

## Determining An Author's Intended Audience

Why would we as readers want to determine an author's intended audience?

The answer: Knowing the author's intended audience helps us to better understand the author's purposes and to better evaluate the author's effectiveness in accomplishing those purposes.

"Experienced writers consider their audience continually. They gear their message to be consonant with the audience's prior knowledge and assumptions" (Dougherty 40). Considering the audience helps an author make multiple decisions. Some of an author's main areas of concern are:

- What content to include/What to exclude
- What level of language to use
- What writing plan to use
- What relationship to establish with the audience
- How the text should appear

Since these are some of the areas an author takes into consideration when writing to a specific audience, they are also the areas that readers should analyze in order to determine who that audience is. When approaching a text, try to determine who the author is trying to communicate with.

### Consider the following two examples:

The following texts are summaries of two different articles. The articles report on the same subject and the same experience, and are written by the same scientists. However, the scientists have greatly changed their textual presentation to appeal to different audiences. Summary one comes from a scientific journal and summary two appears in a news magazine.

#### The Summary Statement of "A Systematic Assessment of Early African Hominids":

A large sample of Pliocene fossil hominid remains has been recovered from the African sites of Hadar in Ethiopia and Laetolil in Tanzania. These collections, dating approximately between 2.9 and 3.8 million years ago, constitute the earliest substantial record of the family Hominidae. This article assesses the phylogenetic relationships of the newly discovered fossil hominid and provides a taxonomy consistent with that assessment.

#### The Summary Statement of "LUCY: A 3.5 million-year-old woman shakes man's family tree":

The identification of a new species, ancestral to humankind, did not come easily. Donald Johanson and Tim White spent thousands of hours in painstaking detective work, poring over the superlative fossils that Johanson had unearthed in the Ethiopian desert. The two scientists knew their work would be controversial because it challenged the generally accepted family trees of *Homo sapiens*.

## Analysis

### *Content*

#### Main Idea

Find the main idea of the text, and then ask yourself who or what type of person would be interested in the subject?

- What would be a main idea of summary number one?
  - The phylogenetic relationship of different fossils recently discovered in Africa.
- Who would be interested in this subject?
  - Specialists, such as scientists, biologists, anthropologists, etc.
  
- What would be a main idea of summary number two?
  - The controversial results of Johanson and White's exhaustive research. The focus here is on the controversy surrounding their research process.
- Who would be interested?
  - General audiences, or those who have some interest in science, but aren't experts.

#### Validations or Support

Next discover what validations or support the author gives to back up her main idea. Ask who would value this support. Who would be persuaded by the support? What types of support are not there? Are parts of the argument missing? Does the author intentionally leave out things that might offend the audience? Does the author inappropriately leave things out that would have persuaded the audience? Does he anticipate their needs?

- What is some support backing up the main idea of summary number one?
  - Statistics on the fossil's age
  - A consistent taxonomy
  
- What is some support backing up the content of summary number two?
  - The narrative format
  - An intriguing description of the process: "painstaking detective work"
  - Focus on the scientists themselves, not just their findings

### *Language*

#### Word Choice

Analyze the language used. Does the language appeal to a specialized group of people or is the text written in layman's terms? Does the language used imply that the reader will bring a certain type of knowledge with him to the text? Is there special jargon used? Is it the language of a highly educated person?

- What type of word choice is used in summary number one?
  - Specialized and precise words, such as *Philocene*, *Hominidae*, phylogenetic relationship, taxonomy

- How does this differ from summary two?
- Number two's word choice targets a general audience. The fossil's Latin name is not used and neither are the specific African locations named.

### Sentence Structure

What type of word order or sentence structure does the text employ? Passive voice construction usually implies a focus on what was done, whereas active voice is emphasizing the doer of the action.

- What type of sentence structure does summary one use?
  - Passive voice, focusing on the actions, not who is performing the actions.
- Contrast this with sentence structure of summary two. What is its sentence structure?
  - The second example uses more active voice. The emphasis is on the scientists as the doers of the action.

### ***Writing Plan***

#### Form

Consider the form or structure of the text. Is it written as a narrative or is it in expository form? What is the effect of the form? Why would the author choose to write the text this way and what type of audience would it appeal to?

- What type of overall form would you expect from the first article?
  - Their chosen writing plan is typically scientific: it explicates the details of their research first, before they present their conclusions.
- The second article greatly contrasts this form. The article consists mainly of narrative and exposition. The reader's attention is immediately focused in on the controversy and the facts given will serve as support after claims are made.

#### Genre

What type or category of work is the text? How does the chosen genre help present the information? What type of audience would the genre appeal to? Is the text presented as a narrative, a drama, an argument, a report, a sermon, or an essay (just to name a few examples)?

- Where would an article like summary one appear?
  - In specialized, scientific journals.
- What about article two? Where would it appear?
  - Possibly in a popular news magazine like *Newsweek* or *Time*.

## ***Writing Relationship***

What tone of voice comes across to you as a reader? Has the author chosen to be academic, friendly, humorous, or cynical? Why? Where is the text's primary focus--is it on the author, the topic or you the reader--and what effect does this have?

