Audience

After reading this handout, you should be able write academic essays for an appropriate audience.

Why Audience Matters

When you write an academic paper, it's easy to forget that you are actually writing to someone. Your audience might be a generalized group of readers, you may know the audience, or you may be writing for yourself. For example, imagine sending a text to your best friend versus writing a letter to your grandma. What details and stories might you include? What might you leave out? It's likely that these two letters would look different in terms of content, structure, and even tone. Keeping your audience in mind while you write can help you make good decisions about what material to include, how to organize your ideas, and how best to support your argument.

Isn't the Instructor or TA my Audience?

Yes, but when you write an essay with only your instructor in mind, you might not write as clearly as you should. It's easy to assume that the professor knows more than you do. If your paper is unclear, however, the instructor has to guess what you mean or the professor might think you don't understand the material. Imagine thinking, "I don't have to explain communism; my instructor knows more about that than I do" and then your graded paper says "Shows no understanding of communism." That's an example of what can go awry when you think of your professor as your only audience.

Next time you write a paper, try imagining your audience consists of a small group: your professor and TA, who likely know the material, and someone from another planet who has never heard of the subject before. How might you write to appeal to this audience? You want your language to be concise and clear enough to explain and convey your point.

Thinking about your audience differently can improve your writing, especially in terms of how clearly you express your argument. The more specific your language is, the more likely you are to have a strong essay. By imagining that your audience is intelligent but uninformed, you will address him or her more effectively.

How do I Identify My Audience and What They Want from Me?

Before you begin writing an essay, ask yourself the following questions:

- Who is your audience?

- Might you have more than one audience? If so, list them.

- Does your assignment give any clues about your audience?

- What does your audience need/want/value, or what is most important to them?

- What are they least likely to care about?

- What kind of organization would best help your audience understand and appreciate your argument?

- What do you (and your research) have to say that might surprise your audience?

- What do you want your audience to think, learn, or assume about you?

- What impression do you want your writing or your research to convey?

How Much Should I Explain?

This is the hard part. You want to show that you understand the material, but different assignments call for varying degrees of information. Different fields also have various expectations from each other. To figure out how much you should say in your paper, read the assignment rubric carefully. The assignment may specify an audience for your essay (I.e., writing to a congressperson, a group of specialists in a particular field, or your peers). If the rubric doesn't specify an audience, you may find it useful to imagine your classmates reading the paper, rather than your instructor.

Once you know your imaginary audience, look for other clues from the assignment. If it asks you to **summarize** something, then your reader expects more examples from the text than if you are asked to **interpret** the passage. Most college assignments focus on argument rather than repeating information, so your reader probably doesn't want a lengthy, point-by-point summary (book reports and argument reconstructions in philosophy classes are exceptions to this rule). If your assignment asks you to **interpret** or **analyze** something, then you want to make sure that your explanation is focused. If your paper is too detailed, then you will end up spending more time describing examples than working on your analysis.

Once you have a draft, try explaining it to a friend, classmate, or Writing Center consultant. Have that person read your rough draft, and then ask him or her to talk to you about what s/he did and didn't understand (Ignore proofreading issues for now). Consider the following responses:

- If your audience has **tons of questions** about what you are saying, then you probably need to explain more. Try to address their questions in your essay.

- If your audience seems **confused**, you probably need to explain more clearly. Focus on making sure your examples and points are clear (quality vs. quantity).
- If your audience **looks bored and can repeat back to you more details than she needs to know** to get your point, you probably explained too much. Excessive detail can be confusing because it keeps the reader from focusing on your main points.

Sometimes it's not the amount of explanation that matters. Your word choice and tone need to match your audience's expectations. For example, imagine you are researching piranhas; you find an article in *National Geographic* and another one in an academic journal for scientists. How would you expect the two articles to sound? *National Geographic* is written for a popular audience, so it may have sentences like "The piranha generally lives in shallow rivers and streams in South America." The scientific journal, on the other hand, will use technical language because it's written for specialists. A sentence like "*Serrasalmus piraya* lives in fresh and brackish intercoastal and proto-arboreal sub-tropical regions between the 45th and 38th parallels" might not be out of place in the journal.

Generally, you want your reader to know enough material to understand the points you are making. You want your audience to understand your thesis, the reason for your paper. To do this, you have to prove your points with evidence. Giving specific examples and using clear language will help your audience grasp what you want them to know.

Reading Your Own Drafts

Writers tend to read their own papers pretty quickly because they know what they are trying to argue. This can be troublesome because it's easy to skip over gaps in your written argument because the gap-filler is in your head. When a paper has gaps, the reader can become confused or frustrated. Imagine reading something while struggling to find the most important points or understand what the writer is trying to say. Isn't that annoying? Doesn't it make you want to quit reading?

Put Yourself in the Reader's Position

Try reading your paper as if you have no previous knowledge of the material. Have you explained enough? Are the connections clear? This can be hard to do at first. Try the following strategies:

- **Take a break from your work.** Go work out, take a nap, take a day off. This is why the Writing Center and your instructors encourage you to start writing more than a day before the paper is due. Otherwise, it's almost impossible to read the essay with a fresh eye.
- **Try outlining after writing**. After you have a draft, look at each paragraph separately. Write down the main point for each paragraph in the order you have put them. Look at your "outline"—does it reflect what you meant to say in a logical order? Are some paragraphs hard to reduce to one point? Why? This technique will help you find places where you may have confused your reader.
- **Read the paper aloud**. Consultants and students do this all the time at the Writing Center. It helps you slow down and really consider how your reader experiences your

text. Reading exactly what is on the page (and not in your mind) will help you catch a lot of sentence-level errors, such as misspellings and missing words, which can make it difficult for your reader to focus on your argument.

These techniques can help you read your paper in the same way your reader will understand your argument. When your professor reads your finished draft, s/he won't have to fill in any gaps. The more work you do, the more likely it is that your instructor will follow and understand your argument.

This article originally appeared as a handout from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Writing Center.