Audience Awareness

Knowing your audience—whether readers or listeners—will help you determine what information to include in a document or presentation, as well as how to convey it most effectively. You should consider your audience when choosing your tone, content, and language—or else your message may seem unfocused or inappropriate.

In the classroom, your audience is often your professor. However, some assignments are designed so that you are addressing a secondary audience such as an expert in the field or the general public. Even when your audience is your instructor, tailor your communication to meet expectations. For example, your professor may expect you to demonstrate critical thinking or to employ an academic style.

Audience Awareness in the Composing Process

You should consider your audience early in the course of writing documents or speeches, but not necessarily as the first step. Worrying too much about accommodating an audience can inhibit early stages of composition. Do some research and prewriting first. Once you're knowledgeable about the topic and confident you have something to say about it, consider how to make it interesting and significant for specific readers or listeners.

Here are some questions to ask when analyzing your audience:

- *How much does the audience know about the subject?* The level and type of knowledge your audience already has determines how much background you need to provide, which terms will need definition or explanation, and whether you'll use an academic or familiar tone.
- *How does the audience feel about your topic?* You may need to convince a skeptical audience that your views have merit. If the audience is biased against your stance, you'll have to find ways to bring them around to your viewpoint. In that case, finding common ground might be a good place to start.
- *What new information can you provide?* Consider why your topic is important to your audience and what they can gain by giving you their attention. Can you motivate them to think more about your issue? To take action?
- *What is your relationship to the audience?* Are you giving orders, suggestions, or advice? Your tone may be more personal with a peer. If you're an authority, you need to sound sure of yourself; if you're a subordinate, you need to show respect.

The Effect of Audience on Style

Your style is determined in part by your audience. Together, the following elements constitute style; adjust them to reach your intended audience:

- *Message.* What does the audience care about, or what are they likely to act upon? What do they need to know from you?
- *Argument/Content.* What sort of evidence would convince them? What would they need to hear to agree with your argument? Would they appreciate a story or find it distracting?
- *Word choice.* Should you use jargon and slang? Formal or informal words? Contractions?
- *Sentence type and length.* Should you use long, complex sentences or short, simple ones? Can you use fragments?
- *Tone.* Should it be personal or distanced, humorous or serious, formal or informal?

Reaching Out to the Audience in the Introduction

The introduction helps the audience decide if a text is worth reading or a speech is worth their attention. Consider the choices the author makes in the following introduction:

> **Ex.1** Natalie, 11, is a timid kid, and her parents, though possessing the best of intentions, aren't making it any easier for her. The Portland, Maine, sixth grader says, "I hate it when Mom and Dad get all supercheery and say, 'Don't be shy. See how your sister Tracy does it? Just go up to that kid and say hi.' But I'm *not* Tracy. It's really hard for me. I feel like everyone is watching me and waiting for me to mess up."

The above is from a *Good Housekeeping* article, "10 Smart Ways to Help a Shy Child" by Beth Johns (March 2001, page 89). The intended audience is middle-class American women with at least a high school education. The readers have children and know ways to deal with them, but are looking for something new. The writer presents herself as a peer and draws interest immediately by using a human interest story about a particular child to introduce the topic. Her tone is informal and her language is casual: "kid" instead of "child," a contraction for "are not," and slang ("supercheery"). She uses active voice and short sentences.

Compare Johns' introduction with "An Ambulatory Physiological Monitor for Animal Welfare Studies" in the scholarly journal *Computers and Electronics in Agriculture* (2001, Volume *32*, pages 181-194):

> **Ex.2** A fundamental problem in recording continuous and rapidly varying physiological signals such as the electrocardiogram (ECG), electromyogram (EMG), or electroencephalogram (EEG) from freely-moving subjects over extended periods of time is the large volume of data that must be collected. This problem is further exacerbated when a number of signals and/or subjects are monitored simultaneously. In animal welfare studies, researchers often wish to record multiple signals from multiple animals while the animals are subjected to various stressors over periods of several weeks (Krantz and Falconer, 1995; Rollin, 1997).

