

UNIT TWO

Audience and Purpose

- Determine how to meet the needs of a specific audience and a multiple audience

MEETING THE AUDIENCE'S NEEDS

Audience and reader are nearly interchangeable terms. As technical communication expands to include multimedia presentations, audience has a broader meaning. Sometimes the audience is not a reader, but a listener or an observer. On the Web, the reader also is an active participant. In any case, technical writers must know who the members of their audience are and what those readers need or want to know.

In the sample document on page 21, the writer knows who the audience is— potential blood donors. The focus is on the reader, and the writing shows an understanding of the reader's point of view. The Red Cross knows this reader well, obviously having heard these reasons many times. After identifying this audience, the writer systematically counters any objections with objective, precise, factual information.

Technical writing is written for both internal and external audiences. When Roweena, a dispatcher, writes a memo announcing pay increases to the police officers in her district, she is writing to the members of her organization—an internal audience. The author of “Top 10 reasons people don’t give blood” is writing for an external audience—people outside the organization.

In technical writing, the writer is transparent. A technical writer is like a member of a stage crew, a behind-the-scenes operator, whose primary obligation is to satisfy the audience's need for information. In a good play, the audience is barely aware of the crew at work who is moving sets and producing sound on cue, but without the crew, the show would not go on. Similarly, good writers produce work without drawing attention to their role.

Types of Audiences

You may write a poem or short story without the intention of sharing it with anyone. However, technical writing implies an audience, often a very specific audience, but sometimes a more varied audience. Your readers may be customers, coworkers, managers, subordinates, or the general public. Usually, your

relationship to your readers determines how you write your document—the tone you use, the formality of the language, and its medium.

■ **Lay reader:** a general reader without expert knowledge but with an interest in a subject. Readers of newspapers and magazines such as *Psychology Today* and *Popular Science* are lay readers.

Thus, a person from the Middle East will see news from the Middle East; a person from South Asia will see news from South.

■ **Technician:** a person with skilled knowledge in an area who implements the ideas or plans of the expert. Technicians, like lathe operators and network administrators, operate equipment, repair machinery, and train others. They read manuals, schematics (drawings), blueprints (design plan) and technical reports.

■ **Expert:** an authority in a particular field who is highly skilled and professional, perhaps with an advanced degree. Experts design equipment, conduct research, and create new products. Experts such as medical doctors and engineers contribute to professional journals such as the *Journal of the American*

■ **Manager:** a person who organizes personnel and is responsible for the day-to-day operations as well as long-range planning. Upper-level managers are leaders responsible for creating a vision and moving the organization forward. Depending on their level of expert knowledge, managers may read feasibility reports, research reports, financial reports, or professional articles.

A reader can fall into more than one category. Thinking through the categories will help you make decisions about how best to communicate with your audience.

Meeting the Needs of a Specific Audience

Do you understand the message below? It is written in Morse code—letters as a series of dots and dashes transmitted as sounds, lights, or electrical pulses. Many people have no need to know Morse code. They are not the target audience. Therefore, the message fails to communicate.

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A Navy radio operator during World War I would have understood this code. The operator's audience shared a common mission: to receive important military messages over long distances. In short, the Navy radio operator used Morse code to meet the highly specific needs of a particular audience.

The Navy operator is the **target audience**, the audience for which the message is written, the audience to which the writer is writing by using language this reader will understand.

To communicate successfully, you must speak the "language" of your audience. Failure to speak in terms that your reader expects creates a barrier that prevents communication, much the same way the Morse

code keeps you from understanding its message. But to speak the language, you must know who the audience is. Your audience may be a **specific audience** (a single person or a group whose point of view is the same), or your audience may be a **multiple audience** (readers whose points of view differ). Once you know your audience, you can plan ways to appeal to your reader(s).

To help you target the needs of a specific group, gather information about the **demographics** of the group—information such as the age, sex, income, and educational level of your group. If you are planning to advertise a new day care center, for example, your target audience would be working parents with young children. You might look at census data to find out where to advertise your new center. If you are designing a website for retirees, look into what retirees are interested in—for example, health care, recreational activities, and travel.

As a writer, the friendly relationship with your readers is also important. Are they customers, managers, peers, or subordinates? Your relationship will determine how you write your document—the tone you use, the formality of your document, and its medium.

The reader's needs determine what kind of information the writer supplies. When your manager needs to know the cost of hiring an administrative assistant, you provide cost. When the maintenance crew wants an e-mail that provides information about mosquito repellent, you research repellents and send the crew members an e-mail with your information. When the audience is unsure of its needs, the writer helps the audience think through the communication situation.

