

# Audience Analysis

## Overview

Audience analysis involves identifying the audience and adapting a speech to their interests, level of understanding, attitudes, and beliefs. Taking an audience-centered approach is important because a speaker's effectiveness will be improved if the presentation is created and delivered in an appropriate manner. Identifying the audience through extensive research is often difficult, so audience adaptation often relies on the healthy use of imagination.

As with many valuable tools, audience analysis can be used to excess. Adapting a speech to an audience is not the same thing as simply telling an audience what they want to hear. Audience analysis does not mean 'grandstanding' or 'kowtowing' to a public. Rather, adaptation guides the stylistic and content choices a speaker makes for a presentation. Audience adaptation often involves walking a very fine line between over-adapting and under-adapting – a distinction that can be greater appreciated by understanding the general components of this skill. The Communications Department offers [tips for analyzing an audience](#).

Think of a time when you heard a speech that sounded "canned" or that fell flat because the audience didn't "get it." Chances are that this happened because the speaker neglected to consider that public speaking is an audience-centered activity. Worse, lack of consideration for one's audience can result in the embarrassment of alienating listeners by telling a joke they don't appreciate, or using language they find offensive. The best way to reduce the risk of such situations is to conduct an audience analysis as you prepare your speech.

Audience analysis is the process of gathering information about the people in your audience so that you can understand their needs, expectations, beliefs, values, attitudes, and likely opinions. In this chapter, we will first examine some reasons why audience analysis is important. We will then describe three different types of audience analysis and some techniques to use in conducting audience analysis. Finally, we will explain how you can use your audience analysis not only during the creation of your speech but also while you are delivering it.

# Audience Analysis Factors

## Audience expectations

When people become audience members in a speech situation, they bring with them expectations about the occasion, topic, and speaker. Violating audience expectations can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the speech. Imagine that a local politician is asked to speak at the memorial service for a beloved former mayor. The audience will expect the politician's speech to praise the life and career of the deceased.

If the politician used the opportunity to discuss a piece of legislation, the audience would probably be offended and the speaker would lose credibility. Of course, there may be some situations when violating the audience's expectations would be an effective strategy. Presenters that make political statements at the Academy Awards do so precisely because the message's incongruity with the occasion increases the impact of the proclamation.

## Knowledge of topic

Audience knowledge of a topic can vary widely on any given occasion, therefore, communicators should find out what their audience already knows about the topic. Never overestimate the audience's knowledge of a topic. If a speaker launches into a technical discussion of genetic engineering but the listeners are not familiar with basic genetics, they will be unable to follow your speech and quickly lose interest. On the other hand, drastically underestimating the audience's knowledge may result in a speech that sounds condescending.

Try to do some research to find out what the audience already knows about the topic. Giving a brief review of important terms and concepts is almost always appropriate, and can sometimes be done by acknowledging the heterogeneous audience and the importance of 'putting everyone on the same page.' For example, even if the audience members were familiar with basic genetics, a

brief review of key term and concepts at the beginning of a speech refreshes memories without being patronizing.

## Attitude toward topic

Knowing audience members' attitudes about a topic will help a speaker determine the best way to reach their goals. Imagine that a presenter is trying to convince the community to build a park. A speaker would probably be inclined to spend the majority of the speech giving reasons why a park would benefit the community.

However, if they found out ahead of time that most neighbors thought the park was a good idea but they were worried about safety issues, then the speaker could devote their time to showing them that park users would be safer in the park than they currently are playing in the streets. The persuasive power of the speech is thus directed at the most important impediment to the building of a park.

## Audience size

Many elements of speech-making change in accordance with audience size. In general, the larger the audience the more formal the presentation should be. Sitting down and using common language when speaking to a group of 10 people is often quite appropriate. However, that style of presentation would probably be inappropriate or ineffective if you were speaking to 1,000 people. Large audiences often require that you use a microphone and speak from an elevated platform.

## Demographics

The demographic factors of an audience include age, gender, religion, ethnic background, class, sexual orientation, occupation, education, group membership, and countless other categories. Since these categories often organize individual's identities and experiences, a wise speaker attends to them. Politicians usually pay a great deal of attention to demographic factors when they

are on the campaign trail. If a politician speaks in Day County, Florida (the county with the largest elderly population) they will likely discuss the issues that are more relevant to people in that age range – Medicare and Social Security.

Communicators must be careful about stereotyping an audience based on demographic information – individuals are always more complicated than a simplistic identity category. Also, be careful not to pander exclusively to interests based on demographics. For example, the elderly certainly are concerned with political issues beyond social security and Medicare. Using demographic factors to guide speech-making does not mean changing the goal of the speech for every different audience; rather, consider what pieces of information (or types of evidence) will be most important for members of different demographic groups.

## Setting

The setting of a presentation can influence the ability to give a speech and the audience's ability and desire to listen. Some of these factors are: the set-up of the room (both size and how the audience is arranged), time of day, temperature, external noises (lawn mowers, traffic), internal noises (babies crying, hacking coughs), and type of space (church, schoolroom, outside). Finding out ahead of time the different factors going into the setting will allow a speaker to adapt their speech appropriately. Will there be a stage? Will there be a podium or lectern? What technology aids will be available? How are the seats arranged? What is the order of speakers?

