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Writing Tip Sheet: Audience

Audience is one of the most important, yet often overlooked, elements of writing. Experienced writers *always* take it into account, and this determines the look and feel of their final product.

Often as a designer, you find yourself writing to people with less design knowledge than you have. In these cases you must police yourself carefully. Insertion of design jargon and lots of abstract statements merely serve to confuse, if not alienate, your reader. It's a good idea to gear your writing to a general audience. (And even if your audience is more knowledgeable, it will appreciate the clarity in your writing.)

Some people worry that writing to a more general audience means “dumbing down” your paper. This is not the case. Don't confuse “dumbing down” with simplifying. You are not simplifying the content, you are simplifying its presentation.

Whenever you have a paper to write, ask yourself the following questions about who you are writing for:

- What is their likely age?
- What is their likely educational level? Their general level of knowledge?
- What sort of experiences does your audience have? Is there a common experience or is the group diverse?
- Does your audience share a specific set of concerns or interests?
- Does your audience have a specific agenda/set of beliefs?

Use your answers to the above to determine the most effective tone/voice to communicate your ideas.

Consider the following cases:

- **Groups with different experience levels.** You have two groups: one consisting of 20-year-old college students, another of middle-aged business executives. How would you go about approaching these two audiences? Remember that they have completely different experiences and viewpoints about life. They react to things very differently. The college students will probably respond to something more casual, perhaps laced with slang. The professionals, on the other hand, will likely prefer a more formal, serious approach. Conversely, be too formal and risk turning off the students; be too casual and risk alienating the executives.

- **Groups with shared sets of beliefs & critical audiences.** Place yourself in this situation: You are against Millennium Partners' proposed 50 floor office building at Mass Ave and Newbury Streets, and you are to address both sides: the developers (pro) and the local populace (con). Since you are opposed, which audience will be more receptive to your ideas? The locals, naturally. But keep in mind, you are preaching to the converted there. They share your beliefs and may well embrace *anything* you say, thus failing to evaluate your material critically. This won't happen with the developers. They represent a highly hostile audience, one looking for reasons to disagree with you. Your presentation will need to be vastly different for them if you want it to be effective. So always keep in mind the difference between friendly and hostile audiences when writing; adjust your tone and content to accommodate.
- **Groups with varying knowledge levels.** Now you have to explain the significance of a building to two more groups: the general public and professional architects. The talk will include some design theory. How would you approach these two audiences? You could probably discuss the building at a fairly technical level with the architects. After all, they should be well versed in the material. However, the general public won't be; they'll need more (and basic) explanation. Attempting to converse in complex design theory and architectural lingo with a bunch of people who don't know the field will only cause confusion and render your presentation ineffective.

So make sure you address your audience in a way they can both relate to and understand.

Two final (important) points:

- 1) An audience **cannot** be blamed for not understanding a piece of writing. It's the author's job to make sure his or her ideas are communicated clearly to the target group. If they're not, then that means of communication must be examined.
- 2) Often assignments do not specify an audience. If this happens, ask the instructor.