

# Identifying Purpose and Audience

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## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the purpose and audience of texts and how to identify that purpose and audience by assessing content, mode, and language. The specific areas of focus include:

### 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

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, look for these 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 useful examples of effective ways to target your intended audience and fulfill your intended purpose.

## 1a. Content

The content of a text is just 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

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 on a debate

In any piece of writing, you're bound to see descriptive, informative, and argumentative 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

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.

## 1d. Level of Formality

How formal or informal a text is depends on its audience and is revealed in:

- Vocabulary level
- Sentence complexity
- How personal the content is

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

## 1e. Tone

**Tone** is a writer's attitude towards the subject, as conveyed through a piece of writing.

Looking to the tone that the author affects 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 the text is to inform the reader about an environmental crisis, then the tone is likely to be grave and serious.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Tone**

A writer's attitude toward the subject, as conveyed through a piece of writing.

## 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.*

Now you can bring all of these tools to bear on a more substantive text and assess what purpose and audience you think it's meant to serve.



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 in the following piece:

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 and thus education must be made accessible to all.

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

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

**Mode:** Much of this paragraph features informative statements:

*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 argumentative mode. Overall, the purpose seems to be to convince the reader to support universal access to higher education:

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

**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 to action, perhaps to get people to join a movement.

**Audience:** To determine the audience, you can look at the word choice and level of vocabulary. In this case, 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. Therefore, you might assume that this is an educated audience and perhaps an audience of adults instead of kids.

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.

**Word Choice:** You’ve already thought about the overall tone, but are there any words that stand out to you in their connotative power? For instance, “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. Therefore, 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 tutorial, you learned that purpose is the intended goal of a text, and audience is the reader or readers of a text. 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.

Good luck!

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Tone

A writer's attitude toward the subject, as conveyed through a piece of writing.