

Brief Audience Refresher

From *The Norton Field Guide to Writing*

AUDIENCE

Who will read (or hear) what you are writing? A seemingly obvious but crucially important question. Your audience affects your writing in various ways. Consider a piece of writing as simple as a note left on the kitchen table:

Jon—

Please take the chicken out to thaw,

and don't forget to feed Annye.

Remember: Dr. Wong at 4.

Love,

Mom

On the surface, this brief note is a straightforward reminder to do three things. But in fact it is a complex message filled with compressed information for a specific audience. The writer (Mom) counts on the reader (her son) to know a lot that can be left unsaid. She expects that Jon knows that the chicken is in the freezer and needs to thaw in time to be cooked for dinner; she knows that he knows who Annye is (a pet?), what he or she is fed, and how much; she assumes that Jon knows who (and where) Dr. Wong is. She doesn't need to spell any of that out because she knows what Jon knows and what he needs to know—and in her note she can be brief. She understands her audience. Think how different such a reminder would be were it written to another audience—a babysitter, perhaps, or a friend helping out while Mom is out of town.

What you write, how much you write, how you phrase it, even your choice of genre (proposal, report, blog post, cover letter)—all are influenced by the audience you envision. And your audience will interpret your writing according to their expectations and experiences.

When you are a student, your teachers are most often your audience, so you need to be aware of their expectations and know the conventions (rules, often unstated) for writing in specific academic fields. You may make statements that seem obvious to you, not realizing that your instructors may consider them assertions that must be proved with evidence of one sort or another. Or you may write more or less formally than teachers expect. Understanding your

audience's expectations—by asking outright, by reading materials in a related field, by trial and error—is important to your success as a writer.

This point is worth dwelling on. You are probably reading this text for a writing course. As a student, you will be expected to produce essays with few or no errors. If you have a job in an office or correspond using email, you may question such standards; after all, much of the email you get at work or from friends is not grammatically perfect. But in a writing class, the instructor needs to see your best work. Whatever the rhetorical situation, your writing must meet the expectations of your audience.

Identify your audience. Audiences may be defined as *known*, *multiple*, or *unknown*. *Known audiences* can include people with whom you're familiar as well as people you don't know personally but whose needs and expectations you do know. You yourself are a known, familiar audience, and you write to and for yourself often. Class notes, to-do lists, reminders, and journals are all written primarily for an audience of one: you. For that reason, they are often in shorthand, full of references and code that you alone understand. Other known, familiar audiences include anyone you actually know—friends, relatives, teachers, classmates—and whose needs and expectations you understand. You can also know what certain readers want and need, even if you've never met them personally, if you write for them within a specific shared context. Such a known audience might include computer gamers who read instructions for beating a game that you have posted on the Internet; you don't know those people, but you know roughly what they know about the game and what they need to know, and you know how to write about it in ways they will understand.

You often have to write for *multiple audiences*. Business memos or reports may be written initially for a supervisor, but he or she may pass them along to others. Grant proposals are a good example: the National Cancer Institute Web site advises scientists applying for grants to bear in mind that the application may have six levels of readers—each, of course, with its own expectations and perspectives. Even writing for a class might involve multiple audiences: your instructor and your classmates.

Unknown audiences can be the most difficult to address since you can't be sure what they know, what they need to know, how they'll react. Such an audience could be your downstairs neighbor, whom you say hello to but with whom you've never had a real conversation; how will she respond to your letter asking her to sponsor you in an upcoming charity walk? Another unknown audience—perhaps surprisingly—might be many of your instructors, who want—and expect!—you to write in ways that are new to you. While you can benefit from analyzing any audience, you need to think most carefully about those you don't know.

Thinking about Audience — Questions for Reflection

- **Whom do you want to reach?** To whom are you writing (or speaking)?
- **What is your audience's background—their education and life experiences?** It may be important for you to know, for example, whether your readers attended college, fought in a war, or have young children.
- **What are their interests?** What do they like? What motivates them? What do they care about?
- **Is there any demographic information that you should keep in mind?** Consider whether race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, occupations, religious beliefs, economic status, and so on, should affect what or how you write. For example, writers for *Men's Health*, *InStyle*, and *Out* must consider the particular interests of each magazine's readers.
- **What political circumstances may affect their reading?** What attitudes—opinions, special interests, biases—may affect the way your audience reads your piece? Are your readers conservative, liberal, or middle of the road? Politics may take many other forms as well—retirees on a fixed income may object to increased school taxes, so a letter arguing for such an increase would need to appeal to them differently than would a similar letter sent to parents of young children.
- **What does your audience already know—or believe—about your topic? What do you need to tell them? What is the best way to do so?** Those retirees who oppose school

taxes already know that taxes are a burden for them; they may need to know why schools are justified in asking for more money every few years when other government organizations do not. A good way to explain this may be with a bar graph showing how good schools with adequate funding benefit property values. Consider which STRATEGIES will be effective—narrative, comparison, something else?

- **What's your relationship with your audience, and how does it affect your language and tone?** Do you know them, or not? Are they friends? colleagues? mentors? adversaries? completely unknown to you? Will they likely share your STANCE? In general, you need to write more formally when you're addressing readers you don't know, and you may address friends and colleagues more informally than you would a boss.
- **What does your audience need and expect from you?** Your history professor, for example, may need to know how well you can discuss the economy of the late Middle Ages in order to assess your learning; that same professor may expect you to write a carefully reasoned argument, drawing conclusions from various sources, with a readily identifiable thesis in the first paragraph. Your boss, on the other hand, may need an informal email that briefly lists your sales contacts for the day; she may expect that you list the contacts in the order in which you saw them, that you clearly identify each one, and that you give a few words about how well each contact went. What GENRE is most appropriate?
- **What kind of response do you want?** Do you want to persuade readers to do or believe something? to accept your information on a topic? to understand why an experience you once had matters to you?
- **How can you best appeal to your audience?** Is there a particular MEDIUM that will best reach them? Are there any DESIGN requirements? (Elderly readers may need larger type, for instance.)