# Sophia

# Purpose, Audience, Tone, and Content

*by Sophia*

> ≡ **WHAT'S COVERED**

In this lesson, you will learn about the roles that purpose, audience, tone, and content play in an essay and how they are connected. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

# 1. Determining Your Purpose

The **purpose** of a piece of writing identifies the reason you write a particular document. Basically, the purpose answers the question "Why?"

> ↗ EXAMPLE  Why write a play? To entertain a packed theater. Why write instructions to the babysitter? To inform him of your schedule and rules. Why write a letter to your congressperson? To persuade her to address your community's needs.

In academic settings, the reason for writing typically fulfills one of four main purposes:

- To summarize
- To analyze
- To synthesize
- To evaluate

To learn more about and view examples of each of these, take a look at the supporting material available below this tutorial.

As you will see, the purpose for writing will guide you through each part of the paper, helping you make decisions about content and style.

> 🗎 **TERM TO KNOW**
>
> **Purpose**
> The intended goal or value of a piece of writing.

# 2. Identifying Your Audience

Although your readers—the **audience** for your writing assignments—may not appear in person, they play an equally vital role.

Even in everyday writing activities, you identify your readers' characteristics, interests, and expectations before making decisions about what you write. In fact, thinking about audience has become so common that you may not even detect the audience-driven decisions you make.

> ↗ EXAMPLE  You probably update your status on a social networking site with the awareness of who will digitally follow the post. If you want to brag about a good grade, you may write the post to please family members. If you want to describe a funny moment, you may write with your friends' senses of humor in mind.

Because focusing on audience will enhance your writing, your process, and your finished product, you must consider the following specific traits of your audience members.

1. _Demographics:_ These measure important data about a group of people, such as age range, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or gender. Certain topics and assignments will require these kinds of considerations about your audience. For other topics and assignments, these measurements may not influence your writing in the end. Regardless, it is important to consider demographics when you begin to think about your purpose for writing.

2. _Education:_ Education considers the audience's level of schooling. If audience members have earned a doctorate degree, for example, you may need to elevate your style and use more formal language. Or, if audience members are still in college, you could write in a more relaxed style. An audience member's major or area of study may also dictate your writing.

3. _Prior knowledge:_ This refers to what the audience already knows about your topic. If your readers are familiar with certain areas of study, they may already know some terms and concepts related to the topic. You may decide whether to define terms and explain concepts based on your audience's prior knowledge. Although you cannot peer inside the brains of your readers to discover their knowledge, you can make reasonable assumptions. For instance, a nursing major would presumably know more about health-related topics than a business major would.

4. _Expectations:_ These indicate what readers will look for while reading your assignment. Readers may expect consistencies in the assignment's appearance, such as correct grammar and traditional formatting like double-spaced lines and legible font. Readers may also have content-based expectations given the assignment's purpose and organization. In an essay titled "The Economics of Enlightenment: The Effects of Rising Tuition," for example, audience members may expect to read about the economic repercussions of college tuition costs.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

**Audience**
The person or people at whom a specific piece of writing is directed.

# 3. Selecting an Appropriate Tone

**Tone** identifies a speaker's attitude toward a subject or another person. You may pick up a person's tone of voice fairly easily in conversation.

> ↗ EXAMPLE  A friend who tells you about her weekend may speak excitedly about a fun skiing trip. An instructor who means business may speak in a low, slow voice to emphasize her serious mood. Or, a coworker who needs to let off some steam after a long meeting may crack a sarcastic joke.

Just as speakers transmit emotion through voice, writers can transmit through writing a range of attitudes,

from excited and humorous to somber and critical. These emotions create connections among the audience, the author, and the subject, ultimately building a relationship between the audience and the text.

To stimulate these connections, writers intimate their attitudes and feelings with useful devices, such as sentence structure, word choice, punctuation, and formal or informal language. Keep in mind that the writer's attitude should always appropriately match the audience and the purpose.

☑ **TRY IT**

Read the following paragraph and consider the writer's tone. How would you describe the writer's attitude toward wildlife conservation?

> Many species of plants and animals are disappearing right before our eyes. If we don't act fast, it might be too late to save them. Human activities, including pollution, deforestation, hunting, and overpopulation, are devastating the natural environment. Without our help, many species will not survive long enough for our children to see them in the wild. Take the tiger, for example. Today, tigers occupy just 7 percent of their historical range, and many local populations are already extinct. Hunted for their beautiful pelt and other body parts, the tiger population has plummeted from one hundred thousand in 1920 to just a few thousand. Contact your local wildlife conservation society today to find out how you can stop this terrible destruction.

