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Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Adapting to Your Audience

As writers and presenters, everyone thinks differently and has a unique perspective. This is true of audience members as well. We can't expect everyone to understand your message the way you do, so clarity is absolutely crucial. When we talk to someone face-to-face, one-on-one, we know very specifically who we're talking to. We automatically adjust our speech to be sure we are communicating our message. Many writers don't make those same adjustments when they write to different audiences, usually because they don't take the time to think about who will be reading what they write. In an academic setting, the writer isn't talking to themselves. The most important thing to consider in audience adaptation is clarity, because the audience isn't psychic. To be sure that we communicate clearly in writing, we need to adjust our message--how we say it and what information we include--by recognizing how different readers can best understand different messages.

Audience Definition

An audience is a group of readers who read a particular piece of writing. As a writer, you should anticipate the needs or expectations of your audience in order to convey information or argue for a particular claim. Your audience might be your instructor, classmates, the president of an organization, the staff of a management company, or any other number of possibilities. You need to know your audience before you start writing.

Types of Audiences

Audiences come in all shapes and sizes. They may be a group of similar people or combinations of different groups of people. You'll need to determine who they are in order to analyze your audience. This guide divides the 'audience' into two categories: academic and non-academic.

Note: Your audience can be a combination of the two.

Determining your Audience Type

Writers determine their audience types by considering:

- **Who** they are (age, sex, gender, education, economic status, political/social /religious beliefs);
- **What Level of Information** they have about the subject (novice, general reader, specialist or expert);
- The **Context** in which they will be reading a piece of writing (in a news article, textbook, midterm essay, specialized journal, Twitter post, etc.)

You'll need to analyze your audience in order to write effectively.

Three Categories of Audience

Michel Muraski, Journalism and Technical Communication Department

Three categories of audience are the "lay" audience, the "managerial" audience, and the "experts."

The "lay" audience has no special or expert knowledge. They connect with the human interest aspect of articles. They usually need background information; they expect more definition and description; and they may want attractive graphics or visuals. You can assume that a "lay" audience is still somewhat educated, just not up-to-date or aware of the scholarly happenings in your field. For this type of audience, it's important to establish that you're both knowledgeable about your topic and interested in expressing your ideas to the group. You want to be informative, clear, and thorough in what you cover without coming across pompous

or domineering. To do this, remain descriptive and avoid using complex rhetoric. The "managerial" audience may or may not have more knowledge than the "lay" audience about your subject, but they will need additional information so they can make a decision about your argument or issue. And how should you go about picturing your audience as you go through the writing process? A "managerial" audience can be assumed as somewhat educated and/or knowledgeable in your field. They probably don't possess a complete knowledge, but a base knowledge that can be built upon by you. You don't need to explain and over analyze every detail about your topic, but you should be consistently clear in what you're saying. Any background information, facts, or statistics needed to make such a decision should be highlighted.

The "experts" may be the most demanding audience in terms of knowledge, presentation, and graphics or visuals. Experts are often "theorists" or "practitioners" themselves, and may be looking at your research compared to their own. For the "expert" audience, document formats are often elaborate and technical, style and vocabulary may be specialized or technical, source citations are reliable and up-to-date, and documentation is accurate.

Academic Audiences

Assuming you are writing a paper for a class, ask yourself who is the reader? The most important reader in an essay situation is arguably the instructor, even if a grader will look at the paper first. Ask yourself what you know about your teacher and his or her approach to the discipline. Do you know, for example, if this teacher always expects papers to be carefully argued? Has this teacher emphasized the importance of summarizing cases accurately before referring to them? Will this professor be looking for an "argument synthesis," showing how the cases all support one point or will this prof be more interested in seeing how the cases complicate one another? In other words, take the time to brainstorm about what you've learned about the teacher to help you meet his or her expectations for this paper. You probably know more about the teacher than you think, and asking

questions about how the teacher treats this material in class will help you remember those details to help you shape your paper.