- What type of relationship is set between authors and audience in summary one?
  - The authors have chosen to speak as educated scientists to a group of their peers. The tone is scientific. They include no personal judgment and they do not need to explain their technical terms because they know their audience will understand those technicalities.
- How does this differ to the tone of summary two?
  - The authors speak as educated men speaking to those less versed in their field. When a technical term has to be used, they explain it instead of assuming their audience will be familiar with it. Instead of speaking scientifically to people on equally educated planes, they chose to entertain with drama and controversy.

## ***Textual Appearance***

Look at how the text is laid out? Does it have a lot of headings or sub-headings? Are there pictures and graphs?

- What is the visual lay-out that an article like summary one would be found in ?
  - This article would appear with a modest format. Its title would not be eye catching, and it would also be set up with sub-headings conventional in scientific scholarly writing to indicate methods, data, evaluation of data, and conclusions.
- Compare the modest visual lay-out to that of an article like summary two. Assuming that this article would be found in a magazine like Newsweek, what would the visual appearance be?
  - Probably, the article would have a larger, eye-catching head-line. There may be pictures to catch the reader's attention, and sub-headings might not be used.

What can we assess from answering these questions?

### **An audience character sketch**

The audience for article one would be scientific experts in their field and obviously interested in the detailed process of describing and identifying the African Hominid. They would value the research process the two scientists underwent to obtain their information and they would understand how much work and meticulous detailing was required by the scientists. The audience would have prior knowledge of all the technical terms involved in the process and

would recognize that the article is written in a way to emphasize the findings and the information, not the scientists. They would appreciate that the writers chose a format that would allow easy access to the information and they would easily recognize the genre as one belonging in a scientific journal.

The other article reaches an entirely different audience. The members of this audience are not as interested in the technicalities as the controversy surrounding the scientists's findings. They can certainly understand the subject matter, but their previous knowledge does not equip them to comprehend at the expert level of the first article. They want to be informed, but also entertained with the drama surrounding the story.

### **An Example of Poorly Capturing the Audience**

In the above examples, the author's intended audience and the actual audience seem to match up--a sign that the authors wrote thoughtfully and effectively. What happens though, when the author does not adequately or accurately assess the intended audience? Let's look at an example where the author has **poorly captured his audience**. Often in editorials or political speeches, authors or speakers attempt to persuade others to agree with their opinions. However, more often than not, they fail to persuade because they do not effectively capture their audience. Instead, they speak only to those who already believe them and ignore the concerns of others.

Dear President Bateman,

I am sick and tired of the debate over knee-length shorts. If people want to wear shorts they should have that freedom. Do we not believe in the right to pursue happiness? Don't we agree that students have a God given right to make their own choices? The choice of what is modest should be left to the students' own integrity. Why all this dictatorship anyway? Other universities don't seem to have a problem with this. Does BYU want to control our lives or what?

Sincerely yours,  
Adam Snideman

With a letter like this, Adam is going to get no where. He may think that he's trying to persuade, but really his letter targets only those who already agree with him. According to his text, Adam must imagine that President Bateman (Adam's admitted audience):

- will allow the anger of one faceless student to cause him to suddenly change his moral standings.
- will acquiesce his beliefs as president of the University when indirectly referred to as a controlling dictator.
- believes an ultimate freedom to choose is the divine good.
- believes that individuals' perceptions of what it means to pursue happiness overrides all other principles.

Though President Bateman probably is concerned about the views and opinions of the student body, Adam's is obviously not the type of letter that would promote any significant change in Bateman's thinking. If Adam wants to effectively appeal to his audience, he must try

and think like that audience. He must figure out what it is that motivates and persuades a man such as President Bateman. Adam fails to do this. He largely ignores who his audience is and will probably succeed only in getting President Bateman mad. Some of the more blatant problems with Adam's attempt to capture an audience are:

1. He doesn't consider or recognize his audience's concerns (what is best for the entire student body).
2. He does not appeal to his audience's sense of honor or expediency.
3. He talks mainly to himself (to blow off steam) instead of trying to connect with an audience.
4. His argument is full of logical fallacies.

**Have a go-ahead.** Here are some examples for you to practice with. Describe the intended audience of each paragraph. (To read the entire article see *Dialogues and Conversations, sec.ed.*).

"The Opening of American Minds," by Richard Rory

When people on the political right talk about education, they immediately start talking about truth. Typically, they enumerate what they take to be familiar and self-evident truths and regret that these are no longer being inculcated in the young. When people on the political left talk about education, they talk first about freedom. The left typically views the old familiar truths cherished by the right as a crust to be broken through, vestiges of old-fashioned modes of thought from which the new generation should be freed.

"The Lost Art of Political Argument," by Christopher Lasch

Let us begin with a simple proposition: What democracy requires is public debate, not information. Of course it needs information too, but the kind of information it needs can be generated only by vigorous popular debate. We do not know what we need to know until we ask the right questions, and we can identify the right questions only by subjecting our own ideas about the world to the test of public controversy.

"In Praise of Ourselves: Stories to Tell," by William A. Wilson

A few years ago, when I was teaching at another university, the faculty became embroiled in one of those too-typical wranglings over allocations of resources. One faculty member (or so it was reported to me: I was not at the meeting) addressed his colleagues from the English department with the scornful and, in his judgement, rhetorical question: "You certainly wouldn't give up a cure for cancer for poetry, would you?" I have always been sorry I was not at the meeting so I could have responded: "For one poem, maybe not; but for poetry--yes."

Works Cited:

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