

Defining Your Audience

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to identify the purpose and audience of a text by assessing several particular characteristics. Through this process, you will more effectively solve problems. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Purpose and Audience in Writing

Before you write, you need to know the **purpose**, which is the intended goal or value of a text. This purpose will govern just about all of the tools you use, including mode, tone, level of formality, and structure.

To find out what the purpose is, ask yourself what the goal of your text is, and what you hope it will achieve. Defining a purpose will identify a problem, strengthening your **problem solving skill**.

Different purposes will create different kinds of writing, and there are many kinds of purposes—entertainment, information, argument, or discussion.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Stories are often designed to make people laugh, so their purpose is entertainment. Instruction manuals are meant to inform and guide, while advertisements are meant to convince you to buy.

In general, the **audience** of a piece of writing is the reader of a text, which can be intended (targeted by the author) or unintended (not targeted by the author).

In a writing class, your intended audience is your instructor, who you know is going to read your paper. Furthermore, you can probably assume that your instructor is an informed audience—a factor that will also influence the way you write.

However, if you find out you'll be sharing your paper with peers, you will have a new, additional audience—one that you hadn't intended in the first place. Therefore, it's always important to keep in mind not only your intended audience but potential unintended audiences as well.

When writing, you might consider your audience's:

- Age
- Gender
- Interests
- Moral or religious philosophy

- Political ideology
- Level of education or expertise

A skillful writer will navigate these audience traits carefully. Thus, as you assess your audience, ask yourself:

- What does my audience already know?
- How interested will my audience be in this detail?
- Am I describing details in a way that will make sense to my audience?
- What characteristics do I think my audience will have?
- Given my audience, how can I write the most effective text possible?



Problem Solving: Skill Reflect

Consider your ideal career. Chances are, you'll need to write some sort of communications in this career, whether they are long or short, formal or informal. Who is the most likely audience for your communications in this career? What is the most likely purpose? How will knowing this information help you write effective communications?



TERMS TO KNOW

Purpose

The intended goal or value of a text.

Audience

The intentional or unintentional reader(s) of a text.

2. Factors That Determine Purpose and Audience

Assessing, identifying, and directing your writing towards the purpose and audience is an essential task.

To figure out what the purpose and audience of a text is, consider the following factors as clues:

- Content
- Mode of writing
- Word choice
- Formality level
- Overall tone

Doing an analysis of these elements within someone else's writing helps you better deploy those same tools in your own writing and provides you with examples of effective ways to target your intended audience and fulfill your intended purpose.

2a. Content

The content of a text is what the author has chosen as the subject and what the author is telling you about that subject, which is closely tied to the purpose.

➔ **EXAMPLE** If the purpose of a piece is to convince people to buy a certain product, the content will feature the product's most attractive selling points.

Sometimes, authors say exactly what their purpose is. But even when the author doesn't say it outright, there are other ways you can identify the purpose. Look for the kinds of details, examples, explanations, descriptions, and arguments the author chooses.

To find the audience, assess the overall subject matter and also the way the author addresses it in order to make guesses about the intended readers.

2b. Mode

Recall that there are four main modes of writing:

- Narrative, which is driven by a story
- Descriptive, which is used to provide details
- Informative, which provides data without biased opinions
- Argumentative, which takes a side in a debate

In any piece of writing, you're bound to see descriptive, informative, and persuasive statements.

But because each mode has its perfect purpose, looking for which modes are used most commonly in any text will likely lead you in the general direction of the purpose, even though the purpose will be narrower than the mode itself.

2c. Word Choice

The words you choose, including both the vocabulary level you select and the connotations and denotations of your words, are related to your audience and purpose.

Vocabulary level can tell you a lot about the intended audience, such as the audience's level of education or age range. Additionally, the tone struck by the connotations and denotations of the words gives you clues about how the reader is meant to feel.

2d. Level of Formality

How formal or informal a text is depends on its audience, and is revealed through the following factors:

- Vocabulary level
- Sentence complexity
- Nature of the content

Academic and professional writing tends to be more formal, while personal writing is usually informal.

2e. Tone

Remember that tone is a writer's attitude towards the subject, as conveyed through the piece of writing.

Looking at the tone that the author uses can tell you what that author's attitude about the subject is, which can in turn clue you in to the overall purpose and how the author wants the audience to feel about that subject.

➔ **EXAMPLE** If the purpose of a text is to inform the reader about a health crisis, then the tone is likely to be grave and serious.