Related Information: Academic Audience Example

Psychology 100 - Your paper should be about 6 pages.

The My Lai massacre in Vietnam in 1969 was a particularly egregious case of over-obedience to military authority in wartime. Show the connection between this event and Milgram's experiments. [Milgram used his authority as a researcher to convince subjects to administer what they thought were painful, even life-threatening, shocks to uncooperative people.] Note that Milgram himself treated the My Lai massacre in the epilogue to his *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (1974). (Behrens and Rosen, 384-5).

Non-Academic Audiences

Non-academic audiences read your writing for reasons other than to grade you. (Some teachers assign papers specifically asking students to write for nonacademic audiences). They will gain information from your writing. Think about writing a newsletter or a resume: audiences read these for information, only how they use the information varies. A nonacademic audience involves more than writing. Consider the following:

- You'll have to determine who the audience is.
- You'll have to think about what is an appropriate format to use.
- You'll have to consider what is and is not an appropriate topic for your audience. (If you don't have one already.)
- You'll have to determine how your topic will fit the format.

Related Information: Non-Academic Audience Example

History 342 - Discovering and Colonizing New Worlds

Imagine that you are an administrator for the school district. In light of the Columbus controversy, you have been assigned to draft a set of guidelines for teaching about Columbus in the district's elementary and junior high schools. These guidelines will explain official policy to parents and teachers in teaching children about Columbus and the significance of his voyages. They will also draw on arguments made on both sides of the controversy, including the historical facts on which both sides agree.

Draft these guidelines. Suggested format: a prefatory section giving the rationale for the guidelines and a set of purposes governing the new policies, followed by the guidelines themselves with an explanation of each one (specifically citing sources). A conclusion is optional. (Behrens and Rosen, 314)

Audience Invoked versus Audience Addressed

Donna Lecourt, English Department

An audience addressed versus an audience invoked is basically your real audience versus the reader you create through your text and introduction. In a way, you tell the reader who you want them to be. In a conference paper I'm writing, I start off by assuming that we're (the reader and myself) sharing some presumptions. By saying that, I'm almost telling the reader who I want them to be. I'm creating an audience position, that "Yes, there exists some reality." But I'm also trying to create it for people who are going to approach this and say, "Okay there are things I think we all hold in common. I don't say that in my text, but my text invokes it. The other audience, the real audience, are those who will be at the conference. Who's at the conference and who reads the journal are not always the same.

Teacher as Audience

Kate Kiefer, English Department

For most academic papers, the teacher is the explicit audience. But even within the same discipline, professors might expect quite different formats for papers. For example, in sociology, one prof might ask you to write mainly about your own experiences and your reactions to your experience. Another professor might want you to do library or field research about a social problem and never refer to your

own experiences or attitudes toward that problem.

Teachers will often try to give students more experience with writing to different audiences by targeting particular readers for a given paper. Then students address the target audience (class members, members of a business community, congressional representatives, and so on), including the teacher as a secondary audience.

Steve Reid, English Department

When asked who their audience is, many students say, "It's my teacher."

I think it's useful for students to widen their sense of audience in order to realize that their specific teacher is, in fact, a representative reader from a particular academic field or discourse community. Their teacher may be a composition teacher, an English literature teacher, a historian, a chemist, a psychologist, or a biologist--and they want and expect writing that is appropriate for their field.

In terms of their expectations about effective writing, each of these teachers "wants" something slightly different, and those differences reflect the expectations of different academic areas. A composition teacher may want an introduction that gradually leads into the topic; a journalist may want an article that begins immediately with the most startling fact or event; a chemist may want to begin with a review of the research. Psychologists, literature professors, and historians may or may not want you to use your own personal experience, depending on the level (informal to formal) of the writing. Not all academic writing has the same requirements, and those requirements are not so much personal whims (Professor Jones hates it when I use first-person or "I"!) as they are the expectations of that particular academic discourse.

