



Determining Your Audience

Your paper should be “reader friendly,” meaning that the reader should not struggle to understand your ideas. You can make your paper reader friendly by analyzing your audience.

One of the first questions you should ask yourself is, “Who are the readers?”

Often the answer to this question is “the audience is my professor”, but this isn’t always the best way to think about audience. It is more helpful to think of your professor as a general reader from a particular background. Unless you are writing a letter, try not to tailor your writing with one specific person in mind, but instead, consider a general reader from a particular “discourse community”. To define your audience, it helps to think about these things:

1. Probable age
2. Probable gender identity
3. Probable education
4. Probable economic status
5. Probable social position
6. Probable values
7. Probable assumptions

It is also helpful to think about the genre you are writing in. A scientific paper, for example, might permit you to use more technical language, as the audience that might read a scientific paper is likely familiar with the field’s jargon.

Decide what your readers know or think they know about your subject.

To help you answer this question, ask yourself, “What is the probable source of their knowledge? Is it a direct experience or an observation? Will my readers react positively or negatively toward my subject?”

Next, ask yourself “What will my readers expect from my writing?”

When you are planning your writing, decide what your audience should expect to learn or gain by reading your essay.

You also need to consider how you can interest your readers in your subject.

If your audience is hostile toward your subject, decide how you can convince them to give your writing a fair reading. If your audience is sympathetic, decide how you can fulfill and enhance their expectations. If your audience is neutral, decide how you can catch and hold onto their attention.

The information on this page was adapted from:

Trimmer, Joseph F. Writing With a Purpose. 11th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995.

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