3. Identifying Purpose and Audience in a Piece of Writing

Now that you know about the factors that determine purpose and audience, you can practice identifying purpose and audience in a given text.

Consider the following short piece of writing:

I am writing to discuss the sales presentation scheduled for tomorrow. I am unable to take the lead on the pitch because I have to be at the hospital for my daughter's surgery. I understand this is an important meeting, and I am sorry to miss it. I have given Renee all of my notes for the presentation, and I am confident she will do an excellent job. I hope to be back in the office Thursday. Thank you for your understanding.

The tone here is formal, even though this is clearly correspondence. Because this is an email or letter for a professional setting sent from an employee to a boss, it is more formal than other kinds of emails, and the tone is pretty neutral.

The direct intent is to inform the supervisor about the absence from work. But the underlying purpose seems to be to show the supervisor how responsible the employee is and how this absence will not affect the company. See how the employee emphasizes the steps she took to ameliorate any negative consequences of missing the meeting.

➔ **EXAMPLE** "I have given Renee all of my notes for the presentation, and I am confident she will do an excellent job."



TRY IT

Now practice this on a more substantive paragraph. Remember that you have a tool kit with content, mode, word choice, formality level, and tone. Using those tools, assess the purpose and audience that the author intends to serve.

There is an old saying that "idle hands are the devil's playground." The idea is that when people are bored, they are more likely to get into trouble. This is doubly true for teenagers and young adults. In a smaller town, there are fewer opportunities for young people to be active and social. For example, there may not be an opportunity for intramural sports to play, live music events to attend, or organizations to join. What do these teenagers do then? One hopes it is productive pursuits, but sometimes it is not. In the absence of engagement and enrichment, our youthful citizenry may be bored and apathetic at best, and mischievous and nefarious at worst. The community needs to invest in more activities to keep teenagers out of trouble and involved in more wholesome activities.

Analyze with the element of content.



It's pretty clear that this piece is about activities to keep teenagers out of trouble.

➞ EXAMPLE “The idea is that when people are bored, they are more likely to get into trouble.”

Analyze with the element of mode.

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Much of this paragraph features informative statements.

➞ EXAMPLE “The idea is that when people are bored, they are more likely to get into trouble. In a smaller town, there are fewer opportunities for young people to be active and social. For example, there may not be an opportunity for intramural sports to play, live music events to attend, or organizations to join.”

But by the end, the language shifts into a more persuasive mode. Overall, the purpose seems to be to convince the reader to create more activities for the younger citizens of the town.

➞ EXAMPLE “What do these teenagers do then? The community needs to invest in more activities to keep teenagers out of trouble and involved in more wholesome activities.”

Analyze with the element of tone.

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Tone tells you a lot here, as many of the words are more evocative and emotional than those in a neutral, informative piece might be. But this isn’t inflammatory rhetoric; this is a subtle tone. It’s neither strident and angry nor wholly dispassionate.

You could characterize the tone, then, as motivated, committed, or energized. This tells you that the precise purpose is not just to convince the reader, but also to spur the reader into action, perhaps to get people to join a movement.

Analyze with the element of audience.

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To determine the audience, you can look at the word choice and sentence structure. The vocabulary is rather precise and intellectual, referring to something as being “engaging” instead of fun or describing the “cizenry” instead of citizens or good residents, which indicates a fairly academic word choice.

The sentence structure is equally academic, with some complex and lengthy sentences and some poetic turns of phrase, as opposed to more simple, conversational sentences.

Therefore, we might assume that this is an educated audience, and perhaps an audience of adults instead of children.

Analyze with the element of word choice.

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You’ve already thought about the overall tone, but are there any words that stand out to you in their

connotative power?

➔ **EXAMPLE** The author uses “mischievous” and “nefarious” to convince the reader that unless the community takes action, teenagers may find themselves getting into anything from pranks to breaking the law.

In this case, the connotations of the words lend themselves to the overall message about the importance of making a change to avoid a negative effect.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that there are several **factors that determine purpose and audience in writing: content, mode, word choice, level of formality, and tone**. You also learned how to **identify the purpose and audience in a piece of writing**. By studying the determining factors of content, mode, word choice, level of formality, and tone, you can tell what the piece is trying to say and who it’s trying to say it to even if the author doesn’t explicitly tell you. Finally, you explored how the importance of identifying purpose and audience strengthens your **problem solving skill**.

Best of luck in your learning!

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Purpose

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