So when you are writing an essay, imagine writing not just for your teacher, but for your teacher as a *representative* of a larger group of readers who belong to that particular academic area. That awareness may help you see that the requirements of that assignment are not just strange or quirky, but make some sense in the larger context of that particular academic discourse.

Developing Audience Awareness

When we talk to someone face-to-face, we always know just who we're talking to. We automatically adjust our speech to be sure we communicate our message. For instance, when we talk to three-year olds, we shorten sentences and use simpler words. When we talk to college professors, we tend to use longer sentences and more formal language.

In short, we change what we say because we *know* our *audience*.

Interestingly, many writers don't make the same adjustments when they write to different audiences, usually because they don't take the time to think about who will be reading what they write. But to be sure that we communicate clearly in writing, we need to adjust our message--how we say it and what information we include--by recognizing that different readers can derive different messages and understandings from the same text. It is crucial to acknowledge the audience on both individual and intellectual levels.

Defining Audience Awareness

As a concept, it sounds so simple: *Think about who will read your paper before and while you write, and adjust your paper to help your reader understand it.*

Compared to the theory of relativity, this concept is a piece of cake.

So why would teachers of writing spend so much time and energy talking about this simple idea? It turns out that writing (and revising) for a particular audience is much harder in practice than in the abstract.

Audience Awareness and Purpose

Let's say you've just had a terrible experience with Parking Management and decide to write a letter to *The Collegian* to complain about this campus service. As you think about writing your letter to *The Collegian*, you'll need to think not only about audience but also about **why** you are writing to those readers. Do you want simply to tell your story? Do you want to argue directly for a change in policy? Do

you want to raise fellow students' consciousness about a problem so that the student senate will eventually take up the issue? Depending on your goal, you might write a narrative, an argument, or a causal analysis. Which approach is most likely to be effective with your readers?

Writers need to consider *both audience and purpose* in writing because the two elements affect the paper so significantly, and decisions about one will affect the other.

Editing and Audience Awareness

Most writers complete their task and audience analysis before they begin writing, but it's important to review what you know about both the specific task and readers' expectations while you draft and revise the paper. Reviewing audience concerns as a separate step in your revising process is an especially good way to be sure you're shaping your paper to best fit your readers' needs.

Appealing to an Audience

Donna Lecourt, English Department

At the first level, the appeal begins even in choice of topic, according to what the audience might already know as well as what the "concerns/issues" of that audience are in that context. (e.g. don't write about why Hamlet wanted to kill himself, or write about how Hamlet made you "feel" about your mother to an English professor). Then, at the next level, once it's influenced how you've chosen a topic and formulated a thesis, it influences what kind of proof you can use to prove or persuade. In other words, part of an appeal to the audience is to use the type of information they find the most valuable. Other appeals concern thinking about what they already find true, and trying to logically begin from there (e.g., We all accept X, so thus Y must be true.) Of course, you also appeal in terms of style (fitting the norms of the community as well as simply trying to amuse, not be pedantic, etc.). Finally, appeals involve how the writer presents herself, that is, what kind of persona does she create on paper.

Assumptions about Audience

Don Zimmerman, Journalism and Technical Communication Department

The assumption often made in scientific and technical circles is if you're a biology prof and there's another biology prof who's working on a particular area, he may well be using a lot of unique terms the other one may not understand. A real problem in organizations is that the person who develops the product, the communication end of things, assumes a lot more than another person really understands. The question becomes, really, what level of understanding does a target audience have? The content area is a slippery thing for students to sometimes get a handle on. They just assume everybody in their discipline knows the terms.

The question is if you've got a manager up here, is he familiar enough with your technical terms? I see technical terms as different than jargon terms. The technical things, really, are often the points communicating the idea fairly succinctly and to the point with the population that's used to dealing with those. As you move up in the management organization, they may or may not know what's going on.

