Audience Analysis 1 – Theory & Practice

Audience, a.k.a. "end users", is a very important factor when you're writing a technical document. For a technical document to be effective, it has to be appropriate for its intended audience. That's one fundamental truth you have to keep in mind when creating your guides and manuals.

However, as a technical writer producing document since 1998, I have to tell you that determining your audience is not always easy. And there is research that supports that statement. **David L. Carson of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute** (who passed away in 2003) for example said a technical writer usually performs his or her job with little or no knowledge about the audience. Tech writers usually write with a fictitious and imagined "general audience" in mind. I agree with Carson totally since my day-to-day experience supports that assertion.

And what does it mean to "determine" who the audience is?

One way to approach this question is to look at the DEMOGRAPHICAL, EDUCATIONAL and SOCIAL/CULTURAL PROFILE of the audience like

- The age group of the audience

- The gender profile of the audience (if relevant at all)

- Ethnic, national or racial profile (if relevant at all)

- General educational level of the audience

- The background the audience has in the topic

- The interest and motivation of the audience

Let's explain with an example why some of these factors might be important when writing a technical document.

AGE & EDUCATION – if your audience consists of senior citizens, they may not know what a "server" is or what a "terabyte" represents. You may have to take your time explaining such technical terms. But for a younger college-age audience there may not be a need to do that. Actually if you do that there is a chance that you may alienate your young and educated audience.

A special case: if your audience is a group of retirees who worked as senior engineers for IBM and CISCO, again there would be no need to explain a "server" and a "terabyte." You'd again be alienating your audience if you attempt to do so.

GENDER – if your audience consists 90% of females, and you are writing a manual that explains how the human digestive system works, you probably should not mention "chewing smokeless tobacco" as an example of anything. Why? Because an overwhelming majority of tobacco chewers in the United States are white males. Thus a female audience may not relate easily to an activity that they have no experience with.

TO SUM UP:

In theory, you have to know your audience and write for that audience. But in practice it's not always easy for a technical writer to determine who that audience is. You should make sure your writing does not contain anything that would not be appropriate for your audience's gender, age, educational background, and other similar demographic characteristics.