



## UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER

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### Knowing Your Audience

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The purpose of this article is to explain the importance of knowing what kind and how much information to include for your readers to make them more receptive to your writing.

#### Meeting Needs

Considering your audience is an important part of writing with intentionality. In a way, it is like providing a service. Your goal is to give them something in your paper that they did not have previously, which means you are writing to fulfill their needs in some way. To do that, you must ask yourself what they need and how you can provide it. You have done the research and analysis, you have gained important knowledge, and now you are trying to think of the best way to share that knowledge with others. An author who knows their audience is more prepared to inform, delight, and create a compelling argument. Knowing your audience is key to understanding how you will arrange the facts and explain concepts. By keeping your audience's pre-existing assumptions in mind, you can more effectively build upon what they already know or target their misconceptions.

#### The Ideal Reader

Perhaps the first way to begin is to imagine the ideal reader for your paper. Most students assume that their ideal reader is their professor, but this is often just the person who is refereeing (or grading) your paper. The professor evaluates how well you are persuading your ideal reader, which usually consists of your peers – people in the same course who have similar experiences and bases of knowledge. So, if your ideal reader is a fellow college student, what do those students know – and need to know – about your topic? How can you make your argument appealing to those readers? For graduate students, the ideal reader may consist of aspiring experts in their discipline. Still more, for doctoral students, professors, and other technical experts, the ideal reader will likely be specialists looking to add to the body of knowledge in their fields.

Another way to approach your readers is to think of your paper as a letter. Who is it addressed to? Who you are writing for will determine your tone, word choice, organization, and time spent explaining concepts. Knowing your audience means understanding what your audience knows and what they do not, which will inform the positioning of your thesis. Practice empathy when you write by imagining how another person will receive your words.

To know your audience, think about how much you are stepping outside of your own viewpoint. For example, if you are writing an informative essay, it is important to consider whether you are writing for a general audience or someone in your line of expertise. An expert audience will not need you to break down niche concepts and will understand commonly used jargon in your field. You may also feel more comfortable writing longer sentences and paragraphs for an expert audience, whereas for a general audience, shorter paragraphs will hold the audience's attention better. If you're writing for a general audience about a complex topic, do not rely on them to fill in gaps. Often, we assume that readers

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possess the same background information that we do before making our argument. For general audiences, make sure you are clearly providing the necessary context for understanding the debate and defining difficult terms as you write.

### Example

If you are writing a persuasive essay, consider the pre-existing stance of your target audience. This will determine how much time you spend responding to concerns or counterclaims, or how you use the pre-existing values of your audience. For example, if you were writing an argumentative essay about why A is better than B, it is helpful to know if you are writing for people who are already supporting your position, are against your position, or are undecided. When writing a persuasive essay, you are not always persuading someone to switch from Side A to Side B. You could also be arguing why Side A people should continue to be Side A, or why Side B is overall correct, but can still find important takeaways from Side A. Or, you could be convincing both Side A and B to choose Side C.

### Tips

1. Construct an audience profile before you begin drafting. What are your audience's interests? Likes and dislikes? What will inspire them? What will disturb or anger them? What effect do you wish to create in the minds of your readers?
2. Have someone from your target audience read your paper. Did they have any questions? Were they confused at any point? Have someone from outside your target audience read your paper. How did their reaction differ from your target audience reader?
3. Consider the length of your paragraphs and overall paper. How much time are you asking your readers to invest in engaging with your content?

### Works Consulted

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