Phillip J. Harris, Peter N. Schaare, Christian J. Cook, and Jon D. Henderson, the research team who wrote this, are clearly addressing fellow researchers who want to gain detailed knowledge on a topic they're familiar with. Because these readers expect that the authors have read the most current literature on the topic, careful documentation is provided within parentheses. The authors use formal language, passive voice ("data must be collected"), jargon ("stressors"), and acronyms ("ECG"). Sentences tend to be long and use many modifiers. For example, the opening sentence has 26 words separating the subject from the predicate.

Addressing a Diverse Audience

An additional but important factor to consider when writing a document or preparing a speech is the differences that exist in our diverse society. Your goal should be to not only address your audience accurately and clearly, but also in a socially acceptable and professional manner. The following are suggestions to help you adapt your document or speech to meet this goal:

- *Recognize your cultural filter.* Cultures are not monolithic, but are formed from many factors such as class, gender, generation, religion, or education. Your cultural filter shapes how you view the world and can at times prevent understanding different backgrounds.
- *Avoid ethnocentrism.* Assuming that your culture's values, customs, or beliefs are superior to another's is ethnocentrism. It's an attitude that can alienate your audience. Be careful not to assume that all cultural practices are shared. Suspend any judgments or cultural stereotypes. An example of an ethnocentric attitude is assuming that everyone in your audience believes capitalism is the best economic system just because that's the system you live under.
- *Be aware of gestures when speaking.* In many cultures, different gestures have different meanings. For example, in North America, eye contact is a sign of respect. However, in Japan and Korea, the same eye contact is considered intimidating. Some gestures (sitting cross-legged, folding your arms) might be acceptable in one culture, but may appear rude or defensive in another. When giving a speech, consider whether your audiences might misconstrue any gestures you're likely to make.
- *Distinguish between people and their abilities.* When referring to an individual with a disability, always use people-first language. For example, instead of "the blind woman," write "the woman who

is blind." This will ensure the person is the focus of your message and not the disability. Also, avoid outdated terms ("handicapped," "crippled") and never identify someone solely by that person's disability ("a quadriplegic," "an epileptic.").

- *Adopt bias-free language.* Biased language privileges one group or leaves out other groups or individuals and often makes unwarranted assumptions. For example, using the term "flesh-colored" assumes that every reader will have the same skin color—or that one color of skin is better than another. Don't write "the male lawyer" when it is unnecessary to signify the lawyer's gender. Avoid mentioning a person's sex, gender, ethnic background, religion, disability, or physical characteristics without a sufficient reason for doing so.
- *Avoid sexist language and gender-specific terms.* Sexist language creates stereotypes that assume one gender is the norm. Nonsexist language refrains from addressing sex at all when it's irrelevant. Gender-specific words (policeman) stress one sex, excluding the other. Consider substituting gender-neutral words (police officer).
- *Acknowledge issues of oppression.* Similar to ethnocentrism, the language we write or speak might convey a negative bias towards individuals or groups. If your message stereotypes a group, even unconsciously, you risk offending your audience. Examples of discriminating language to avoid include:
    - Racism – Your audience will be diverse. By recognizing that there are many cultural frames of reference, you'll reach each reader or listener effectively. Unless it is necessary, avoid references to ethnicity.
    - Heterosexism – If your essay or speech depicts a relationship, don't assume that each member of your audience is heterosexual.
    - Ageism – Many pervasive stereotypes exist with regard to the age of individuals. If you write or speak about an elderly person, challenge discriminating ideas such as "old people are feeble" or "teenagers lack wisdom."
    - Sexism – While sexist language assumes one term for both genders, sexism suggests one sex or gender is inferior to the other. To suggest that females are emotional and men are logical privileges one sex over the other, while stereotyping that all of one sex have the same traits or characteristics.

References

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