

### Unit 3: Writing for a Public Audience

Length: 1000+ words (750 for draft)

Audience: Public (specified)

Draft Due: Monday, March 18th

Peer Reviews Due: Thursday, March 21st

Final Due: Monday, March 25th

In your second unit paper, you wrote for a scholarly audience. Public audiences do not encounter texts with this same sense of obligation. They read because they want to read, not because they have to. Public audiences may read for pleasure or because something catches their interest or attention. In short, public writing is writing that we read on our own time.

Before we begin, I would like to suggest that we avoid using terms such as general public or general audience to talk about this work. Although these terms are pretty common, I don't think they're very accurate. There is no general public; there are only more or less contingent or local groups or publics. Even the broadest kinds of public writing, such as *The New York Times* or *Time* magazine, are written not for people in general but for groups that share certain broad values or beliefs (such as a commitment to civil society). People who don't share such a commitment may read *The New York Times*, of course, but it is not written with them in mind.

I've tried to diversify your options for this unit as much as possible. Here are some ideas:

*The Translation.* A translation is simply a journalistic representation of some development within a field. They invariably report on some recently published article announcing a discovery or finding. The translation article based on that research communicates the new information to the general public in "laymen's terms," presenting salient facts without getting bogged down in heavily scientific or medical jargon. Often, these articles place a premium on what information is most helpful to people or would make a difference in their lives. These types of articles are often found in the health/science or features sections of newspapers and magazines or in online sources such as CNN.com and MSNBC.com.

*The Explainer.* An explainer article is a kind of academic piggy-back article accompanying a larger piece or series dealing with non-academic issues. For a number of years, *Slate.com* featured a regular column called "Explainer," but this genre also appears in other print and online sources. Explainer articles are needed when a public debate or event seems to open the door to the misunderstanding of technical or academic issues, and so the public needs to have the issue clarified. Examples of recent explainer questions include clarifying current legal and political issues. A number of *Slate* explainers in 2016 and 2017 focused on examining the plausibility of terms used by then-candidate and now President Trump like "drain the swamp" and "smoking gun," drawing on expertise from fields such as engineering and law. The explainer article is generally informative, and resembles a reference document in some respects. However, it is always occasioned by some recent development in the news.

*The Op-Ed.* An op-ed is a persuasive argument developed for a specified public audience. A recent Op-Ed in *The New York Times* by W. Kamau Bell of CNN's "United Shades of America" argues for the importance of net neutrality to artists and activists. It is important to remember that an op-ed is an informed opinion, meaning you have done the research and analysis necessary to back

up your claims. Usually, a successful op-ed presents a problem, explains why it's a problem, and offers a solution, while acknowledging the opposing perspective as a means to strengthen its own position.

*The Campaign.* Political campaign literature is an obvious example, but so are other kinds of writing directed toward specific public audiences. Campaigns seek to inform, educate, and motivate specific constituencies. Campaign literature is a bit like marketing or advertising, but it's not only that; it seeks to disseminate information from the community of experts (the discourse community of which you are a part) to that segment of the broader public which that community serves. Brochures, a popular campaign genre, make use of different colors and fonts, graphics, bullet points, statistics, and simple language to inform or instruct your targeted audience.

Regardless of your specific genre, the main rhetorical challenge here is translating technical/scientific information and knowledge to a specified public audience. Though not lengthy, this paper is likely to be challenging in specific ways. Popular genres are various yet tightly constrained. Most important for this class, your example of public writing needs to transmit some specific knowledge — that is, knowledge that tends to be closely held by your discourse community — to a targeted public audience. This is not a chance to abandon your discourse community or write just about what concerns you; rather, this is an opportunity to put your discourse community into a larger context of public need and service.

Although genres of public writing vary greatly, they have some things in common. In addition to the overall features we look for in AWD, we will look specifically for the following elements:

- A concise introduction (or lead) that sets the stage for the rest of the article, including both its subject and its context.
- Appeals to audience investment: these may include a human-interest dimension, careful use of tone (including humor), invitations to understand the academic field and its importance for them, and so forth.
- Effective highlighting of salient details.
- Syntax and vocabulary used at a level consistent with your proposed audience.
- A high level of clarity.

You may find that some of the values you are trying to exemplify conflict with each other. For example, you want to explain your point concisely to a non-expert audience. This calls for a kind of language use that tends toward generalization. Yet you also want to attend to counter-perspectives and so forth. How can you do both? How can you be responsible toward the nuances of the field while maintaining a rhetorical stance consistent with appealing to a specified public audience? This dialogue among values will constitute the major rhetorical challenge of this project.

Because you're writing toward a target public rather than to the (non-existent) general public, I'd like you to preface your document with a memo to the class in which you put the work in context and explain the rhetorical function of this piece. If there's something specific about your audience that will not come across in the document itself, this is the place to explain that. This *context memo* counts towards the 1,000-word minimum.

A note on documentation: Although public writing tends to be documented less rigorously than academic writing, I'd like you to follow academic practices of citation in the draft (e.g. ACM, IEEE, etc.). The final version of the paper can be submitted in a more stripped-down form if full documentation would conflict with the rhetorical setting of the document. You should explain any unusual documentation choices in your context memo.

Grading Criteria:

- Subject choice is both appropriate for a public audience and demonstrates an understanding of the current state of the discipline.
- Genre is appropriate to the discipline and to the need of a specified public audience.
- Context Memo to class explains the document effectively.
- Contains a concise introduction that sets the stage for the rest of the article.
- Develops appropriate appeals to audience.
- Shows effective highlighting of salient details.
- Uses appropriate and consistent level of syntax and vocabulary.
- Demonstrates consistently clear writing.
- Demonstrates careful negotiation among possible conflicting rhetorical values.
- Uses appropriate citation conventions and explains any departures from typical practice.
- Fulfills length and genre requirements.