When we talk about things from the communications standpoint, we use a term called "frame of reference." I've learned there are many different terms like that in other fields. A body of literature called "reference base" is essentially the same thing. It's what the person reading or seeing the message brings to their setting. It's their total life experience framing how they interpret the message.

Analyzing an Audience

Analyzing your audience is essential. You need to determine *exactly* who will read what you are going to write. For example, you might investigate who reads the journal articles or trade magazines in your field of study. Check out some of those magazines or journals and browse through several issues. In addition, you might interview people who will be your readers. There are many scholarly resources on the internet as well (such as the WAC Clearinghouse @ CSU) including both niche and general forums, massive online databases, and compilatory websites. The internet's scholarly resources should be a main asset for collecting information on your audience.

Remember: Analyze your audience BEFORE you start writing, so you'll know what format, style, vocabulary, or level of information is expected.

Writers in the advertising business spend a great deal of time researching their targeted audiences. Once they know who their audience is, they can mold their advertising--their words, format, graphics, images--to appeal to that specific audience.

You can determine the characteristics about your target audience through a demographic profile, or by investigating information or assumptions about your particular audience.

Audience Analysis: Formal versus Informal

Don Zimmerman, Journalism and Technical Communication Department

One way to analyze an audience is what I call "informal" in its analysis techniques. The other way is a more "formal," structured approach that is not used a lot.

In the informal way, a whole series of things usually happens. As a professional works in the field, they grow an intuitive sense about what their target audiences are. In other words, it's like an engineer. They go to a conference, they read the journals, they start to know how to write for people or how to communicate about them or how to target that, without really doing it. In other words, it's life experiences with particular people that will give them that.

Other ways are by essentially reading and going through the publications they read. In other words, trade magazines. Some civil engineering news magazines are targeted for the practitioner in civil engineering. Those will give you a pretty good insight as to what's going on. A series of specialized civil engineering magazines deal with different aspects like earth moving news. There's a whole series of publications from the Institute of Concrete Development. Each of those are slightly different in what they want. Some of them are strong research journals and others are targeted to the day-to-day person who's operating in the field.

Writers can talk to other people in a company and say, "I'm doing this report for John Smith or Sally." How do they see the world on this? Especially a new person.

Most organizations do pretty heavy copy editing in lots of cases. Part of it is, there's a corporate culture often about how you do things and how you say things that may or may not be articulated very well to a new person.

The more "formal" analysis techniques I like are things like writing focus groups and group techniques and surveys. One of the questions becomes, "What kinds of information do you need about the audience?" For me, in some ways, it's pretty simple. That is, "What is the primary purpose of this information?" "Is this information to inform them?" "Will that target audience be making a decision on that information?"

Analyzing Academic Audiences

Even within the same discipline, professors might expect quite different formats for papers. For example, in sociology, one prof might ask you to write mainly about your own experiences and your reactions to your experience. Another professor might want you to do library or field research about a social problem and never refer to your own experiences or attitudes toward that problem.

In other words, college writing assignments--even if your teacher is your only reader-- require careful audience analysis.

Let's assume for the moment that you are writing a paper for a class. Who is the reader? The most important reader is the professor, even if the prof has a grader who will look at the paper first. Sometimes the assignment will ask you to write to some reader other than the prof, and we'll take up those audiences after we look in more detail at how you can analyze teachers as the primary audience for papers.

So what kinds of questions can you ask to help you understand your professor as your main reader?

1. Look carefully at the assignment sheet. Does it tell you anything about your teacher's expectations?
2. Do you have any models of papers like this written for this prof in the past?
3. Ask questions. What more can you learn about the professor's expectations as a reader by asking directly?

4. Ask yourself what you know about the professor and about the discipline.

Related Information: Example Academic Audience Analysis: PSY100

Your paper should be about 6 pages.

