

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

While the writer is important to the rhetorical situation surrounding an essay, the intended reader (audience) is equally important. The writer should identify the target audience and find appropriate strategies to address that audience. While it is possible (and quite likely) that people other than the intended audience may read the essay, a writer cannot address a large, generalized group of people and effectively reach all of them.

Thus, audience analysis is an important step in the process of creating an effective essay. It helps maintain an appropriate tone, use the most pertinent information, and tailor the scope of the essay's argument.

First and foremost, determine who would be interested in the topic and specific focus of the paper. "Anyone who..." is **never** an answer, though; neither is "the teacher." You need to be more specific. For example, if possible solutions to the problem of teenage smoking are being examined, some audiences that immediately present themselves as possibilities are teens, parents, and lawmakers. But can all three of those audiences be reached with the same information and same solutions? It's unlikely, and so the content (especially the specific solution) may further define the audience. If, for example, the essay discusses how parents need to take a more active role in educating their teenaged children about the dangers of smoking, then the most obvious audience is the parents of teenagers and/or pre-teens. Parents, in general, would not be an effective audience - if their children are all grown and beyond the teenage years, it would be ineffectual for those parents to discuss this with them now. Parents of toddlers would also be inappropriate for similar reasons.

Even then, the intended audience should be more specific. Are all parents created equal? No. The statistics for teenage smoking suggest that other demographic factors play a role - race, gender, age, income, education. These factors can drastically alter how the topic is approached. Older parents, for instance, are likely to have grown up in a time when various brands of cigarettes were endorsed by doctors! The essay's tactics and information might need to be reconsidered for such an audience.

Or perhaps the focus is on how the laws governing teenage smoking need to be stricter. Parents are less likely to be the best audience - while they may be concerned about those laws, they cannot directly do anything about them. A more obvious audience is lawmakers - they would be the ones who would have the power to change those laws. If lawmakers are the audience, the essay is less likely to approach them casually; the wording will be more formal and the essay would rely on statistics and similar data. But lawmakers are answerable to their constituents - in this case, the parents who may be concerned about this issue. To change the law directly, address the lawmakers. But if the goal is to create outrage among parents, who would then lobby their legislators to change the laws - the scope and information included in the essay would change. More emotional examples and language would be used. While data and statistics may be important, parents are more likely to respond to specific and "personal" examples.

Consider why the audience would be interested in the topic - parents obviously should want to protect their children, and thus would have some interest in this topic. Lawmakers would be interested in the topic because their constituencies may feel it's important. Teens, on the other hand, might be a more challenging audience for a variety of reasons. What's at stake for the audience - how or why is this topic important?

What the audience knows, what they don't know, and what they need to know (which isn't always the same as what they don't know) also affect the essay. For instance, if the proposal is to change the laws governing smoking by teens, lawmakers (a likely intended audience) can be assumed to already be familiar with the laws themselves; thus, the laws might not need to be discussed at any great length (if at all). Instead, the essay would look at how those laws are not working on a larger scale (as individual incidents can be seen as aberrant and not representative of the laws overall) and provide evidence that changes are needed and will have the desired result. Parents, on the other hand, might not be familiar with the particulars of the laws,

and thus need that information. The effectiveness of those laws would still be relevant, but the examples might be more specific and emotional. An essay addressing teens might focus more on the consequences of breaking those laws - the use of fear of punishment as a persuasive tactic might be more effective, as peer pressure and other factors may inhibit a logical, health-focused argument, for example.

Even the wording of the essay will change - lawmakers might not need certain terms defined, whereas parents will. Teens may respond better to language that speaks to them like other teens would (hence the frequent use of narratives to persuade in situations like this) rather than language, which seems to be more "adult." Parents will not want to be talked down to, but they also might not understand the use of too much jargon.

Use the following questions to help with audience analysis.

1. Who is the INTENDED audience?

- Don't just generically label or name the intended audience. Describe these intended readers.

Consider the following possible details:

- Sex
 - Age
 - Income
 - Race
 - Geographic location
 - Education
 - Marital status/family
 - Occupation
 - (many others can also be considered)
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- Avoid using empty, generic stereotypes, and don't fall into the "anyone who" trap.

- Discuss how the intended audience is affected by or involved in the topic being discussed. Discuss the main characteristics of this audience, including values, assumptions, experiences, and stances that work for and against the essay's purpose.

2. How will the audience benefit from this topic?

- What can be done with the information provided? Why is it necessary to know this? What difference might it make?

3. In what context is the reader looking at this material?

- Are the readers already somewhat interested? Are they completely unaware? Are they antagonistic toward the topic, or doubtful about any point which might be made? Are they supportive?

4. What questions do these readers need to have answered?

- What kind of background information is needed before the claim can be made?

5. What is the audience's technical or educational background?

- In general, are they prepared and able to understand, interpret, and apply the information in the essay?