

Acknowledgment and Response

Purpose: To become more familiar with different methods of acknowledgment and response; to analyze the different tones that this rhetorical move can take on

The acknowledgment of alternative viewpoints signals that you are “entering a conversation” (Graff and Birkenstein), and it can occur on a spectrum between respectful and dismissive. Acknowledgment that is more respectful is often used when the new viewpoint being offered is likely to be controversial, or if it interferes with a widely-held perspective. Acknowledgment that is more dismissive can be used when there is a greater variety of opinions on the subject.

PART 1: An example of **respectful acknowledgment** comes from *Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us*, by Mike Rose, an expert on American public education. In this book, Rose challenges the value of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a series of laws mandating standardized testing in reading and math as the main method of determining the success or failure of a public school. He thinks NCLB is a mistake, but the dominant governmental and public perspective is that public schools are failing, and NCLB is the only way to fix them. To challenge this popular viewpoint, he needs to use respectful acknowledgment that addresses the positive side of NCLB:

“There are aspects of NCLB that are clearly democratic. The assumption that all children can learn and develop. The responsibility of public institutions to their citizenry. The dissatisfaction with business as usual and a belief that institutions can be improved” (Rose 45).

The acknowledgment of what many consider valuable about NCLB, even though he thinks it’s a terrible idea, creates the impression that the writer takes seriously the conventional wisdom on the subject and has studied it carefully.

Similarly, the language in the **response** Rose offers can’t harshly attack NCLB, or he risks losing his audience. Accordingly, Rose has to use language that presents his argument as an exploration of a new idea, rather than a refutation of the old one:

“What is worth exploring, though, is the degree to which these tenets are invested in an accountability mechanism that might restrict their full realization. A score on a standardized test seems like a straightforward indicator of achievement. The score goes up, goes down, or remains the same. But there are, in fact, a host of procedural and technical problems in developing, administering, scoring, and interpreting such tests. (And there are also concerns about how schools and districts can manipulate them)” (Rose 45).

The conversational tone Rose uses (“[w]hat is worth exploring, though,” especially) makes it hard to get mad at Rose or reject his idea – what he goes on to say *is* worth exploring, whether the reader thinks NCLB is a good idea or not. Readers are likely more open to the evidence Rose goes on to provide than they would be if he used language that immediately rejected their viewpoints.

PART 2: Elsewhere, Mike Rose also offers us an example of **dismissive acknowledgment**. Five years after the publication of his book, Rose wrote an article called “School Reform Fails the Test” for *The American Scholar* that also discusses his concerns about NCLB. But, at this point, public opinion has slowly begun to turn against NCLB, and Rose knows it. Because of this changing viewpoint, Rose doesn’t need to provide such a full account of everything that is good about NCLB in order for his argument to be taken seriously. His acknowledgment can be simpler and less dramatic:

“No Child Left Behind’s focus on vulnerable students was important, and the law did jolt some low-performing schools into improving their students’ mastery of the basic math and reading skills measured by the tests” (Rose).

Rose’s **response** follows suit – it doesn’t contain the more tentative, ingratiating language as his previous response, and, without much setup, it presents facts that speak for themselves:

“But the use of such tests and the high stakes attached to them also led to other results that any student of organizational behavior could have predicted. A number of education officials manipulated the system by lowering the cutoff test scores for proficiency, or withheld from testing students who would perform poorly, or occasionally fudged the results. A dramatic example is the recent case of cheating in Atlanta, where school personnel all the way up to the superintendent were indicted.

Studies of what went on in classrooms are equally troubling and predictable. The high-stakes tests led many administrators and teachers to increase math and reading test preparation and reduce time spent on science, history, and geography. The arts were, in some cases, drastically reduced or eliminated. Aspects of math and reading that didn’t directly relate to the tests were also eliminated, even though they could have led to broader understanding and appreciation of these subjects” (Rose).

Rose can afford here to be more direct in his argument against NCLB because he knows that the consensus about it has changed – his rejection of its practices is advancing a conversation that is more widely in progress, rather than one that would be considered extremely controversial.