Understanding Purpose and Audience

Understanding your purpose and audience is critical when writing for any course. Determining your purpose and audience can influence your decisions about content, emphasis, organization, style, and tone.

Determining Your Purpose

Your purpose for writing is simply what you are trying to accomplish. There are several different things you may be trying to accomplish in your writing. Choose the one that best suits the paper you’re working on now:

- **Writing to Reflect** means you are exploring personal ideas to make sense of your experiences. Examples include diaries, journals, and autobiographical memoirs. You’re trying to communicate your emotions and reactions to others.

- **Writing to Inform** means you are communicating factual details about particular topics. Examples include newspaper articles, reference books, textbooks, instruction manuals and informative web sites such as government or non-profit sites. You’re providing definitions, explaining concepts or processes and helping readers understand ideas and see relationships.

- **Writing to Persuade** means you are trying to convince your readers to accept your position on a particular topic. Examples include research papers, editorials, advertisements and some business communications.

- **Writing to Evaluate** means you are assessing the validity, accuracy or quality of information to assess the relative merits of something. Examples include reports, critiques and book reviews.

Determining Your Audience

Most of the writing you will do in college has an audience, which is simply a particular reader or group of readers.

First, determine your audience type by considering:

- Who they are (age, sex, education, economic status, political/social/religious beliefs)
- What level of information they have about the subject (novice, general reader, specialist or expert)
- The context in which they will be reading a piece of writing (in a newspaper, textbook, popular magazine, specialized journal, on the Internet, etc.)
Second, **decide which category** your audience fits into:

- **The lay/general audience** has no special or expert knowledge of what you’re writing about. They need background information, definitions, and descriptions to help them understand your paper. You will be writing for the lay audience more than any other in college. Even though your instructor may be a subject matter expert on your topic, you will generally treat them as if they were a lay person, but take into account what that particular instructor expects from your paper (see Writing For Your Instructor below).

- **The managerial audience** may have more background information than the lay audience. What the managerial audience needs is relevant background information, facts, and statistics in order to make a decision based on what you write.

- **The expert audience** will generally have all the necessary background information about your topic, often knowing more about it that you. Writing for the expert audience often involves a very specific style of writing which can be very technical in the way it is formatted, the document citation, and the vocabulary that is used.

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**Writing For Your Instructor**

You can treat your instructors as lay audience members in the sense that you will want to provide them the background information, definitions, and descriptions a lay reader would need to understand your topic. However, writing for your instructor also requires that you structure your ideas in a manner that is appropriate for an academic paper.

Your instructor will want to know what you know. It is important to them that you can express what you know clearly and accurately. The way you organize and express your ideas can be as important as the ideas themselves.

Remember that your instructors are trained as careful readers and critics. They will expect accurate information, standard grammar, correct spelling, correctly formatted papers and logically presented ideas. They will expect you to back up your generalizations with specific examples and to draw your own conclusions based on the examples given.