

Determining Your Purpose and 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 continue to strengthen your communication skill. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Factors That Determine Purpose and Audience

1a. Content

1b. Mode

1c. Word Choice

1d. Level of Formality

1e. Tone

2. Identifying Purpose and Audience in a Piece of Writing

1. Factors That Determine Purpose and Audience

As you've learned, the purpose is the intended goal or value of a text, and the audience is the reader of the text, which can be intended (targeted by the author) or unintended (not specifically targeted by the author).

Thus, 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.



Communication: Skill Reflect

As you read through the content of this lesson, consider your ideal career. How can you use this information in your career to determine your purpose and audience? How will this strengthen your communication skill?

1a. 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.

1b. 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
- Persuasive, which aims to convince readers

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.

1c. Word Choice

As we've discussed earlier, word choice can intentionally or unintentionally evoke readers' emotions and convey your own feelings. The words you choose, including both the vocabulary level you select and the connotations and denotations of your words, will affect the audience and your purpose, but may do so positively or negatively.

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 of the words gives you clues about how the reader is meant to feel. If you misjudge how your audience will respond to word choices – whether they are offended, alienated, or simply puzzled – you will not achieve your purpose. But if you do understand your audience and “speak their language” by using the words and connotations that resonate with them, you will be more successful.

1d. 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.

1e. 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.

2. 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:

Recently, I had to miss class because of an illness. I am sorry that I wasn't able to inform you of this absence in advance. However, I was able to contact Alice Stein just after class and she was generous enough to make copies of her notes and the handout for me. I therefore don't think that I am considerably behind due to my absence, but I am still hoping that I can attend your office hours this week to discuss a few areas of this week's assignment that I could use some help on. I appreciate your understanding!

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

The direct intent is to inform the professor about the student's absence and that the student will visit office hours. But the underlying purpose seems to be to show the professor how responsible the student is. See how the student emphasizes the steps she took to ameliorate any negative consequences of missing class:

However, I was able to contact Alice Stein just after class and she was generous enough to make copies of her notes and the handout for me.



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.

In an ideal world, no one would be barred from attending college for lack of finances. Education provides benefits both tangible and intangible. Practically, education provides the lessons, experiences, and training needed to pursue many career paths. Beyond that, college provides students with a richer store of knowledge about their world. With the career-based knowledge gleaned from their major's course of study and the additional knowledge gathered during general education requirements, students set out into the world as more informed citizens. That's where the biggest intangible benefit arises: an educated citizenry creates a stronger and more productive society. Thus keeping students from education due to financial means is a tragedy for individuals and communities. An uneducated populace is a deficit for all, so education must be made more accessible.

Assess the paragraph on content.



It's pretty clear that this piece is about education and cost, and why education is important.

⇒ EXAMPLE *In an ideal world, no one would be barred from attending college for lack of finances.*

Assess the paragraph on mode.



Much of this paragraph features informative statements.

⇒ EXAMPLE *Practically, education provides the lessons, experiences, and training needed to pursue many career paths. Beyond that, college provides students with a richer store of knowledge about their world.*

But by the end, the language shifts into a more persuasive mode. Overall, the purpose seems to be to convince the reader to support universal access to higher education.

⇒ **EXAMPLE** *Thus keeping students from education due to financial means is a tragedy for individuals and communities. An uneducated populace is a deficit for all, so education must be made more accessible.*

Assess the paragraph on tone.



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.

Assess the paragraph on audience.



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 “tangible” instead of concrete or describing the “citizenry” 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.

Assess the paragraph on word choice.



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

⇒ **EXAMPLE** The phrase “richer store of knowledge” is pretty evocative. The author could have just said that students will know more about the world, but by adding implications of financial benefit, this phrase connotes material wealth.

In this case, the connotations of the words lend themselves to the overall message about worth.

Using all these tools, you've now done a pretty thorough analysis of the purpose and audience of this paragraph.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that there are several **factors that determine purpose and audience** in a particular text: **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. This practice also helps you pull together several writing principles to become a more effective communicator.

Best of luck in your learning!

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