The My Lai massacre in Vietnam in 1969 was a particularly egregious case of over-obedience to military authority in wartime. Show the connection between this event and Milgram's experiments. [Milgram used his authority as a researcher to convince subjects to administer what they thought were painful, even life-threatening, shocks to uncooperative people.] Note that Milgram himself treated the My Lai massacre in the epilogue to his *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (1974). (Behrens and Rosen, 384-5).

- Step One: Look carefully at the assignment sheet. Does it tell you anything about your teacher's expectations?

Analysis

What does this assignment ask you to do? "*Show the connection*" between Milgram's work and the My Lai massacre.

What will you need to be able to show the connection? A description of both Milgram's work and the massacre.

Will you be able to stop writing once you've described both parts? No--you then need to show the connection.

You know that you don't have much space to develop extended descriptions of either Milgram's work or the My Lai massacre. In order to describe both *and* show the connection between the two, you'll need to keep the descriptions relatively short so that you don't tax your reader's patience.

- Step Two: Do you have any models of papers like this written for this prof in the past?

Analysis

Do you already have enough information about Milgram and My Lai? If not, you'll definitely need to do library work and cite your sources appropriately. The paper prompt itself suggests that you look at Milgram's 1974 publication, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*.

The paper doesn't ask you to include personal experiences or to contribute personal analysis, although as you draw out the connection you will undoubtedly rely on your interpretation of your sources and your understanding of events.

- Step Three: Ask questions. What more can you learn about the professor's expectations as a reader by asking directly?

Analysis

For this paper, you know that your reader is not interested in seeing how you have felt obedient or disobedient in critical situations. Rather, this reader is looking for a more academic (less personal) investigation of the issue of obedience. This reader is trying to determine if you intellectually understand the issue (over-obedience to authority), not if you have had pertinent experiences. As a result, the paper will be more formal and academic than if the paper were focused on your own attitudes and experiences.

- Step Four: Ask yourself what you know about the professor and about the discipline.

Analysis

Do you know anything else about your reader from sample papers? From other papers you've written for this professor? From this teacher's behavior in class or her/his preferences for certain kinds of arguments and proof?

Think carefully about what you've observed about this professor and use that information to help you shape your paper.

Related Information: Example Academic Audience Analysis: BUS402

Your essay should be 7-10 pages.

How effective is studying and discussing hypothetical dilemmas (i.e., studying cases) in preparing you for the pressures of actual dilemmas in the workplace? Develop your answer into an argument synthesis that draws on three or more cases in this chapter. If possible, refer to actual ethical dilemmas with which you've struggled in your own work. (Behrens and Rosen, 815)

- Step One: Look carefully at the assignment sheet. Does it tell you anything about your teacher's expectations?

Analysis

A writer responding to this prompt would first notice that there are three key parts to the assignment:

1. Answer the question about effectiveness of cases. The entire paper needs to support the answer.
2. Synthesize information and arguments from three sample cases.
3. Include personal experience and experience-based critical analysis.

You also know that you have plenty of "room" to develop all three key elements of the assignment because you can take up to ten pages. But this assignment does not specify format, use of outside sources, or level of formality, and so a writer might want to ask the teacher about those points or look closely at sample papers to gather more information.

- Step Two: Do you have any models of papers like this written for this prof in the past?

Analysis

You do have samples of cases, though, in the material that the assignment asks you to review. So you will be able to look at those cases and use those to help you write about your own experiences. In other words, your professor will expect you to frame your experiences in much the same way that the sample cases are set up. Your teacher will look for the same kinds of detail in your supporting evidence that appears in the sample cases. By looking carefully at the samples, writers can learn about what to include in their descriptions.

- Step Three: Ask questions. What more can you learn about the professor's expectations as a reader by asking directly?

Analysis

In particular, be sure to find out why the teacher is having you write the paper. Some teachers assign papers to help students learn information or expand their thinking on an issue. For these papers, "conventions" of academic papers are often less important than showing what you've learned or thought about. But some teachers assign papers to help students learn what it's like to write in a specific discipline. For these teachers, academic "conventions" are extremely important.

