

Campus Academic Resource Program

Understanding Audience

This handout will:

- Consider the context of writing assignments through prompts
- Show how to cater writing assignments to a particular audience
- Situate writers in readers' positions to objectively understand their own writing

Pre-Writing Process

Pre-writing is an important component in considering how to write for your audience. This process includes brainstorming and understanding your writing prompt. Even though your professor or TA will read and grade your paper, you limit your writing by only writing for one or both of them.

- Do not automatically assume your reader knows more than, or just as much as, you.
 - This assumption stunts your writing because you are not writing to a broad range of people.
 - Assume your reader is a friend who is not in your class.
 - What information and analysis should you include to be able to successfully teach the material to your friend?
 - What tone would you use?
 - How would you balance the information you provide to teach the material to your friend?
- Look for key words in your writing prompt that will help you understand your audience
 - These key words may be specific terminology from the course; or these words may be certain verbs which indicate the direction of your writing.
 - Information words: define, explain
 - Relation words: compare, contrast
 - Interpretation words: assess, justify
 - Once you locate these key words and phrases, you can determine what your audience may already know.

Pre-Writing Process: Creating an Audience Profile

Another part of your pre-writing process is creating an “audience profile.” This profile will help you determine who your audience is and what your audience knows. By thoroughly understanding your prompt, you can begin to create your profile. The University of Maryland University College suggests that you consider the following questions to compile your profile:

- Who is my primary audience?
- What purpose will this writing serve for my readers? How will they use it?
- Is my audience multicultural?
- What is my audience's attitude toward and probable reaction to this writing?
- Will readers expect certain patterns of thought in my writing?

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You can also include additional questions or considerations when compiling your profile. By speaking to your professor about the assignment prompt, you may come across other audience characteristics you may not have previously considered.

Common Audience Types

This section will cover the common audience types. It will help you determine which audience fits into your writing assignment and what they need from your writing.

- **General:** If your audience is a general group of people, it can be assumed that they are similar to your classmates. A general audience knows just about as much as you do on the subject, and your writing should be adjusted accordingly.
- **Professionals:** If your audience are professionals in your field of study, it can be assumed that they know specific terminology and key words used in that field. Moreover, your tone should also be similar to that used in your field.
- **Larger academic community:** This type of audience can be thought of especially when writing a research paper. Your audience is the larger population of your academic discipline. Since you are writing a research paper, your tone should be applicable to those who both know as much as you do, and those who know more than you do. It may help you to read articles or journals written by other academics to become familiar with the style of writing used.

Real and Intended Audiences

Now that we have covered common audience types, we can look at the difference between *real* and *intended* audiences. The main difference between the two is who actually reads your paper, and who you write your paper for. In this case, the *real* audience is the person who actually reads your paper. This person can be your professor or TA. The *intended* audience, on the other hand, is who you have in mind while writing. Therefore, your *intended* audience can fall into one of the above categories.

Exercise 1

Read the following prompt. Does this prompt indicate who your *real* or *intended* audience is? Also, consider which “audience type” this prompt aims to reach.

Throughout the semester, we have discussed the presence of nature in dystopian fiction. For your final, write a 12-15 page research paper (using at least 8 secondary sources) analyzing one author’s use of nature in his or her work. Develop a clear and concise thesis that either adds a new theory to the discipline or that expands on an existing theory. Some questions to consider are: What is the author’s intention? How does this depiction of nature affect the reader? Where does your analysis of the text fall within the greater scope of research?

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Who is the *real* audience?

Who is the *intended* audience?

What are some key words available in the prompt to help you compile an audience profile?

Is there an “audience type” present in the prompt? If so, who is it? _____

Types of Essays

Another method to analyze who you’re writing for is to consider the type of essay you’re writing. There are three main types of essays.