If you think that the tone here is urgent and concerned, you are correct. The writer is clearly passionate about the topic and ends her paragraph by asking her readers to take action.
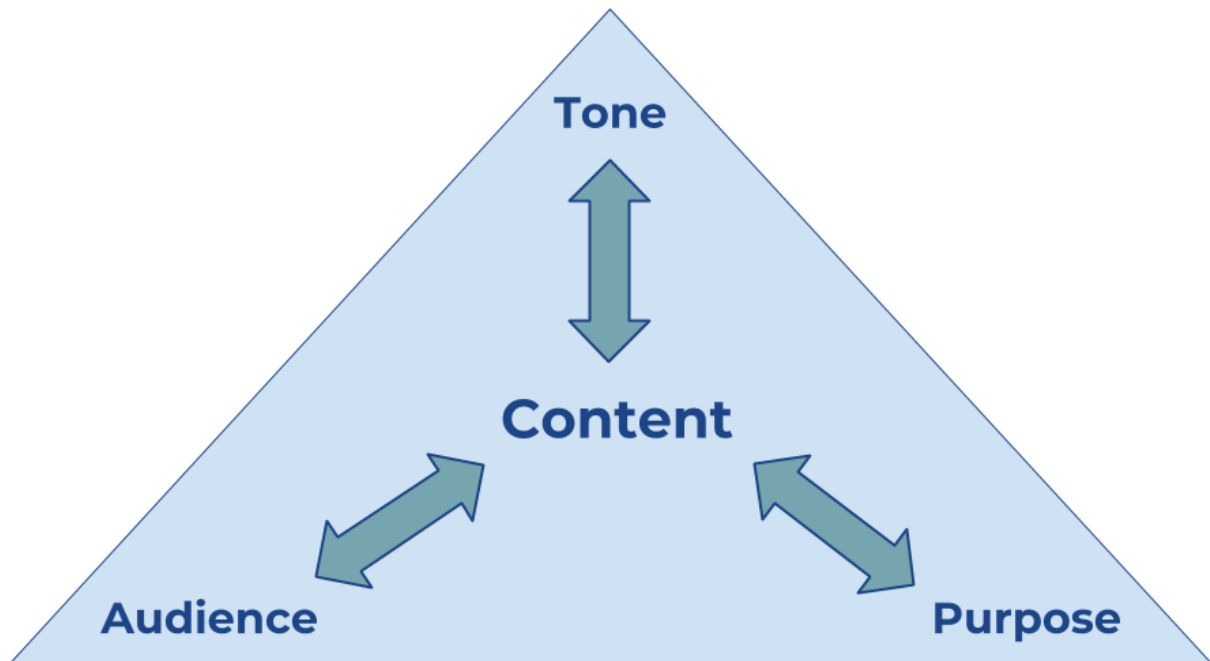
📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

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

# 4. Choosing Appropriate Content

Content refers to all the written substance in a document. After selecting an audience and a purpose, you must choose what information will make it to the page.

This may consist of examples, statistics, facts, anecdotes, testimonies, and observations, but no matter the type, the information must be appropriate and interesting for the audience and purpose.

Content is also shaped by tone. When the tone matches the content, the audience will be more engaged, and you will build a stronger relationship with your readers.

↗ **EXAMPLE**  An essay written for third graders that summarizes the legislative process would have to contain succinct and simple content. You would choose simple content that the audience could easily understand, and you would express that content in an enthusiastic tone.

These same considerations apply to all audiences and purposes.

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### ☑ SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that purpose, audience, tone, and content are important considerations when writing an essay, and are all connected to one another. **Determining your purpose** involves pinpointing the reason for your writing, **identifying your audience** involves considering the characteristics of your readers, **selecting an appropriate tone** involves determining the writing style and language you will use given your purpose and audience, and **choosing appropriate content** involves using your audience, purpose, and tone to figure out what you need to include in the essay.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Purpose, Audience, Tone, and Content" tutorial.

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### 📄 TERMS TO KNOW

**Audience**
The person or people at whom a specific piece of writing is directed.

**Purpose**
The intended goal or value of a piece of writing.

**Tone**

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