- Step Four: Ask yourself what you know about the professor and about the discipline.

Analysis

You should also ask yourself what you know about your teacher and his or her approach to the discipline. Do you know, for example, that this teacher always expects papers to be carefully argued? Has this teacher emphasized the importance of summarizing cases accurately before referring to them? Will

this professor be looking for an "argument synthesis" that shows how the cases all support one point or will this prof be more interested in seeing how the cases complicate one another?

In other words, take the time to brainstorm about what you've learned about the teacher to help you meet his or her expectations for this paper. You probably know much more about the teacher than you might think, and asking questions about how the teacher treats this material in class will help you to remember those details that can help you shape your paper.

Does the assignment sheet tell you anything about your teacher's expectations?

- Can you tell if the paper needs to cite outside sources? If so, can the sources include interviews, field research, or just library sources?
- Does the assignment indicate whether you can use personal experiences? Personal (critical) analysis?

Use these two questions to help you determine how much of yourself you need to include in a paper. Most professors who expect to see personal experience or personal thinking on an issue say so pretty clearly in the assignment sheet.

- Does the paper have to follow a specific format? If so, what are the labels for parts of the paper? (Experienced writers use these labels to help generate material for the paper.)
- Does the assignment note specifically the level of formality of the paper? Does it, for instance, note that you should write it for possible publication in a journal?
- Does the assignment specifically note expectations about proofreading? (Often, a prof who reminds students about taking care with punctuation and spelling is asking for a more formal as well as a carefully edited paper.)

Use these questions to help you determine how formal or informal your reader expects your paper to be.

A professor who goes to the trouble of telling writers what to do expects to see those elements in a paper and is usually annoyed when writers violate those

expectations. So always use the information your professors give you to meet their stated expectations in a paper. Don't assume all profs are the same!

Do you have any models of papers like this written for this prof in the past?

If your professor is willing to give you a sample paper or to send you to look at a journal for examples of professional publications, you can learn a great deal about what your professor expects. Or if you have written papers for this professor before, look at those again to remind yourself of this professor's expectations.

As you look at the models and samples, ask yourself what you can tell about

- outside sources (library materials, interviews, surveys, observational research)
- personal experience or analysis
- headings
- formality of language
- standards of proofreading

What can you learn about the professor's expectations by asking directly?

If you haven't been able to learn much from the assignment sheet or the samples, be sure to ask for more information.

In particular, be sure to find out *why* the teacher is having you write the paper. Some teachers assign papers to help students learn information or expand their thinking on an issue. For these papers, "conventions" of academic papers are often less important than showing what you've learned or thought about. But some teachers assign papers to help students learn what it's like to write in a specific discipline. For these teachers, academic "conventions" are extremely important.

Ask yourself what you know about the professor and about the discipline.

- Is the discipline itself in transition? Do teachers who have just completed their degrees do different kinds of research than teachers who have been established in the profession for 15 years? Do they write different kinds of papers?

- What kinds of research does your professor do in his own work? Does the professor expect you to use the same kinds of research techniques?
- Has your professor assigned paper topics like this one for a number of years? Or is the prof experimenting with a new approach in the paper? (If this is a new assignment or approach, the prof might be more open to having students experiment with a wider range of responses.)
- What kinds of evidence do professionals in this discipline find most convincing? For instance, a philosophy professor might well be convinced by an argument that relies solely on logic and never refers to tangible evidence. An engineering prof, on the other hand, might respond to a logical paper by asking for a mathematical or physical model. Be sure to understand what "counts" as proof in the discipline you're writing for.

Analyzing Non-Academic Audiences

Some teachers realize that much professional writing for their students is not going to be academic writing. These profs assign papers that specifically ask students to write to non-academic audiences. For example, one professor in Resource Management asks students to write to city council members for one assignment.

How can you analyze other audiences to help you adapt your papers for their needs?

