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HELLO OUT THERE! ARE YOU READING ME?

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Audience identification is the first step in purposeful writing. Yet we find little written information that helps us in determining the makeup of an audience, what it needs to know, and how we can use that information to produce a meaningful publication. A large national laboratory reaches diverse audiences with different types of publications. Representative communicators who produce manuals, press releases, public relations publications, in-house publications, journal articles, and technical reports share their methods of identifying and writing for audiences and pose some thought-provoking questions about audiences and the lack thereof.

"Before you write, determine who your audience is"..."Aim your message directly at your audience" .. "A report should be written entirely from the viewpoint of the reader." We know! We have heard those statements before—in college classrooms, in training courses, at professional meetings. We always nod our heads in assent because we agree, but we don't know how to answer the questions that always follow. Is there an audience? Why do we want to know? How do we determine who makes up our audience? What do we want to know about them? What then? We know that any audience is made up of people—people with a need for information. But what if we have information and no immediate audience? If an audience does not exist, then surely writing just to document findings is a costly way of filling filing cabinets. However, we may have a responsibility to document significant findings for an audience that may not now exist.

For now, let's assume that we have an identifiable audience. What do we need to know about them so that we can give them the information they need in a usable format? Mike Stroud, Director of the consulting firm, Communications Strategies, believes that we usually write to provide three types of information—that which

- enhances decision-making,
- identifies relative priorities, and
- records accomplishments.

If these assumptions are true, we need to determine what we want our audience to do with what we write.

- If we want them to make a decision, we need to know what information they need to make that decision.
- If we want to clarify information, we need to know the consequences of that information to readers—why the information is important to them.
- If we are recording accomplishments, we need to know our readers' levels of expertise.

If we prefer the more traditional approach, then we are looking for

- differences, such as age, sex, occupation, and interest,
- educational background,
- level of experience, and
- regional implications.

Now, how do we find out these things about an audience? Types of audiences may be as many as the types of publications an organization produces. Consequently, the methods used to determine the audience for a publication must be unique to that publication. All publications may have one audience in common—management; that is, before any publication is released to its audience, it must first survive some chain of approval. Technical publications have yet another audience—the professionals whose work is presented in the writing. Regardless of whom we may want to reach outside our organization, these two groups make up the most important audience and are perhaps the most difficult for whom we write. Managers may be concerned with political implications, whereas professionals fear that their work will be misrepresented. To our advantage, this audience is local and can be contacted for immediate feedback, but the ultimate readers who are primary in importance become secondary in contact. Who they are and what they need from the writer can be determined in a number of ways, depending on the type of publication. Here are a few categories of publications as examples.

Manuals

Manuals are the classic case of audience participation in writing content. Manuals are written for use in-house and out. Almost always, they are written because someone somewhere needs to know how to use... or how to do.... Members of the audience can be interviewed where they work to determine who they are, how they do their job, what their level of education and experience is, and what and how much they need to know. After the manual is written and distributed, the author can contact users for feedback on their ability to understand and use the directions given therein. For additional feedback, the author can contact the persons who receive the end product produced by following the manual instructions to see if it is properly made or properly written. Suggested changes can then be reviewed for authenticity and incorporated in future revisions or editions.

Press Releases

Editors make up the primary audience for a press release, and they determine what will meet the needs of the secondary audience. Because the secondary audience is usually nontechnical, the story itself may determine who that audience is. For instance, a news release on geothermal energy is best placed in a region where geothermal issues are of public concern. However, the initial news release may evoke other audiences who want more in-depth material and request further interviews for expanded stories. Often this audience is not sure what it needs to know, but at this point, the writer has direct contact with them and can give out the information the audience really needs.

Public Relations Publications

The purpose of these publications is to present to the public an image of an organization and its capabilities for the purposes of distributing information or recruiting. This audience is difficult to determine because it is varied and changes with the use of the publication. For instance, these publications may be distributed to the general public at trade shows, by Chambers of Commerce, and at professional meetings. Consequently, the content of the publication may best be determined by considering its purpose. What audience would we like to reach? What information would we like to convey? If we put ourselves in the place of this hypothetical audience that represents the majority of people we would like to reach, then we can decide what we would want to know about the subject—a potential employer, a new product line, or the latest advances in oil shale technology, perhaps. We can select a vocabulary and format that will allow the casual reader to learn from it. If we are fortunate, we may get a small amount of feedback from persons using the publication that will give us suggestions for revising further editions or planning new layouts.

In-House Publications

In-house publications are of two types—the magazine that represents the work of the company and is distributed both in and out of house, and the house organ that conveys information to the employees about company policy and activities. Both types have in common the local, vocal audience. Easy to define, this audience is usually not shy about expressing opinions on content and artwork, ease of reading, usefulness, and even typeface. This audience likes to see its name in print and is quick to make suggestions about what should have been or what ought to be.

