Finding your audience: a primer

Before you sit down to write something, ask yourself some questions about the people who will read it.

Before you can reach your audience, you have to find them. That means understanding who they are, what their expectations are, what they bring to your writing, and what you want them to take away.

Ask yourself these questions when you sit down to write:

1. **Who** is my audience?
2. **What** do I want them to know, believe, or feel after they read it?
3. **When** and **where** will they read it?
4. **Why** will they read it?

Who is my audience?

Are you writing for your principal or superintendent? For parents? Students? Colleagues? Potential employers? Obviously the sort of content you'll produce will vary with your audience, but your style and format will need to vary, too.

If you're writing for other professional educators, you can use a little jargon as shorthand (though too much will make you seem pompous and potentially confuse less-experienced colleagues). If you're writing for parents, consider their level of education. You may need to make your writing accessible to parents with a high school diploma while still giving those with advanced degrees the level of content they'll expect from a fellow professional. If you're writing for students, are they students you've taught face to face or students you're "meeting" for the first time online? If the latter, you'll have to establish credibility with them.

What do I want them to know, believe, or feel?

This sounds obvious — how can you write if you don't know what you're trying to communicate? But, as I suggested in an [earlier article](), your content will also determine your style and organization. To borrow the architectural principle, form should follow function. Ask yourself: do I want to convey information or ideas?

If you're posting an assignment for students or parents to refer to at home, you want them to quickly grasp basic information: what you want and when you want it. So you'll want to write short sentences and paragraphs. Stick to the point. Use bulleted lists. An essay assignment for AP English will require more explanation than a list of math problems from a textbook, but even then, there will be specific pieces of information you'll want students to focus on.

If you're posting your philosophy of teaching so parents can understand why you do what you do, you'll need to go into more depth. The same is true if you're developing materials for staff development on a difficult topic like classroom management or writing a reflection on your teaching for licensure or National Board Certification. These are ideas that require thought, and your writing will need to be more thoughtful.

When and where will they read it?

When and where your audience read your writing will affect the way they read it and, in turn, the way you need to write for them — especially on the web. Will they read it at work or at home? Over a high-speed connection from the office? a cable modem? a dial-up connection? Will they read it during the day, as part of their jobs, or at home after a long day and with a hundred distractions competing for their attention? If they're rushed, distracted, or tired, don't expect as much attention to detail as you might like. If they're on a slow Internet connection, don't expect them to click too many times to read what you've written or to spend too much time tying up their phone line. And don't forget parents and students using public Internet terminals at the library — they'll have a faster connection than they might from home, but they still won't want to spend a lot of time on the web.

Why will they read it?

Turning people's reasons for reading into a short list is dangerous, but let me try it anyway, with a focus on why people read on the web.

a. **Because they have to.** Perhaps it's an assignment for a class: if you're assigning a reading, you get to dictate the terms of the reading and what the students are supposed to get out of it. Of course, if you don't make those terms clear, or if you make it too difficult for them, they won't do it anyway. We can hope, beg, implore, demand that our students will listen to every word we say and read every word we write, but those of us who survive as teachers know better.

b. **Because they are professionally interested in your work.** This could describe a certification board looking at an application, an administrator considering hiring or promoting you, or a parent looking up your credentials. You can assume that if they weren't interested, they wouldn't be there; and it's you, specifically, that they are interested in, so they can't find this content from another source. But you still have to hold their interest once they're there: they don't have to read what you've written. In this case, it's not they who need something from you; it's you who need something from them — professional approval.

c. **Because they are personally interested in what you have to say.** If you're writing staff development materials for fellow teachers that will be posted on the web for general access, you can, again, assume a certain level of interest from your audience. If they weren't interested in the topic, they wouldn't be reading it. But they may have only a passing interest. And whatever the topic, there are probably other sources of information and ideas out there. You don't have a captive audience, so you have to sell your writing.

The more easily your audience can move on without reading your writing, the more you have to do to keep them interested. That sounds obvious, but it's easily overlooked. In general, it means good, strong, clear writing — a topic too broad to go into right now. On the web in particular, it means asking less of your readers — not oversimplifying your message, but making your writing easier to read on the web.