As we saw when we looked at professors as the main audience, asking questions is one of the best techniques for analyzing audience.

Related Information: Non-Academic Audience Example: HIST342

History 342 - Discovering and Colonizing New Worlds

Imagine that you are an administrator for the school district. In light of the Columbus controversy, you have been assigned to draft a set of guidelines for teaching about Columbus in the district's elementary and junior high schools. These guidelines will explain official policy to parents and teachers in teaching children about Columbus and the significance of his voyages. They will also

draw on arguments made on both sides of the controversy, as well as on historical facts on which both sides agree.

Draft these guidelines. Suggested format: a prefatory section giving the rationale for the guidelines and a set of purposes governing the new policies, followed by the guidelines themselves with an explanation of each one (specifically citing sources). A conclusion is optional. (Behrens and Rosen, 314)

- Step One: Reasons for Reading

Analysis

You know that your audience will include parents, teachers, and other administrators. Because this is a complicated set of readers, you will almost certainly have to decide which ones will be your primary audience and which will be secondary audiences.

Because teachers will use the guidelines in creating their lesson plans, they will be your primary audience. But you cannot forget that parents will be reading the guidelines. Particularly in the preface and in the explanations of guidelines, you'll need to include more background information that will make clear to parents why the school district is making certain decisions about what to include or emphasize in teaching about Columbus.

- Step Two: Background Knowledge

Analysis

Both teachers and parents will represent a wide spectrum in terms of knowledge, and you'll want to be sensitive to these issues when writing a document that combines both a complicated task and a diverse (though easily named) audience by balancing the amount of background information you include.

- Step Three: Bias

Analysis

Both teachers and parents will represent a wide spectrum in terms of bias as well. It's a both politically and ethically sensitive topic and you'll want to be aware of those issues when writing a document that combines both a complicated task and a diverse (though easily named) audience.

- Step Four: Other Possible Areas of Interest

Analysis

Keep in mind that all readers are different. And even though you may know some things about your reader as an audience member, you can't assume you know everything about them as a person. Occupations, income levels, and political or religious affiliations can differ greatly within a single audience. Everyone comes from a different background. If such topics are important to your audience and/or to your topic, you should be careful to remain understanding, realistic, and constructive in your approach.

Reasons for Reading

- Why is this audience interested in reading your paper?
- Do they plan to base budget or policy decisions on your paper?
- Do they need background information?
- Are they looking for evidence of problems or solutions?

If you can determine just what your readers need from your paper, then you can be sure to give them the information or analysis they're looking for. Always begin, then, by asking questions about why readers are reading!

Background Knowledge

- Are you writing to readers who have a great deal of information on your topic or those who know little about it?
- Have your readers had first-hand experience with your topic or are they likely to know only what they've read about it elsewhere?

The more you determine about your readers' background knowledge on your topic, the better you can determine what background information is necessary to include /summarize, and which details can be assumed as known.

Bias

- Do your readers have strong opinions about the topic you're writing about?
- What is each side of the opposition saying?
- Have your readers already reached a conclusion that you need to change? Or are you reinforcing preexisting ideas?

If you're writing an argument, people are bound to either agree or disagree with you. In such a case, it's your job to sway your audience's bias towards your view. If you're writing something informative, it's still important to consider bias. Whenever something people can have an opinion on comes up, bias is present and should be considered if not directly addressed.

Other Possible Areas of Interest

Sometimes readers are shaped by their occupations, income levels, political affiliations, cultures, and religions. If these related areas seem important to your readers and to your topics, be sure to learn as much as you can so that you can shape your paper to be effective with these readers.

Writing for an Audience

Once you know your audience, you are ready to begin writing. Knowing your audience enables you to select or reject details for that specific audience. In addition, different audiences expect different types or formats for texts. Readers of Environmental Impact Statements don't want to read rhyming poetry extolling the virtues of nature. Mothers expecting letters from children aren't interested in reading a laboratory report about recent revelations in physics.

