and changes may still be made. Even so, the author must write the book proposal as if it were a fully constructed manuscript.

Therefore, learning how ethos is an essential aspect of your writing will be valuable to you throughout your professional career. The more inventing an ethos becomes second nature to you, the easier it will be for you to use it for your writing projects. Understanding how ethos works will help you become a successful member of the field of English Studies and will assist you in becoming involved in many writing projects over the course of your academic and scholarly career.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee, *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students* (New York: Pearson, 2009), 199–200.

<sup>2</sup> Heather Camp, “Constructing a Professional Ethos: The Role of Identity in Graduate Student Writing Development,” Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 2007, 4.

<sup>3</sup> David Bartholomae, “Inventing the University,” in *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*, ed. Victor Villanueva and Kristin L. Arola (Urbana: NCTE, 2011), 523–54, 523.

<sup>4</sup> Bartholomae, “Inventing the University,” 524.

<sup>5</sup> Donna LeCourt, *Identity Matters: Schooling the Student Body in Academic Discourse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 42.

<sup>6</sup> Ann E. Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Models, and Maxims for Writing Teachers* (Montclair: Boynton/Cook, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Harris, *Rewriting: How To Do Things With Texts* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006), 55.

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