Audience Awareness

Audience (partially adapted from a handout from The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

Why does audience matter when I write?

When you're in the process of writing a paper, it's easy to forget that you are actually writing to someone. Whether you've thought about it consciously or not, you always write to an audience.

To illustrate the impact of audience, imagine you're writing a letter to your grandma to tell her about your first month of college. What details and stories might you include? What might you leave out? Now imagine that you're writing on the same topic, but that your audience this time is your best friend from high school. Even if you have an extremely cool grandma to whom you're very close, it's likely that your two letters would look quite different in terms of content, structure, and even tone.

But why do I care about this? Isn't my instructor my REAL audience?

Yes, your instructor or TA is probably the actual audience for many of your papers. Your instructors read and grade your essays, and you want to keep their needs and perspectives in mind when you write. However, when you write an essay with only your instructor in mind, you might not say as much as you should or say it as clearly as you should, because you assume that the person grading it knows more than you do and will fill in the gaps. This may lead to you receiving a lower grade than you'd like, because your instructor will likely be expecting you to demonstrate your knowledge in the essay. By treating your instructor as an intelligent but uninformed audience, you end up addressing her more effectively.

However, as time goes by in your college career, your instructor will be your sole audience less and less frequently. After all, part of the point of specializing in an academic field is to engage in scholarly conversation with others in your area. And, of course, you'll only be in college for a limited amount of time, after which you won't be writing just to earn a grade. Developing a sense of the complexities of audience now will definitely help you in the long run.

How do I identify my audience and what they want from me?

Before you even begin the process of writing, take some time to consider who your audience is and what they want from you. Use the following questions to help you identify your audience and what you can do to address its wants and needs.
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- Who is your audience?
- How many audiences do you have? (After all, you’ll often have multiple people/groups of people reading what you write.) List them.
- What does your audience need? What do they want?
- What is most important to them?
- What are they least likely to care about?
- How might you organize your essay in a way that will be best for your audience?
- What do you have to say or what are you doing in your research that might surprise your audience?
- What do you want your audience to think, learn, or assume about you? What impression do you want your writing or your research to convey?