Knowing the knowledge and interest levels of your audience on your topic is crucial.

It will help you determine how to write as well, how much information to include, how long to make your text, how subjective or objective you should be, and how formal or informal your text should be.

Writing Purpose

Writers need to consider both audience and purpose in writing because the two elements affect writing significantly, and decisions about one affect the other. For instance, the main purpose in advertising is to sell a product. Advertisers seek the audience who is most likely to purchase a product. Once they have identified this group [called the "target audience"], they can write their ads to capture the attention of this audience. Hence, their purpose, which is to sell a product or service, shapes what they write. Continually consider *why* you are writing through all steps of the writing process.

Details to Consider

Consider the following information about the expectations of your audience:

- Will the audience expect outside sources to be cited? What types of sources? Dated or current sources? Primary or secondary sources? Sources from academic journals or popular magazines/influencers? What types of Internet sources should be cited?
- Will the audience expect personal experience to be used? In the introduction? As evidence in the body of the text?
- Will the audience expect the text to be written in the first-person ("I") or in the third-person?
- Will the audience understand technical terms? Will they expect long explanations or definitions of key terms? Will they expect you to use the jargon of the field?
- Will the audience expect particular formats? Will they expect an essay, an article, a laboratory report? Will the text have a table of contents, a reference list, a title page, headings and subheadings, and extensive graphics or tables?

Readers versus Audience

Steve Reid, English Department

To me a reader is an important concept to think about when you're writing for an audience. If you're thinking about writing for readers, generally, then what you need to do is ask yourself questions about how readers process information. How do they make meaning, and how do they access key ideas in text and what are readers expectations when they pick up a printed text? Obviously those are going to vary from one discipline to the next. I like to make the distinction in my own mind between audience, i.e. target group of people who might pick up what I've written and read it, and readers who may have expectations about what's going to be in text. Readers may expect things to be in paragraphs. Readers may look for topic sentences. Readers will certainly try to anticipate what the overall claim is. Readers need cues about how to move from one section to the next. It's useful also to think, not just about target audience, but about how readers actually process textual information.

You can make the distinction between your audience as a target group (i.e., the group of people who may be attracted to your subject matter or your point-of-view) and your audience as readers (actual people who read your text, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence, word by word.)

An audience is the group of people who will be attracted to your writing. They may share certain subject interests, social or political beliefs, or certain demographic features. Once you know something about your target audience, you have some idea about their expectations of the subject, format, and style of writing.

When you use the term, "readers," however, you are, in addition, thinking about how your audience processes your text, or how they actually read. In addition to being interested in your ideas, these actual readers must wade through your words and sentences. Writers need to learn to anticipate the needs of their readers as well as the interests of their audiences.

Related Information: Guidelines for Readers

- *A title or lead-in that focuses accurately on the content of the text.* Readers don't like to be misled about the focus of the text.
- *Some sentences or paragraphs that set the context for this topic.* Readers like to know why they should read this text.
- *Sentences that give the thesis, claim, or main point of the text.* Readers want to know the main point in order to process the information in the text.
- *Paragraphs that focus on a single main idea.* Readers like to deal with one major idea at a time, to avoid becoming confused.
- *Transitions between paragraphs or major ideas.* Readers like to know how the previous idea is connected or related to the next idea.
- *Supporting evidence, facts, examples, statistics.* Readers want some proof for assertions that your text makes.
- *Clear sentences and an error-free style.* Readers don't want to be distracted by awkward sentences, spelling errors, or grammatical problems.

Additional Resources

Adelaide Writing Style Guide - ['Writing for Your Audience'](#)

Purdue OWL - ['Audience Analysis'](#)

Purdue OWL - ['Tone, Mood, and Audience'](#)

UMGC Writing Resources - ['Writing for an Audience'](#)

UNC Writing Center - ['Audience'](#)

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