In technical writing, one rule dominates: *The needs and wants of your audience dictate every decision you make as a writer.* The writer uses a skill to provide a valuable service. Think of it this way: The writer is the server, and the audience is the person ordering from the menu. If the person ordering requests a salad with no tomatoes and Italian dressing on the side, the server obliges!

Analyze Your Target Audience

Sometimes your audience is a specific person or group with a common interest. After you identify the readers in your target audience, consider how their knowledge level, roles, interests, cultural background, and personalities may influence what you write and how you write it. Age, experience, attitude, organizational distance, income, and politics may affect the language you choose to communicate successfully. Targeting the special needs of a specific audience requires a writer to consider several factors at once. Understanding your audience's knowledge level, role, interests, cultural background, and personality is the first step to successful communication.

Attending to the needs and wants of your audience is much like attending to a special guest in your home. You are aware of this person's presence, and you make every effort to make this person feel welcomed. For example, a Spanish-speaking exchange student from Chile spoke English moderately well and enjoyed playing the guitar. His American host family attended to his needs and wants by defining unfamiliar words and borrowing a guitar for him to play. Just as the host family gave special consideration to the Chilean student, you should consider your audience by making every effort to **accommodate** (adjust to, make concessions for) your audience's needs and wants.

Knowledge Level

What people know and how well they know it varies widely from one person to the next.

Role

Consider your reader's **role** or his or her area of responsibility before you begin writing. A role is the function or job that someone performs at work. Role or job title affects not only knowledge level, but also the information your reader thinks is important.

Understand your reader's role and accommodate it. An accountant is concerned about her company's finances. If you write a memo to the accounting office about a planned purchase, you should accommodate the accountant's role by including information about cost. The technician who reads the same memo may be more interested in how to operate equipment being purchased, having little concern about the cost. For the technician, you should include sufficient information about the technical aspects of the equipment.

Interest

When your readers are interested in your subject, they read with greater enthusiasm. Where you find common interest, take advantage of it. Where there is none, try to create it. Some readers, however, will never be interested in your subject. Accept those readers' lack of interest and focus on giving them the information they need.

Interest can be affected by age, experience, cultural background, and role. Your interests now are different from what they were ten years ago because you have a wider range of experiences. The camping and fishing trips you enjoyed as a child may have been replaced by long motor trips and concerts as a young adult. If everyone in your family enjoys eating black beans and rice, you may have a taste for those foods because of your background. Right now your role is to be a student. When you join the workforce, your interests will be determined in part by your professional role.

Cultural Background

Culture the special beliefs, customs, and values specific to a particular group of people or to a particular region—affects what an audience considers to be proper behavior. Many beliefs regarding human relations are affected by an individual's cultural background. By failing to consider someone's cultural background, you risk offending your reader and creating barriers in the communication process. Your goal is to open the lines of communication and reach out to all of your readers.

In the United States, regional cultural differences affect communication. In the South, many parents insist that their children say, "Yes, ma'am," "No, ma'am," "Yes, sir," and "No, sir" to their elders as a sign of respect and proper etiquette. Other regions of the country do not rely as heavily on these endearments. While "Yes, ma'am" and "Yes, sir" are expected as polite gestures in one region of the country, the expressions may sound out of place—even offensive—in another region. Some people begin a telephone conversation with small talk, asking how the person or his or her family is, as a prelude to conducting business. Yet other people consider such small talk to be too personal or a waste of time.

U.S. businesses are becoming increasingly global. American-based businesses have interests abroad in countries such as Mexico, Argentina, Turkey, and India. Many documents are read by audiences outside the United States whose cultural differences affect communication. Where American business personnel perceive directness as a sign of open and honest business dealings, other cultures consider this approach brash and insensitive. Where American business relies heavily on written agreements (“put it in writing” and “read the fine print”), other cultures trust oral communication. Understanding these differences is imperative to accommodating your audience’s cultural background.

Personality

Personality can be affected by culture, heredity, age, experience, and role. Also, someone’s personality can shape his or her work habits. A legal researcher who prefers to work alone may appreciate receiving instructions via e-mail and therefore enjoys reading her e-mail. Someone who prefers working in a group may want to receive oral instructions in a meeting so he can share his reaction with others. For him, e-mail may be a nuisance. When communicating, you may not know your readers well enough to make judgments about their personalities. But if you do, you can tailor your communication style appropriately.

Before you begin to write a technical document, analyze your audience to determine their special needs.