While these issues may appear minor compared to the content of the speech and the make-up of the audience, this foreknowledge will soothe nerves, assist in developing eye contact, and ensure that the appropriate technology, if necessary, is available. Take into account the way that the setting will affect audience attention and participation. People are usually tired after a meal and late in the day. If scheduled to speak at 1:00 PM, a speaker may have to make the speech more entertaining through animation or humor, exhibit more enthusiasm, or otherwise involve the audience in order to keep their attention.

# Voluntariness

Audiences are either voluntary, in which case they are genuinely interested in what a presenter has to say, or involuntary, in which case they are not inherently interested in the presentation. Knowing the difference will assist in establishing how hard a speaker needs to work to spark the interest of the audience. Involuntary audiences are notoriously hard to generate and maintain interest in a topic (think about most people's attitudes toward classes or mandatory meetings they would prefer to not attend.)

# Egocentrism

Most audience members are egocentric: they are generally most interested in things that directly affect them or their community. An effective speaker must be able to show their audience why the topic they are speaking on should be important to them.

# Types of Audience Analysis

An audience analysis is a process used to identify and understand the priority and influencing audiences for a SBCC strategy. The [priority](#) and [influencing audiences](#) are those people whose behavior must change in order to improve the health situation. A complete audience analysis looks at:

- [Socio-demographic](#) characteristics such as sex, age, language and religion.
- Geographic characteristics like where the audience lives and how that might impact behavior.
- [Psychographic](#) characteristics such as needs, hopes, concerns and aspirations.
- Audience *thoughts, beliefs, knowledge* and *current actions* related to the health or social issue.
- [Barriers](#) and [facilitators](#) that prevent or encourage audience members to adopt the desired behavior change.
- [Gender](#) and how it impacts audience members' behavior and ability to change.

- Effective *communication channels* for reaching the audience.

Socio-Demographic	Geographic	Psychographic	Communication Channels	Other Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sex or gender</li> <li>• Age range</li> <li>• Education level</li> <li>• Job type</li> <li>• Language</li> <li>• Ethnicity</li> <li>• Religion</li> <li>• Household size or number of children</li> <li>• Level of income</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Occupation</li> </ul> <p><b>Sources:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DHS</li> <li>• Census Data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Region</li> <li>• District</li> <li>• City</li> <li>• Urban</li> <li>• Rural</li> </ul> <p><b>Sources:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Census Data</li> <li>• Local Government Data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Needs or concerns</li> <li>• Hopes and aspirations</li> <li>• Values</li> <li>• Interests</li> <li>• Activities</li> <li>• Attitudes and opinions</li> <li>• Lifestyle</li> <li>• Personality traits</li> </ul> <p><b>Sources:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Market research</li> <li>• Consumer surveys</li> <li>• Media reports</li> <li>• Project research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequent vs. occasional use</li> <li>• Use for general information</li> <li>• Use for health information</li> </ul> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community media</li> <li>• Print</li> <li>• Radio</li> <li>• Television</li> <li>• Mobile phone</li> <li>• Social media</li> </ul> <p><b>Sources:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media reports</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where audiences spend time</li> <li>• Activities audiences already participate in</li> </ul> <p><b>Examples:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community events</li> <li>• Health clinics</li> <li>• Religious institutions</li> <li>• Health fairs</li> <li>• Schools and school events</li> </ul>

## 1. DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

As indicated earlier, demographic information includes factors such as gender, age range, marital status, race and ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. In your public speaking class, you probably already know how many students are male and female, their approximate ages, and so forth. But how can you assess the demographics of an audience ahead of time if you have had no previous contact with them? In many cases, you can ask the person or organization that has invited you to speak; it's likely that they can tell you a lot about the demographics of the people who are expected to come to hear you.

Whatever method you use to gather demographics, exercise respect from the outset. For instance, if you are collecting information about whether audience members have ever been divorced, be aware that not everyone will want to answer your questions. You can't require them to do so, and you may not make assumptions about their reluctance to discuss the topic. You must allow them their privacy.

Demographic audience analysis includes taking in factors such as age, gender, race, culture, ethnicity, marital status, socio-economic conditions, education, occupation, etc. For example, if the subject is healthcare and the audience is in their late fifties, your speech should be geared towards age-appropriate recommendations for a healthy lifestyle.

## **2. PSYCHOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS**

Psychographic is one of the types of audience analysis that covers understanding the attitudes, beliefs, values and thinking patterns of your audience.

Values such as freedom, honesty, justice, patriotism, equality are universal and cherished by most audiences. The audience is likely to respect you and want to hear from you if your speech reflects any of these values.

## **3. SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS**

Situational audience analysis includes factors such as audience size, the occasion, the room layout, the stage layout, motivation, or interest level of the audience.

If your audience is smaller, there is a possibility of developing a [rapport](#) with each member. Tailor your data and delivery to the occasion—what you will say at a corporate conference will differ widely from your talk at a momentous family function.

## **4. MULTICULTURAL ANALYSIS**

The content of your speech should acknowledge the diversity of your audience.

