***The Everyday Writer***

By Becky Fremo, Associate Professor of English

Andrea Lunsford’s *Everyday Writer* is one of the most well respected handbooks on the market today. Lunsford herself is a foremother in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, and she has published extensively on topics ranging from Aristotelian rhetoric to the ethics of collaborative writing to “intellectual property” to the writing practices of first-year students. She is also a super-nice lady (she was my professor for two years at Ohio State, before she left for Stanford. She also gave me the most gorgeous quilt when my first son was born). Professor Lunsford is easy to spot when she makes an appearance at a national conference, since she wears her hair in two buns that look at awful lot like Princess Leia’s.

But I digress. You want to know what this handbook is really about. What can it offer you? According to its glossy web site, “*The Everyday Writer* gives today’s students the information they need to be effective, ethical writers.”

What’s this, you say? There’s a connection between writing and ethics?

Well, yes. In a nutshell, the rhetorical tradition—the study and practice of persuasive communication, which is itself rooted in the oral context but has migrated over the years into print and now digital culture—has always been about ethical issues. When Aristotle asked his students (rhetorically), “What are the available means of persuasion,” he did so with the assumption that rhetoric was always concerned with probability: figuring out what an audience member would *probably think* about a topic, based on assumptions about audience members themselves. (*Everyday Writer*, by the way, features chapters that describe and explain rhetorical concepts such as these, helping students learn to suit their own writing to the needs of specific audiences, in both academic and non-academic contexts). In any case, when you’re working to persuade people based on appeals (Artistotle mentioned appeals to logos, ethos, and pathos, loosely translated as appeals to one’s logic, character, and emotion), you’re not really dealing with Truth, right? And if you’re conniving about how to convince your fellow Ancient Greeks to support an idea (“Suggest that abolishing feta cheese will save cows! This is an appeal to ethos!”), maybe you’re not communicating in a way that’s really good for the rest of the polis. You’re not making arguments based on absolute truths; you’re simply pandering. That seems kind of unethical, no?

Andrea Lunsford and her book help us navigate such questions. In turn, we, Gustavus Adolphus College, are the polis: the community of speakers/ writers/ artists/ performers who seek to talk and write with one another in ways that are respectful, engaging, and ethical. But how will we even begin to communicate with one another when we’re so different? We’re scientists, painters, historians, photographers, ethnographers, and poets! We don’t all share the same assumptions. We don’t all privilege the same forms of knowledge! One can “know” something scientifically because it’s proven in a laboratory; one can “know” something historically because we discovered a first-hand account of an event; one can “know” something philosophically because the structure of an argument leads us to a logical conclusion. If we don’t have the same assumptions about the big stuff, how will we ever communicate with one another?

For starters, we can agree upon a shared set of conventions—ways of doing things—for our communicative acts. That’s where *Everyday Writer* comes in. Its job, as a “handbook,” is to model and explain conventions to students, so that when they begin to write for different audiences, they can understand the ways and means of doing business with that audience on paper. Since we’re now using a metaphor (doing academic business sounds a little gross, but I’m going to see where it goes). . . Think about the word “convention” for a minute. I won’t pull out the Oxford English Dictionary definition-- though I HIGHLY recommend doing so, since it’s always fun—but I will ask you what you think about when you hear the word “convention.” I think of huge halls filled with confetti, businessmen (do the women wear those things?) in silly hats, nice hotel rooms at discount rates, and the miraculous way that hundreds or even thousands of people manage to have a great big party together while still getting some goals accomplished.

Well… that’s sort of what conventions do for us as writers or speakers. You’re a big group of students, and you’re looking for ways to party—peacefully—with one another in this building and all across campus. It’s a party of words, of course, and everyone’s invited, but we need a way to make sure that nobody comes dressed up like Hester from *The Scarlet Letter* if it’s a “Celebrate Shakespeare!” party. Those who don’t wear the appropriate style to the party may never be invited again.

Likewise, those who don’t consult a style manual before attempting to submit a paper to a professor, or a professional organization, or a disciplinary conference, or a prestigious journal take a huge risk. They may end up using a style or structure that isn’t valued or understood or even recognized within that particular field. The *Everyday Writer* provides students with the information that enables them to be as rhetorically flexible as possible, so that they can prepare their work for a variety of academic audiences in multiple academic contexts. It’s about much more than where the comma goes when we write up a citation in MLA format. It’s about acknowledging that there are always multiple rhetorical options to choose from; understanding the connection between persuasive style and the achievement of goals; recognizing what counts as information from discipline to discipline; learning what sorts of sentence-level behaviors are governed by “rules” (are any of them?) and which ones are merely a matter of shared practice.

There are longer, more sophisticated books that focus on these issues, to be sure. But Andrea Lunsford has carefully considered her audience (college students), and thus she’s prepared a book that’s rhetorically appropriate just for you.

It’s a book that’s intended to do lots of different things for lots of different people. It’s the “Urgent Care” of writing textbooks—the place you go when you’re in a hurry and you need somebody to look at your sentences fast, or the place you go when you want to look up how to use MLA or APA or CBE or Chicago style, or the book you open at 4:00 a.m. when the Writing Center is closed and your professor has stopped responding to email for the night. Now, it’s always best, when you have some sort of medical issue, to go to your family doctor (here the doctor is a metaphor for professor, in case you need some help with interpretation). But sometimes that family doc just isn’t available on YOUR schedule. Why not let Andrea Lunsford’s book save you a trip to the Emergency Room?