ASK THESE QUESTIONS MAKE THESE ACCOMMODATIONS

Knowledge Level

What does my reader already know about the topic?

Is my reader an expert, a technician, or a lay reader?

What does my reader need to know?

What does my reader want to know?

Add particular knowledge that your audience does not have. Leave out or quickly summarize knowledge your audience already has. Decide how much technical language to include. Use informal definitions or a glossary if necessary. Present complex information visually.

Interests

How strong is my reader’s interest in my topic?

Are my reader’s priorities different from mine or the same as mine?

Is my reader likely to agree with my point of view?

Appeal to known interests or try to create interest. Express agreement with and understanding of a point of view when possible. Provide evidence to help sway others to your point of view.

Role

Is my reader’s role -to make decisions or implement a plan? - to operate equipment, encode data,

train others? -to create or design or invent?

Is my communication going to management, to a peer, or to a supervisee?

Include knowledge the role requires— planning parameters for managers, technical details for technicians. Write different sections for different roles. Be diplomatic with management, courteous yet straightforward with a peer, and respectful and direct with someone you supervise.

Cultural Background

What is my reader's cultural background?

What are my reader's beliefs?

Are my reader's beliefs different from mine or the same as mine?

Understand how culture affects someone's beliefs and decisions. Learn about the cultural background of your audience and adhere to the cultural norms of that audience as much as possible.

Personality

What kind of personality does my reader have?

Is my reader analytical, quiet, or outgoing?

Does my reader prefer having details or seeing the big picture?

Adjust tone and medium to personality. Provide facts, order, and evidence for the analytically minded; a personal touch for facilitators; and ideas and the overall picture for creative thinkers.

Meeting the Needs of a Multiple Audience

Shakespeare was arguably the greatest writer who ever lived. His success depended on his wit, knowledge of theater, and understanding of his audience. As a businessperson, Shakespeare knew that he had to please England's royal family as well as the peasants who came to see his plays. He had to appeal to young and old, to men and women, to the educated and the uneducated. In the sixteenth century, Shakespeare wrote successfully to a multiple audience, an audience made up of multiple interests, with members whose needs and wants sometimes conflicted with one another.

Today technical writers face a similar challenge writing to an audience that can include executives, managers and administrative assistants.

In his day, Shakespeare was clever—he wrote different parts of the same play for different people. Today his “different parts for different folks” strategy is used by technical writers too. But technical writers go one step further.

WRITER'S FOCUS

They “label” the parts with headings, short titles preceding sections of the document to alert readers to the information written for them. Analyzing the audience's needs and providing information in the best possible way for the audience to understand.

Another strategy for meeting the diverse needs of a multiple audience is to determine who comes first—whose needs are most important. To decide what data to focus on as you write, divide your audience into two groups: **primary audience** and **secondary audience**. Think of the primary audience as readers or listeners to whom you are responsible first and the secondary audience as readers or listeners to whom you are responsible after having met the needs of the primary audience. Both audiences are important, but as a writer, you must organize your tasks according to some kind of priority.

Focus on Ethics

As a writer, to **avoid biased language**, you must be aware of stereotypes (fixed images) in your writing. Sometimes the stereotype is so engrained in the culture that you do not realize you are using biased language. You probably know that you should **avoid sexist language in your writing** (referring to men and women differently), but stereotypes include more than gender. People also can be stereotyped because of race, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental abilities, religion, ethnicity, and weight.

In your writing, strive to **present everyone as being equal**. There are several ways to do this. First, avoid sexist language by referring to men and women the same way. **For example, do not assume that all doctors are men and that all nurses are women**. Avoid using examples that reinforce stereotypes.

Do not mention a person's physical characteristics if they are not relevant. If you would not say, "Our new software developer is Max, a smart white man without disabilities," then do not say, "Our new software developer is Sandra, a smart white woman with physical disabilities."

Sometimes you are not aware of the biased language. **If you are not sure whether you have used stereotypes in your writing, ask another person to look over the document.**

PLANNING YOUR DOCUMENT'S PURPOSE, SCOPE AND LIMITATION

Understanding who your audience is and what they need and want is an important part of your job as a writer. However, you have other decisions to make before you are ready to write. Early in the writing process, determine the purpose of your document, its scope, and the medium you will use.

Purpose

Purpose is defined as a specific end or outcome to be obtained. It is what a writer wants a reader to do after reading a document. **In technical writing, the purpose is to inform or persuade.** Quite often the purpose is both. Because much technical writing is intended to persuade, you need to **consider your topic from the readers' points of view**. How will your readers react to the information you provide? For them, is the information good or bad news? With whom or what are you competing for your readers' attention? Is there a time limit for responding? Are your readers required to read your document? In other words, how hard must you work to get and keep your readers' attention? You should address these and other concerns as you think about the purpose of your document.

