

A Writer's Audience

Audience matters

When you're in the process of writing a paper, it's easy to forget that you are actually writing to someone. Whether you've thought about it consciously or not, you always write to an audience: sometimes your audience is a very generalized group of readers, sometimes you know your audience, and sometimes you write for yourself. Keeping your audience in mind while you write can help you make good decisions about what material to include, how to organize your ideas, and how best to support your argument.

Imagine you're writing to your grandmother to tell her about your first month of school. What details and stories might you include? What might you leave out? Now imagine that you're writing on the same topic but your audience is your best friend. Unless you have an extremely cool grandma to whom you're very close, it's likely that your two letters would look quite different in terms of content, structure, and even tone.

Isn't my teacher my audience?

Yes, your teacher is probably the actual audience for your paper. Your teachers read and grade your essays, and you want to keep their needs and perspectives in mind when you write. However, when you write an essay with only your teacher in mind, you might not say as much as you should or say it as clearly as you should, because you assume that the person grading it knows more than you do and will fill in the gaps. This leaves it up to the teacher to decide what you are really saying, and she might decide differently than you expect. For example, she might decide that those gaps show that you don't know and understand the material.

Thinking about your audience differently can improve your writing, especially in terms of how clearly you express your argument. The clearer your points are, the more likely you are to have a strong essay. By treating your teacher as an intelligent but uninformed audience, you end up addressing her more effectively.

How do I identify my audience and what they want from me?

Before you even begin the process of writing, take time to consider who your audience is and what they want from you. Use the following questions to help you identify your audience and what you can do to address their wants and needs.

- Who is your audience?
- Does your assignment itself give any clues about your audience?
- What does your audience need to know? What would they want to know?

- What is most important to them?
- What are they least likely to care about?
- What kind of organization would best help your audience understand and appreciate your writing?
- What do you have to say that might surprise your audience?
- What do you want your audience to think, learn, or assume about you?
- What impression do you want your writing to leave?

How much should I explain?

This is the hard part. The assignment may specify an audience for your paper; some-times the teacher will ask you to imagine that you are writing to your congressperson or for a group of your classmates. If the assignment doesn't specify an audience, you may find it most useful to imagine your classmates reading the paper, rather than your teacher.

Now, knowing your imaginary audience, what other clues can you get from the assignment? If the assignment asks you to summarize something that you have read, then your reader wants you to include more examples from the text than if the assignment asks you to interpret the passage.

Once you have a draft, try your level of explanation out on a friend or a classmate. Get the person to read your rough draft, and then ask her to talk to you about what she did and didn't understand. You will likely get one of the following responses or a combination of them:

If your listener/reader has tons of questions about what you are saying, then you probably need to explain more.

If your reader seems confused, you probably need to explain more clearly. So focus on making sure your examples and points are clear.

If your reader looks bored and can repeat back to you more details than she needs to know to get your point, you probably explained too much. Excessive detail can also be confusing, because it can bog the reader down and keep her from focusing on your main points.

Sometimes it's not the amount of explanation that matters, but the word choice and tone you adopt. Your word choice and tone need to match your audience's expectations.

Generally, you want your reader to know enough material to understand the points you are making.

Reading your own drafts

Writers tend to read over their own papers pretty quickly, with the knowledge of what they are trying to argue already in their minds. Reading in this way can cause you to skip over gaps in your written argument because the gap-filler is in your head. A problem occurs when your reader falls into these gaps. Your reader wants you to make the necessary connections from one thought or sentence to the next. When you don't, the reader can become confused or frustrated. Think about when you read something and you struggle to find the most important points or what the writer is trying to say. Isn't that annoying? Doesn't it make you want to quit reading and surf the web or call a friend?

Putting yourself in the reader's position

Instead of reading your draft as if you wrote it and know what you meant, try reading it as if you have no previous knowledge of the material. Have you explained enough? Are the connections clear? This can be hard to do at first. Consider using one of the following strategies:

Take a break from your work. If you write a paper the night before it's due, you make it almost impossible to read the paper with a fresh eye.

Try outlining after writing—after you have a draft, look at each paragraph separately. Write down the main point for each paragraph on a separate sheet of paper, in the order you have put them. Then look at your "outline"—does it reflect what you meant to say, in a logical order? This technique will help you find places where you may have confused your reader by straying from your original plan for the paper.

Read the paper aloud. Once you get used to it, you'll see that it helps you slow down and really consider how your reader experiences your text. It will also help you catch a lot of sentence-level errors, such as misspellings and missing words, which can make it difficult for your reader to focus on your argument.

These techniques can help you read your paper in the same way your reader will and make revisions that help your reader understand your argument. The more work you do, the less work your audience will have to do—and the more likely it is that your reader will follow and understand your argument.