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05.02: Audience Analysis

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Audience Analysis

David McMurrey

Chapter Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, readers will be able to:

1. Identify the four common categories of audience and explain the differences between them.
2. Analyze your audience and explain how to tailor your writing to that audience.

The audience of a technical report—or any piece of writing for that matter—is the intended or potential reader or readers. For most technical writers, this is the most important consideration in planning, writing, and reviewing a document. You "adapt" your writing to meet the needs, interests, and background of the readers who will be reading your writing.

The principle seems absurdly simple and obvious. It's much the same as telling someone, "Talk so the person in front of you can understand what you're saying." It's like saying, "Don't talk rocket science to your six-year-old." Do we need a course in that? Doesn't seem like it. But, in fact, lack of audience analysis and adaptation is one of the root causes of most of the problems you find in professional, technical documents—particularly instructions where it surfaces most glaringly.

Note: Once you've read this chapter on audience analysis, try using the audience planner below. You fill in blanks with answers to questions about your audience and then e-mail it to yourself. Use the audience planner for any writing project as a way of getting yourself to think about your audience in detail.

Audience Planner

Types of Audiences

One of the first things to do when you analyze an audience is to identify its type (or types—it's rarely just one type). The common division of audiences into categories is as follows:

- **Experts:** These are the people who know the theory and the product inside and out. They designed it, they tested it, they know everything about it. Often, they have advanced degrees and operate in academic settings or in research and development areas of the government and technology worlds. The nonspecialist reader is least likely to understand what these people are saying—but also has the least reason to try. More often, the communication challenge faced by the expert is communicating to the technician and the executive.
- **Technicians:** These are the people who build, operate, maintain, and repair the stuff that the experts design and theorize about. Theirs is a highly technical knowledge as well, but of a more practical nature.
- **Executives:** These are the people who make business, economic, administrative, legal, governmental, and/or political decisions on the stuff that the experts and technicians work with. If it's a new product, they decide whether to produce and market it. If it's a new power technology, they decide whether the city should implement it. Executives are likely to have as little technical knowledge about the subject as nonspecialists.
- **Nonspecialists:** These readers have the least technical knowledge of all. Their interest may be as practical as technicians', but in a different way. They want to use the new product to accomplish their tasks; they want to understand the new power technology enough to know whether to vote for or against it in the upcoming bond election. Or, they may just be curious about a specific technical matter and want to learn about it—but for no specific, practical reason.

Audience Analysis

It's important to determine which of the four categories just discussed the potential readers of your document belong to, but that's not the end of it. Audiences, regardless of category, must also be analyzed in terms of characteristics such as the following:

- **Background—knowledge, experience, training:** One of your most important concerns is just how much knowledge, experience, or training you can expect in your readers. If you expect some of your readers to lack certain background, do you automatically supply it in your document? Consider an example: imagine you're writing a guide to using a software product that runs under Microsoft Windows. How much can you expect your readers to know about Windows? If some are likely to know little about Windows, should you provide that information? If you say no, then you run the risk of customers' getting frustrated with your product. If you say yes to adding background information on Windows, you increase your work effort and add to the page count of the document (and thus to the cost). Obviously, there's no easy answer to this question—part of the answer may involve just how small a segment of the audience needs that background information.
- **Needs and interests:** To plan your document, you need to know what your audience is going to expect from that document. Imagine how readers will want to use your document and what will they demand from it. For example, imagine you are writing a manual on how to use a new smart phone—what are your readers going to expect to find in it? Imagine you're under contract to write a background report on global warming for a national real estate association—what do they want to read about; and, equally important, what do they not want to read about?
- **Other demographic characteristics:** And of course there are many other characteristics about your readers that might have an influence on how you should design and write your document—for example, age groups, type of residence, area of residence, gender, political preferences, and so on.

Audience analysis can get complicated by at least three other factors: mixed audience types for one document, wide variability within audience, and unknown audiences.

- **More than one audience.** You're likely to find that your report is for more than one audience. For example, it may be seen by technical people (experts and technicians) and administrative people (executives). What do you do? You can either write all the sections so that all the audiences of your document can understand them (good luck!). Or you can write each section strictly for the audience that would be interested in it, then use headings and section introductions to alert your audience about where to go and what to avoid in your report.
- **Wide variability in an audience.** You may realize that, although you have an audience that fits into only one category, there is a wide variability in its background. This is a tough one—if you write to the lowest common denominator of reader, you're likely to end up with a cumbersome, tedious book-like thing that will turn off the majority of readers. But if you don't write to that lowest level, you lose that segment of your readers. What to do? Most writers go for the majority of readers and sacrifice that minority that needs more help. Others put the supplemental information in appendixes or insert cross-references to beginners' books.

Audience Adaptation

Okay! So you've analyzed your audience until you know them better than you know yourself. What good is it? How do you use this information? How do you keep from writing something that will still be incomprehensible or useless to your readers?