To determine the specific purpose of your writing assignment, ask yourself a couple of basic questions:

What do I want to inform my readers about? ■

What do I want to persuade or convince them of? ■

What do I want to happen as a result of this document? ■ To determine the purpose of your writing, ask additional questions to figure out what you want to happen as a result of the document. What do you want your readers to do? What do you want them to know, to buy, to believe, to give? What would you like them to learn to do or change their minds about? Would you like them to stop doing something or start doing something? When you answer those questions, you will know the purpose of your document.

A statement of purpose may be to inform citizens of the latest employment trends or to convince the public to purchase smoke alarms. The persuasive purpose also implies providing information. Thus, a purpose to persuade becomes a purpose to inform, too.

Scope

Once you have a clear, stated purpose, you must decide the following: How thorough will my coverage be? What information do I include and omit? Here you use your audience analysis and statement of purpose to make decisions about the **scope** of your writing—the extent of treatment, activity, or influence, that is, what is and is not included.

Suppose you are writing instructions telling car owners how to change a tire. You have settled on this statement of purpose: The user should be able to change a tire after reading my instructions. If you wonder whether to include information about how to select a dependable tire or how often to rotate tires, you could review your statement of purpose and say to yourself, No, my purpose is to explain how to change a tire, not to sell tires or inform users about proper tire maintenance. If you are wondering whether to tell your reader that changing a tire is not difficult and that it is an important survival skill, you can ask yourself this question: Will this information help me achieve my purpose with this audience? In other words, will it help my drivers change a tire? The answer is yes. You want to include anything that motivates your reader to perform your process.

Medium

Finally, you need to choose a medium for delivering your message. Today technology gives you many options.

The **medium** is a means by which information is conveyed (for example, a television commercial). What kind of document will you produce? Will it be printed? What medium will accomplish your purpose and appeal to your audience?

As you are making your decision, ask yourself three questions:

1. Is the medium appropriate for my audience, message, and purpose?
2. Is the time and money required to produce the medium worth the possible outcome?
3. What media are available to me?

Using the interactive CD complete with video for your 85-page proposal certainly takes advantage of the features made possible by technology. But is it appropriate for your audience? Such a presentation could generate more interest than the printed page. The CD is compact, is easy to produce and mail, provides many options for retrieval, and may appeal to an audience's fascination with technology. Once the CD is loaded, users have more choices. They can print some or all of the content.

Think Critically

To help you decide what medium is appropriate, find out what kind of media are typically used in your organization. Your local department of social services may use e-mail for routine communication and interoffice mail for important memos and intake reports. The state agency, however, may expect e-mail attachments for monthly participation reports. Work at the national level may best be presented on a website from which PowerPoint® presentations and brochures can be downloaded and printed.

While many businesses have state-of-the-art computer equipment and fast Internet connections, some small businesses, such as Air Care's home heating and air-conditioning business, may have only a computer, a printer, and a minimum amount of accounting and word processing software. You, like Ramon, the owner of Air Care, may find yourself in a field for which you are well prepared professionally but not as adept with desktop publishing. So CD-ROMs and web pages are not yet options for everyone. Perhaps well- designed sales proposals, invoices, and interoffice memos meet the needs of this environment.

Communication Dilemma

The **format** of your medium deals with the details of the document's arrangement: the type of document, its length, the preferred style manual, and its organization. Just as your English instructor may prefer that your essays be written a particular way, your employer also may prefer that your document be written a certain way. Your English instructor may require papers to be keyed and double-spaced using the guidelines from the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Your business or psychology instructor may require another style guide, such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* or the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

An employer may expect you to follow a company style sheet (with suggested headings and a specified way to present data) and include the company letterhead (with the logo, address, and slogan).

Traditionally, correspondence outside an organization uses a business letter and correspondence inside an organization uses a memo. Furthermore, the level of formality may depend on the subject matter, the audience, and company standards.

Today electronic formats consisting of e-mail, CD-ROM, online help, and web-based information are changing traditional ways of communicating. E-mail is an informal and quick (although not always reliable) way to communicate and can be used for inside and outside correspondence. Forms and procedures can be posted on a company's intranet web server where templates set up for page layouts ensure design consistency.

Technical writers have many avenues with which to convey information. Writers' many choices provide them with creative and innovative solutions to any communication challenge.