- Expository: Expository essays are also known as Informative essays. These types of essays teach your reader about a subject. Therefore, after you’re aware of who your audience is, you can adjust the amount of information you include to cater to your reader’s needs.
 - Some key words to let you know you’re writing an Expository essay are Information words such as: define, explain.
 - Since Expository essays are teaching your reader, your *Intended* audience will most likely fall under the “General” audience type.
- Argumentative: Argumentative essays are meant to guide your reader to understand your point of view, or analysis, of a subject. Even though you include opposing views within your essay, your reader should understand why your analysis is the best analysis.
 - Some key words to let you know you’re writing an Argumentative essay are Interpretation words such as: assess, justify.
 - Since your essay presents your point of view on the subject, you are expected to justify your argument based on factual evidence, using objective language. For further information, see our handout entitled “Objective Tone Versus Subjective Tone.”
 - Depending on the level of scholarship, Argumentative essays can encompass multiple *Intended* audiences. You can look for key words in your prompt which may indicate what you’re arguing for, and who the opponents are.
- Persuasive: Persuasive essays are similar to Argumentative essays in that they both ask you to sway your reader’s opinion to align with yours. However, Persuasive essays do not always use evidence like Argumentative essays. Rather, Persuasive essays may instead use the writer’s opinions and appeal to the reader’s emotions.

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- Some key words to let you know you're writing a Persuasive essay are both Relation words such as: compare, contrast; and Interpretation words.
 - Depending on what you're attempting to persuade your reader of, you may compare two opposing sides to present your opinion, or you may justify your point of view on a subject. Be sure to analyze your prompt and check with your professor.
 - As opposed to the Argumentative essay, a Persuasive essay appeals to the reader's emotions, using subjective language. For further information, see our handout entitled "Objective Tone Versus Subjective Tone."
- Since Persuasive essays traditionally rely on opinions instead of facts, your *Intended* audience type may not include Professionals or the Larger Academic Community. Most likely, your Persuasive essay's audience type will be the General population.

Considering the Reader's Position

The most important part of writing for a particular audience is to consider the reader's position. Now that you have read about the different types of audiences and the difference between *real* and *intended* audiences, you can start to place yourself in the reader's position when writing.

- Put yourself in the reader's position
 - Think of yourself as the reader of a new subject. What is your perspective? What knowledge about the subject do you already have? What are you hoping to learn by reading this paper?
 - Proofreading your work.
 - Often, it is difficult to put yourself in the reader's position when you, as the writer, already have knowledge of the subject. This can make proofreading difficult as you can miss holes in your argument(s). The University of North Carolina suggests the following methods to put yourself in the reader's position:
 - Take a break from your work: If you are consistently re-reading your work, you're bound to miss certain areas of improvement. However, if you take a day between finishing your rough draft and editing to begin a new draft, you are more likely to catch inconsistencies.
 - Outline your paper after it's complete: Create an outline for each paragraph on a separate piece of paper. Once you see your ideas objectively outlined, you will be able to notice if you are missing something in your argument. You will also be able to notice if your paragraphs don't flow correctly or consistently.
 - Read your paper aloud: Reading your paper aloud will help you recognize how your reader understands your text. Rather than proofreading, you will be able to more readily notice grammatical or outlining errors in your work.
 - Peer Review

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- The best way to know how your reader will analyze and comprehend your text is to have someone aside from yourself read your work. This person, or people, can be: someone from your same class, a peer who is not in your class, a CARP tutor, or a friend who fits your “audience profile.”

Answer Key: Exercise 1

Who is the *real* audience?

The *real* audience is the person reading and grading your paper. This may be your professor, TA, or a combination of the two. Also consider your peers as your *real* audience if your class participates in peer response.

Who is the *intended* audience?

The *intended* audience could be a larger group of literary scholars. Since the prompt asks about a specific literary representation, the *intended* audience can either be scholars interested in that particular field (nature in dystopian fiction) or scholars in literature overall.

What are some key words available in the prompt to help you compile an audience profile?

- Nature
- Dystopian/Dystopia
- New theory
- Adding to existing theory
- Intention
- Greater scope of research

Is there an “audience type” present in the prompt? If so, who is it?

Although this prompt is for a specific class about specific fiction, the “audience type” can either be professionals or the larger academic community.

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