Purpose and Audience

by Sophia

1. Purpose in Writing

Before you write, you want 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

- Structure

To find out what the purpose is, ask yourself what the goal of your text is and what you hope it will achieve.

IN CONTEXT

If you're writing a paper for an English class, its purpose might be to describe the symbolism in *Alice in Wonderland*.

Or maybe you're writing an email to your friends proposing an *Alice in Wonderland*-themed party. For that email, the purpose is to convince your friends how fun the party will be. While this is a great

purpose, it calls for a different kind of writing than the first example.

Likewise, a professional presentation with the purpose of providing information on a recent *Alice in Wonderland* charity swimming event is a totally different kind of writing.

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

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.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Purpose
The intended goal or value of a text.

1a. Connection to Mode

All of these purposes will change the mode the author will choose. These purposes are also more specific than the mode itself, but they can be served by that particular mode's structure, tone, and other features.

There are several different types of mode:

- Narrative
- Descriptive
- Informative
- Argumentative

Each mode can be particularly useful for different purposes.

IN CONTEXT

The argumentative mode, for instance, could be deployed when your purpose is to justify a recent purchase to your friend, to entice friends to join you on a trip, or to debate the policies of a political candidate.

However, if your purpose was to describe the candidate's policies to your dad, who's unfamiliar with that politician, the argumentative mode wouldn't fit. You're not trying to convince your dad to vote for that candidate; you're just trying to tell your dad about the candidate's platform. Thus, you would want to use the informative mode. This is why it's important to choose your mode wisely.

Also note that in an academic setting, you may be assigned a particular mode to use, such as when you take an argumentative writing class. If you're assigned an argumentative paper, your purpose is going to need to be argumentation.

2. Audience in Writing

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 the argumentative writing class, your intended audience is your teacher, who you know is going to read your paper. Furthermore, you can probably assume that your teacher 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.

In fact, you know how this works because you've been an audience yourself.

> **IN CONTEXT**
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> You want to bake a birthday cake, so you go to the library to pick up a cookbook. As you browse the titles, you probably notice a lot about the intended audience of each cookbook.
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> The cookbook about gourmet grilling will probably expect an audience that owns a deluxe grill. The one about vegan cooking might assume that its audience has knowledge of the ethical ideologies of veganism. If you're a beginner, you won't select the cookbook for a professional baker; that book is for an audience with a lot more technical skills than you have.

As a writer, you'll want to consider your audience just as you'd consider which cookbook to select.

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?

[✎] **TRY IT**

Pretend the audience for the following text is a group of doctors for whom the author wants to describe an experience in the ER. What do you think the purpose of this text is?

> *When I recently went to your emergency room, I was pleased to be immediately assessed by an intake nurse. Within minutes, kind medical professionals were taking my vitals and asking about my condition. Though the experience was not perfect, it was much better than any other trip to any other ER. I encourage your other ERs to follow this example and cut waiting times.*

The author seems to want these doctors to reduce wait times at other ERs to match the good service at this ER. Also, consider the details that the author chose. Do you think this is effectively targeted to this audience?

To decide, you can ask yourself some of the audience-related questions you just learned.

> *When I recently went to your emergency room, I was pleased to be immediately assessed by an intake nurse. Within minutes, kind medical professionals were taking my vitals and asking about my condition. Though the experience was not perfect, it was much better than any other trip to any other ER. I encourage your other ERs to follow this example and cut waiting times.*
> **How interested will they be?**

Since these are presumably doctors in charge of emergency rooms, they would likely be compelled by this topic.

> *When I recently went to your emergency room, I was pleased to be immediately **assessed by an intake nurse**. Within minutes, kind medical professionals were **taking my vitals** and asking about my condition. Though the experience was not perfect, it was much better than any other trip to any other ER. I encourage your other ERs to follow this example and cut waiting times*
> **Am I describing details in a way that will make sense?**

These doctors are experts, so you can also assume that they know what it means to be assessed by an intake nurse and have vitals taken. If this were written to an audience who had never been to a hospital,

then it wouldn't be so clear.

> *When I recently went to your emergency room,* **I was pleased to be immediately assessed by an intake nurse. Within minutes, kind medical professionals were taking my vitals and asking about my condition.** *Though the experience was not perfect, it was much better than any other trip to any other ER. I encourage your other ERs to follow this example and cut waiting times*
>   **Am I writing in a way that will be effective?**

This last question is probably the most difficult to answer, but it's also very important. To convince these doctors to replicate this ER in other locations, the writer wouldn't begin with a litany of the ways in which this trip wasn't perfect, as that wouldn't be an effective tactic. Instead, focusing on the specific details of what was positive in this visit is an effective way of writing to this audience and for this purpose.

3. Relationship between Purpose and Audience

From what you just learned, you've already begun to consider the close relationship between a text's purpose and its audience.

You can think of this relationship like a cycle.

The purpose is your reason for writing the text, but you hope to achieve that purpose with a specific audience. Thus, speaking directly to that audience is part of your purpose. These things are inherently linked.

Because of this, the audience is not something you can consider after you've already written. You have to write with a particular audience in mind, and target your words to them.

> **IN CONTEXT**
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> If your purpose is to write a guidebook of historical sites for visitors to your hometown, those visitors themselves are part of your purpose. You would write for visitors differently than you would for locals, and you'd use a different approach if you were writing to an expert audience about historical sites. In that case, you'd maybe choose a more descriptive mode and definitely a more precise vocabulary.
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> However, if you were writing a proposal to local school kids to try to convince them to visit these sites, that younger audience would change the approach you would take to this purpose. You would obviously need a simpler vocabulary, but you might also use different sentence structures and even a different tone. For instance, school kids might not be convinced by a somber tone. You might need a more excited, lighthearted one.

Different approaches will work better with different audiences, and you, therefore, want to think carefully about your intended audience and purpose as you write.

SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned that **in writing, purpose** is the intended goal or value of a text. Purpose has a strong **connection to mode**, or the way the text is written. There are several different modes, and the one you select should be the one that best serves your purpose.

You also learned that **in writing, audience** is the reader of a text. Audience can be either intended or unintended, and the effectiveness of a text will depend on how well you reach your audience.

Finally, you explored the **relationship between purpose and audience**, and how each will influence the way a text is written.

Good luck!

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TERMS TO KNOW

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   The intended goal or value of a text.