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Audience Analysis

The audience is the most important part of any writing project; why else would it be written, if not for an audience to read it? Even your class notes have an audience—you! Have you ever had someone ask you to take notes for them and noticed that your note-taking style changed to make things clearer for them? You had a new audience! If you don't tailor your writing for your audience, you may fail to grab their attention, and your ideas may not be communicated. Determining who the audience will be and tailoring the document for that audience is an essential step of the writing process.

Who Are You Writing This For?

One trap many students seem to fall into is assuming that their audience is their instructor. This assumption may technically be true, but in many cases the purpose of writing for a class is to train the student to communicate about the subject that they are studying. Students may inadvertently hobble their writing and fall short of the goals of the course by assuming that their audience (the instructor) is already knowledgeable about their topic (because they just taught it to us!), when what the instructor actually wants is to see if the student can accurately convey their information to someone who has no background in it. An instructor is almost always happy to clarify their expectations.

Many academic topics are argumentative or informative, and thus it is best to try not to exclude any potential audiences. When in doubt, it doesn't hurt to assume that, at some point, someone who has never heard of this subject might read your paper. If you tailor your paper for this hypothetical reader, you can cover all of your bases.

There are also times when it is important to tailor your paper to a specific audience. Perhaps there is an audience who is specific to a topic, such as a paper addressed to experts who hold a specific belief in a specific field. It wouldn't make a lot of sense to appeal to a universal audience while trying to explain some facet of a field that very few people actually study, or even know about!

Some Things to Ask Yourself:

Who Cares?
Seriously, who cares about your topic? Is it something that everyone will (or at least should…) have some interest in, or is it a specific niche of information that will only catch the eye of a certain group of people? Who is going to pick up your paper and be interested in the topic?

Why Should They Care?
Why are you writing this? Why would they be interested in it? Is it something you feel everyone needs to hear about, or is it something that advances the knowledge of a specific area?

Once you've decided if it's a specific audience or more universal, you can break it down even further:

How much does the audience know about this, and how much do they NEED to know?

Are they familiar with your topic, or do you need to be thorough with your background? Will they understand your paper without that background? Are there specific points relating to your topic or findings that should be refreshed in the introduction? Should you assume there could be a reader in the future who might not be familiar with it, even if your initial audience is? Alternatively, are you flooding them with information that they don't really need? Is the background going to be tedious to read through if the audience is already an expert? Are they being forced to read through extraneous details that don't really enhance your conclusions?

How does the audience feel about this?

Is this a heated debate or a commonly held belief that you are challenging? Is it a new approach to something, where change might meet with resistance? Or is your audience going to be receptive to this idea? The audience's perspective can affect your approach to the topic and the tone you take when presenting your ideas.

What information is this paper going to provide that they do not already have?

What is the point of writing this? Why is it important to them? Is the conclusion going to be obvious to the audience, or do you need to elaborate more about the implications and importance of the findings?

What questions are they going to have?

If you were an audience member reading this for the first time, what might you have to say to the author? Can any of those questions be cleared up in the body of your paper? Putting yourself in the shoes of your audience can help in a vast number of ways; you will get an idea of whether you have thoroughly covered the topic, whether they have the right amount of detail available to them, and whether you have the right target audience in mind.

What is your relationship to the audience?

Are you a peer? An authority? A subordinate? Are you offering advice and suggestions, presenting evidence, or appealing for something? Will the audience be receptive or judgemental?

If you would like more help on determining the specifics of your audience, ask the ASC for more details.