Part 3: Planning messages

3.3 Audience analysis

John Thill and Courtland Bovee (Thill & Bovee, 2004), two leading authors in the field of business communication, have created a checklist for planning business messages. The following twelve-item checklist, adapted here, serves as a useful reminder of the importance of preparation in the writing process:

1. Determine your general purpose: are you trying to inform, persuade, entertain, facilitate interaction, or motivate a reader?
2. Determine your specific purpose (the desired outcome).
3. Make sure your purpose is realistic.
4. Make sure your timing is appropriate.
5. Make sure your sources are credible.
6. Make sure the message reflects positively on your business.
7. Determine audience size.

8. Determine audience composition.
9. Determine audience knowledge and awareness of topic.
10. Anticipate probable responses.
11. Select the correct channel.
12. Make sure the information provided is accurate, ethical, and pertinent.

Throughout the next few chapters, we will examine these various steps in greater detail.
The audience any piece of writing is the intended or potential reader or readers. This should be *the most important* consideration in planning, writing, and reviewing a document. You "adapt" your writing to meet the needs, interests, and background of the readers who will be reading your writing.

The principle seems absurdly simple and obvious. It's much the same as telling someone, "Talk so the person in front of you can understand what you're saying." It's like saying, "Don't talk rocket science to your six-year-old." Do we need a course in that? Doesn't seem like it. But, in fact, lack of audience analysis and adaptation is one of the root causes of most of the problems you find in business documents.

Audiences, regardless of category, must also be analyzed in terms of characteristics such as the following:

- **Background—knowledge, experience, training:** One of your most important concerns is just how much knowledge, experience, or training you can expect in your readers. If you expect some of your readers to lack certain background, do you automatically supply it in your document? Consider an example: imagine you're writing a guide to using a software product that runs under Microsoft Windows. How much can you expect your readers to know about Windows? If some are likely to know little about Windows, should you provide that information? If you say no, then you run the risk of customers' getting frustrated with your product. If you say yes to adding background information on Windows, you increase your work effort and add to the page count of the document (and thus to the cost). Obviously, there's no easy answer to this question—part of the answer may involve just how small a segment of the audience needs that background information.
- **Needs and interests:** To plan your document, you need to know what your audience is going to expect from that document. Imagine how readers will want to use your document and what will they demand from it.

For example, imagine you are writing a manual on how to use a new smart phone—what are your readers going to expect to find in it? Imagine you're under contract to write a background report on climate change for a national real estate association—what do they want to read about and, equally important, what do they *not* want to read about?

- **Different cultures:** If you write for an international audience, be aware that formats for indicating time and dates, monetary amounts, and numerical amounts vary across the globe. Also be aware that humour and figurative language (as in "hit a home run") are not likely to be understood outside of your own culture.
- **Other demographic characteristics:** There are many other characteristics about your readers that *might* have an influence on how you should design and write your document—for example, age groups, type of residence, area of residence, gender, political preferences, and so on.

Audience analysis can get complicated by other factors, such as mixed audience types for one document and wide variability within the audience.

- **More than one audience.** You may often find that your business message is for more than one audience. For example, it may be seen by technical people (experts and technicians) and administrative people (executives). What to do? You can either write all the sections so that all the audiences of your document can understand them (good luck!), or you can write each section strictly for the audience that would be interested in it, then use headings and section introductions to alert your audience about where to go and what to avoid in your report.
- **Wide variability in an audience.** You may realize that, although you have an audience that fits into only one category, there is a wide variability in its background. This is a tough one—if you write to the lowest common denominator of reader, you're likely to end up with a cumbersome, tedious book-like thing that will turn off the majority of readers. But if you don't write to that lowest level, you lose that segment of your readers. What to do? Most writers go for the majority of readers and sacrifice that minority that needs more help. Others put the supplemental information in appendices or insert cross-references to beginners' books.

Reference

Thill, J. V., & Bovee, C. L. (2004). *Business communication today (8th ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

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