



From the desk of . . .  
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# Audience Analysis

## What is an Audience?

An audience is anyone who will listen to you or read what you have written. Audiences are the receivers of communication and can be specific individuals whom you know very well, people whom you know less well, and even those you have never spoken to or met. But whether you write for a specific or general audience, analyzing those who will be the recipients of your communication is a significant and fundamental prelude to virtually any writing activity.

The need for this analysis in writing is especially acute for two reasons. First, because the audience is distant. A writer is not able to interact with the audience as they are hearing the message and thus see what is working or not, what is confusing or clear, what is accepted or unaccepted. The second reason is that audiences of writing expect their attention to be engaged immediately and maintained throughout the communication. In writing, there can be no equivalents of the verbal awkward pause, stopping and staring over, or a second chance to explain something that wasn't clear.

## Classifying Audiences

Audiences can be either simple or complex. A simple audience consists of your **primary target** and no one else. This primary target audience can be either a single person or a small group. A secondary audience, on the other hand, consists of those who may also read what you've written, although they were not the original or even the most important targets. When an audience consists of primary and secondary targets it is said to be a complex audience.

Here's the important point: An audience analysis should address the characteristics of both the primary and the secondary audiences. The two can sometimes vary greatly, and it is the writer's responsibility to try to satisfy both.

Example: You are the manager of a 15-person department. You are writing to inform your employees that as of a certain date you wish them to fill out their time cards online. You offer them two ways to learn to do this: (1) work a self-paced online training module; or (2) enroll in a half-day tutorial class. In addition to the members of your department, you are copying your department secretary, the director of human resources and director of training.

The 15 employees are your primary audience. The secretary, HR director and training director are your secondary audience. Are there differences between the two? You betcha:

Only half of your employees are college educated. All in the secondary audience have bachelor degrees or higher.

**Implication:** You will need to write the memo and instructions on the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup>-grade level.

Only 20% of your employees are computer literate. All in the secondary audience are computer literate.

**Implication:** You will need to send a hard copy of this memo to your employees. Only the secondary audience should get it via electronic means.

Only 10% of your employees have any experience with online time cards. The secondary audience may or may not use them.

**Implication:** You will need to define terms such as “online time card” in order to help both your audiences better understand.

## Essential Questions

A good place to begin your audience analysis is to start with these basic questions:

1. Who is the primary audience? Do I have a secondary audience? If so, who is it?
2. What background knowledge and experiences do my audience members have regarding this topic?
3. What is my relationship to the primary and secondary members of the audience? Am I a subordinate, supervisor, or equal colleague? Is my relationship formal or informal?
4. What do you want your audience to do with the information that you provide?

Once you have those essential answers, you can begin to fill in the picture with a host of other questions:

- ▶ What ages are your audiences? How might age influence how you should communicate?
- ▶ How large is your audience? How will size influence the channel of communication that you use? If your channel is email, for instance, how will that medium affect how you write and what you write?
- ▶ What does your audience know about you?
- ▶ How can you increase your credibility with your audience?
- ▶ What do you think your audience should know about your topic?
- ▶ What do you think your audience will want to know about your topic?
- ▶ How will you know if your audience received and understood your message? What feedback will you receive?