The business of writing to your audience may have a lot to do with in-born talent, intuition, and even mystery. But there are some controls you can use to have a better chance to connect with your readers. The following "controls" have mostly to do with making technical information more understandable for nonspecialist audiences:

- **Add information readers need to understand your document.** Check to see whether certain key information is missing—for example, a critical series of steps from a set of instructions, important background that helps beginners understand the main discussion, or definition of key terms.
- **Omit information your readers do not need.** Unnecessary information can also confuse and frustrate readers—after all, it's there so they feel obligated to read it. For example, you can probably chop theoretical discussion from basic instructions.
- **Change the level of the information you currently have.** You may have the right information but it may be "pitched" at too high or too low a technical level. It may be pitched at the wrong kind of audience—for example, at an expert audience rather than a technician audience. This happens most often when product-design notes are passed off as instructions.
- **Add examples to help readers understand.** Examples are one of the most powerful ways to connect with audiences, particularly in instructions. Even in noninstructional text, for example, when you are trying to explain a technical concept, examples are a major help—analogs in particular.
- **Change the level of your examples.** You may be using examples but the technical content or level may not be appropriate to your readers. Homespun examples may not be useful to experts; highly technical ones may totally miss your nonspecialist readers.
- **Change the organization of your information.** Sometimes, you can have all the right information but arrange it in the wrong way. For example, there can be too much (or too little) background information up front such that certain readers get lost. Sometimes, background information needs to be consolidated into the main information—for example, in instructions it's sometimes better to feed in chunks of background at the points where they are immediately needed.

- **Strengthen transitions.** It may be difficult for readers, particularly nonspecialists, to see the connections between the main sections of your report, between individual paragraphs, and sometimes even between individual sentences. You can make these connections much clearer by adding transition words and by echoing key words more accurately. Words like "therefore," "for example," "however" are transition words—they indicate the logic connecting the previous thought to the upcoming thought. You can also strengthen transitions by carefully echoing the same key words. In technical prose, it's not a good idea to vary word choice—use the same words so that people don't get any more confused than they may already be.
- **Write stronger introductions—both for the whole document and for major sections.** People seem to read with more confidence and understanding when they have the "big picture"—a view of what's coming, and how it relates to what they've just read. Therefore, make sure you have a strong introduction to the entire document—one that makes clear the topic, purpose, audience, and contents of that document. And for each major section within your document, use mini-introductions that indicate at least the topic of the section and give an overview of the subtopics to be covered in that section.
- **Create topic sentences for paragraphs and paragraph groups.** It can help readers immensely to give them an idea of the topic and purpose of a section (a group of paragraphs) and in particular to give them an overview of the subtopics about to be covered. Roadmaps help when you're in a different state!
- **Change sentence style and length.** How you write—down at the individual sentence level—can make a big difference too. In instructions, for example, using imperative voice and "you" phrasing is vastly more understandable than the passive voice or third-personal phrasing. For some reason, personalizing your writing style and making it more relaxed and informal can make it more accessible and understandable. Passive, personless writing is harder to read—put people and action in your writing. Similarly, go for active verbs as opposed to be verb phrasing. All of this makes your writing more direct and immediate—readers don't have to dig for it. And obviously, sentence length matters as well. An average of somewhere between 15 and 25 words per sentence is about right; sentences over 30 words are to be mistrusted.
- **Work on sentence clarity and economy.** This is closely related to the previous "control" but deserves its own spot. Often, writing style can be so wordy that it is hard or frustrating to read. When you revise your rough drafts, put them on a diet—go through a draft line by line trying to reduce the overall word, page, or line count by 20 percent. Try it as an experiment and see how you do. You'll find a lot of fussy, unnecessary detail and inflated phrasing you can chop out.
- **Use more or different graphics.** For nonspecialist audiences, you may want to use more graphics—and simpler ones at that. Graphics for specialists are more detailed, more technical. In technical documents for nonspecialists, there also tend to be more "decorative" graphics—ones that are attractive but serve no strict informative or persuasive purpose at all.
- **Break text up or consolidate text into meaningful, usable chunks.** For nonspecialist readers, you may need to have shorter paragraphs. Maybe a 6- to 8-line paragraph is the usual maximum. Notice how much longer paragraphs are in technical documents written for specialists.
- **Add cross-references to important information.** In technical information, you can help nonspecialist readers by pointing them to background sources. If you can't fully explain a topic on the spot, point to a section or chapter where it is.
- **Use headings and lists.** Readers can be intimidated by big dense paragraphs of writing, uncut by anything other than a blank line now and then. Search your rough drafts for ways to incorporate headings—look for changes in topic or subtopic. Search your writing for listings of things—these can be made into vertical lists. Look for paired listings such as terms and their definitions—these can be made into two-column lists. Of course, be careful not to force this special formatting—don't overdo it.
- **Use special typography, and work with margins, line length, line spacing, type size, and type style.** For nonspecialist readers, you can do things like making the lines shorter (bringing in the margins), using larger type sizes, and other such tactics. Certain type styles are believed to be friendlier and more readable than others. (Try to find someone involved with publishing to get some insights on fonts.)

These are the kinds of "controls" that professional technical writers use to finetune their work and make it as readily understandable as possible. And in contrast, it's the accumulation of lots of problems in these areas—even seemingly trivial ones—that add up to a document being difficult to read and understand. Nonprofessionals often question why professional writers and editors insist on bothering with such seemingly picky, trivial, petty details in writing—but they all add up! It reminds me of the ancient Chinese execution method called "death by a thousand cuts." However, in this case, it would be "perplexity by a thousand minor problems."