Different cultures have different value systems and behavior patterns. Being judgemental in your speech creates a negative impact. Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity should be part of your audience analysis.

Some other types of audience analysis are:

- Is it a niche audience with a high level of expertise or a general audience without any specialization in the subject matter? Consider this before using jargon or terms of art.

- Why are they investing their time in your speech? What inputs do they need from you?
- Do a knowledge analysis of your audience and put your best foot forward. Let your confidence and competence win over the audience.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Demographic audience analysis focuses on group memberships of audience members.
- Another element of audience is psychographic information, which focuses on audience attitudes, beliefs, and values.
- Situational analysis of the occasion, physical setting, and other factors are also critical to effective audience analysis.

## Conducting Audience Analysis

Now that we have described what audience analysis is and why it is important, let's examine some details of how to conduct it. Exactly how can you learn about the people who will make up your audience?

### Direct Observation

One way to learn about people is to observe them. By observing nonverbal patterns of behavior, you can learn a great deal as long as you are careful how you interpret the behaviors. For instance, do people greet each other with a handshake, a hug, a smile, or a nod? Do members of opposite sexes make physical contact? Does the setting suggest more conservative behavior? By listening in on conversations, you can find out the issues that concern people. Are people in the campus center talking about political unrest in the Middle East? About concerns over future Pell Grant funding? We suggest that you consider the ethical dimensions of eavesdropping, however. Are you simply overhearing an open conversation, or are you prying into a highly personal or private discussion?



## Interviews and Surveys

Because your demographic analysis will be limited to your most likely audience, your most accurate way to learn about them is to seek personal information through interviews and surveys.

An interview is a one-on-one exchange in which you ask questions of a respondent, whereas a survey is a set of questions administered to several—or, preferably, many—respondents.

Interviews may be conducted face-to-face, by phone, or by written means, such as texting. They allow more in-depth discussion than surveys, and they are also more time consuming to conduct.

Surveys are also sometimes conducted face-to-face or by phone, but online surveys are increasingly common.

You may collect and tabulate survey results manually, or set up an automated online survey through the free or subscription portals of sites like **Survey Monkey** and **Zoomerang**. Using an online survey provides the advantage of keeping responses anonymous, which may increase your audience members' willingness to participate and to answer personal questions. Surveys are an efficient way to collect information quickly; however, in contrast to interviews, they don't allow for follow-up questions to help you understand why your respondent gave a certain answer.

When you use interviews and surveys, there are several important things to keep in mind:

- Make sure your interview and survey questions are directly related to your speech topic. Do not use interviews to delve into private areas of people's lives. For instance, if your speech is about the debate between creationism and evolution, limit your questions to their opinions about that topic; do not meander into their beliefs about sexual behavior or their personal religious practices.
- Keep interviews and surveys short, or you could alienate your audience long before your speech is even outlined. Tell them the purpose of the interview or survey and make sure they understand that their participation is voluntary.
- Don't rely on just a few respondents to inform you about your entire audience. In all likelihood, you have a cognitively diverse audience. In order to accurately identify trends, you will likely need to interview or survey at least ten to twenty people.

In addition, when you conduct interviews and surveys, keep in mind that people are sometimes less than honest in describing their beliefs, attitudes, and behavior. This widely recognized weakness of interviews and survey research is known as *socially desirable responding*: You can

reduce the effects of socially desirable responding by choosing your questions carefully. As marketing consultant Terry Vavra advises, “one should never ask what one can’t logically expect respondents to honestly reveal.” Vavra, T. G. (2009, June 14). The truth about truth in survey research. Retrieved from <http://www.terryvavra.com/customer-research/the-truth-about-truth-in-survey-research> For example, if you want to know audience members’ attitudes about body piercing, you are likely to get more honest answers by asking “Do you think body piercing is attractive?” rather than “How many piercings do you have and where on your body are they located?”

## **Focus Groups**

A focus group is a small group of people who give you feedback about their perceptions. As with interviews and surveys, in a focus group you should use a limited list of carefully prepared questions designed to get at the information you need to understand their beliefs, attitudes, and values specifically related to your topic.

If you conduct a focus group, part of your task will be striking a balance between allowing the discussion to flow freely according to what group members have to say and keeping the group focused on the questions. It’s also your job to guide the group in maintaining responsible and respectful behavior toward each other. In evaluating focus group feedback, do your best to be receptive to what people had to say, whether or not it conforms to what you expected. Your purpose in conducting the group was to understand group members’ beliefs, attitudes, and values about your topic, not to confirm your assumptions.

## **Using Existing Data about Your Audience**

Occasionally, existing information will be available about your audience. For instance, if you have a student audience, it might not be difficult to find out what their academic majors are. You might also be able to find out their degree of investment in their educations; for instance, you could reasonably assume that the seniors in the audience have been successful students who have invested at least three years pursuing a higher education. Sophomores have at least survived their

first year but may not have matched the seniors in demonstrating strong values toward education and the work ethic necessary to earn a degree.

## **References**

<https://www.comm.pitt.edu/oral-comm-lab/audience-analysis>