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ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Who are you talking to? Tailoring your writing style for your audience

I am writing this for you. You are my audience.

The preceding statements seem obvious. But here's another one: I am writing this for my editors.

In other words, this essay is like much of the writing you presumably do. It has two audiences — a primary one and a secondary one.

Assessing those audiences is essential to effective writing. My goal in this essay is to explain why and to provide ideas for defining your audience and determining your writing style.

Your second audience comes first

Let's start with the secondary audience, which is whoever edits and/or reviews your work before publication. By "publication," I'm referring to the moment when your work is sent to your main audience, whether it's hitting "Send" on an email, posting to social media, uploading to a website, printing or utilizing any other format.

Although I refer to editors as your secondary audience, they are an audience for whom you absolutely should prepare. Doing so will save time, energy and stress.

You need to observe and learn the preferences and idiosyncrasies of your editor(s). If your supervisor — or whoever edits your work — still believes the outdated notions that there should be two spaces between sentences, that it's grammatically wrong to end a sentence with a preposition, or that one should never use contractions, then it behooves you to follow those rules without complaint. Those are minor irritations that need not disrupt your writing style and that are not worth fighting.

If your editor constantly makes substantive changes in both the content and the style, that is another matter.

And if you don't have an editor, I encourage you to at least find an obliging colleague who will proofread your work carefully and alert you to glitches, errors in logic and holes.

Writing for your main audience

What works for one audience may or may not work for another. Like many writers, I often have a specific person — real or imagined — in mind to represent my target audience. Identifying or creating that representation is a good way to get a handle on the characteristics of a

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particular audience.

Writing Style

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Knowing your audience will determine how you approach your writing. Your goal is to put yourself in the audience's shoes and to write from that perspective.

As a professional communicator, your audience, not your personal preferences, should determine your writing approach. Your journal at home is where you can write any way you want.

If it is an audience with a short attention span, your writing must be tight and concise — able to be read and absorbed within a couple of minutes. In fact, your headline should be so on-target and your first paragraph so short as to grab and keep the audience's attention in a few seconds. One such approach is a quick-hit list of bulleted items.

News releases should be written in a tight, concise form — this is what you, the audience, need to know. So should some social media posts and, depending on your supervisors' preferences, memos to them.

Storytelling is the most powerful form of communication. If your audience has time for a story, you can take more of a feature approach. That sometimes is appropriate for a newsletter or a website. Remember, a longer piece does not mean it should move slower. Prune your writing of tangents and unnecessary verbiage.

Your tone may be informal. But please, please don't try to be cutesy in your writing; it rarely works, even though you think it's delightful.

Your tone should match your audience's expectations. If the issue is deadly serious, or if you are writing to the school board or a government agency, your tone should be formal as an indication of respect.

If your audience is fellow staff members, you want to strive for a middle tone. Being either overly formal or overly relaxed can be off-putting.

If your audience is children, you should be informal but not hokey. Unless you're a middle school student — or an accomplished author of youth literature — don't try to write like a middle school student.

Who is the audience?

Many new businesses fail. Why? Because they lack a realistic business plan, including an accurate understanding of their target audience and how to reach that audience.

Every piece of writing should have its own plan, an answer to this overriding question: What do I want to accomplish with this communication, who is my target audience, and how do I make it relevant to this audience?

Here are a few more questions to help you prepare:

- What is my key message?
- Whom should I keep in mind in addition to my main target audience?
- What are the audience's values, interests and concerns? How do I incorporate these in presenting my key message?
- What writing structure would my audience be most receptive to?
- How knowledgeable is my audience on this topic? What is the right level of explanation to provide, and how will I do that?

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- Can information be told better through an alternative format, such as a graphic, photograph or video?
- What questions will my audience have?
- Have I answered those questions?

Does your voice matter?

Based on your audience, your tone and your style may vary.

My writing voice tends to be one of short, subject-verb-object sentences and short paragraphs, regardless of the subject matter. I usually strive to be conversational but not unduly familiar. In an opinion piece, depending on the audience, I can be forceful.

Know yourself as a writer. I do a lot of rewriting. Even in personal emails, my first drafts often are too complicated, poking into tangents that I care about but that are neither necessary nor helpful to my main points.

One of my first bosses said I was not a natural writer. He was right. Over time, I developed a style that works for me. Until then, I unfortunately forced readers to endure some regretful periods of experimentation, including one during which I was teasingly known by colleagues as the “Master of Metaphor.” It took a while to learn that good writing, including vivid writing, is plain writing. Flowery language is off-putting, unless you are someone who loves the past centuries’ great works of literature that hardly anyone reads today.

If you are concerned about developing your own style, relax. It will happen. However, here are tips to help you accelerate the process:

- Keep track of writers whom you enjoy and admire. On your own time, practice writing in that style. Unlike athletes and musicians, we writers spend little time simply practicing our craft. Practice is what creates improvement.
- Take something you have written and practice writing it in other styles.
- Go back a month later and read several of your pieces. What works and what doesn’t work in your writing? What can you learn from them? Would anyone read these pieces if they didn’t have to?
- Do freewriting regularly. Write by hand without worrying about whether the spelling or punctuation or grammar is correct. Later, take note of your voice in that writing.
- Write down several adjectives that describe you. Together, they can give clues to the writing style to which you aspire.
- Recognize how you’re feeling when you write. Are you alert and relaxed, or tired and stressed? The latter can infect your writing, creating a style of drudgery.
- Read, read, read. Write, write, write.

Most important, find the style that works for you and your audience(s).

Write on.