Conversely, the magazine is usually not written with the local audience in mind. Its purpose is to convey information on technical projects to the larger scientific community. An established publication will probably have a hodgepodge distribution list that has grown unmanageable over the years and yields little useful information about the needs of the audience. Here a skillfully designed readership survey, including some personal contact, can serve two purposes—to cut down the distribution list to a manageable size and to identify what the primary audience would like to have in future publications.

Journal Articles

Journal articles are very technical and specialized, and they are written to document new information for highly motivated readers—a peer group. Because the immediate audience may be a journal editor assisted by a team of reviewers, the article is first written for them. When it is approved, it often can be modified in a manner that will satisfy the professional audience. What is published in a journal gives clues about what the audience wants, because readers' requests for reprints help the editor determine which articles are well received. Requesting copies of criticisms of other papers on a similar subject is another way of determining the style and content that the editorial staff is looking for.

Technical Reports

Most large organizations publish technical reports. The purpose of these reports may be to reach a milestone in a project, to respond to a publish-or-perish dictum, or to document findings. The distribution list is often determined by someone other than the author, and too often the printed product ends up on dusty library shelves, in warehouses, and in boxes in the author's office. To reach the intended peer group, the author often must distribute the copies personally.

However, recently a new audience for technical reports has surfaced among scientists in foreign countries. This audience is eager to find information on new technical advances in the United States and may even arrange to visit an author while on a trip here. This reinforces the responsibility of authors to present their data and conclusions in a clear, concise manner rather than assuming that their colleagues will automatically understand what they are trying to say.

If none of these types of publications apply to a particular situation or the audience is too varied to define, Stroud's hierarchical approach may be the solution.

- Determine what we want different readers to do with what we write—take action? be informed? use it in their work?
- Group our readers according to their similarities to us, the writers.
- Write to the readers least like ourselves—the least motivated readers first, then the others.

Now that we know who our audience is, how do we give the audience what is needs in a way that it can use it? We already know that when we communicate we must keep our readers in mind and, considering what they know and need to know, present the information at their levels. Here are some questions that we can ask ourselves as we respond to the identified needs of an audience.

- How complete must information be to meet reader needs? Informative writing is not wise or economical if it gives readers more than they need to know.
- Are tone and style suitable to readers' needs? The use of language in a publication should tell readers how to use the information contained. For instance, if readers are to carry out an instruction, perhaps the imperative mood should be used. The style of writing should catch and hold readers' interest if the information contained is to be used.
- Are unfamiliar terms defined? Readers' levels of experience will determine their need for definition. If they have no technical background, technical terms are best defined in relation to familiar terms. For example, one writer explains the technical term "collisionless shock waves" for nontechnical readers as the way the wind from a passing truck buffets a car.
- What vocabulary level is used? Writing to impress rather than communicate is wrong, and a technical vocabulary is intended only for technical readers. If documents are written for different levels of readers, use expressions, symbols, and abbreviations only for readers interested in detail.
- Are summaries and transitions needed? Though these are not necessary for some readers, unfamiliarity with a subject or lack of technical training may make it difficult for a reader to see relationships in thought. Consequently, the writer may need to summarize a section before moving on to the next one or tie two thoughts together in a new section to make a smooth transition from the previous one.

Finally, if we have information and no audience, what then? Here, a story provokes thought. In the 1940s, explosives technology was developing rapidly in response to a national defense need. All attention was focused on the final objective, so individual experiments were just steps toward that end. Had time allowed scientists to write about their findings, national security policies discouraged it. So significant findings were recorded only in notes that were relegated to filing cabinets.

Several decades passed, and these pioneers in explosives technology prepared to retire. Dutifully, they cleaned out their filing cabinets, and the developmental history of explosives technology was moved from filing cabinets to trash cans. However, one scientist stored his notes in his attic, and there they were recovered by a concerned younger colleague. Based on these remaining notes, C. L. Mader wrote six volumes entitled *The Los Alamos Series on Dynamic Material Properties*. These volumes are recognized in the world atomic energy community as the primers on explosives technology. No audience in the 1940s, but an audience in the 1980s!

There is an audience out there, most of the time, and it does have needs that we can meet. The audience varies in sex, education, occupation, or interest. It may be identified by personal contact, by the purpose of the publication, by readership surveys, and by knowledge of peer group characteristics. Sometimes the information selects the audience, and sometimes we don't have anything to say to an audience. But if there is an audience, there is a need. Our world is experiencing an information overload in the midst of a hectic pace that allows little time for reading. As writers, our best approach must be to see ourselves as part of this overwhelmed audience. How would we like to see information presented so that it is most accessible? Think about it...then write.

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