

# Writing for General Audiences

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## Learning Outcomes

- Understand the difference between writing for a general audience versus an academic audience
- Recognize the benefits of analyzing your audience
- Define and evaluate your purpose, context, and message
- Learn strategies for designing and presenting a message so that it is successfully understood by a general audience

## 14.1 What the Heck Are General Audiences?

This might come as a surprise to you, but when you graduate, you won't always be working with people in your field. Don't get me wrong—you'll still be expected to communicate in the specialized language of your discipline to people *inside* your discipline, but people *outside* your field will also need to understand your work—people like your manager, your customers or clients, and maybe even your significant other. You'll need to learn how to translate complicated topics for these general audiences, also known as public audiences, in order to get your message across.

In fact, just because most of you are young, people will automatically assume that you're tech savvy and an expert at posting on social media. And this will most likely lead to you being tasked with writing posts and blogs for your company, program, or department—even if you've never done it before. But don't panic. Instead, get good at it!

And despite what people assume about youngsters, even if you're skilled at following celebrities on Twitter or posting cat memes on Instagram, that doesn't mean that you know how to represent your company online or report on research published by your favorite professor. So we want to arm you with strategies to tackle the tricky task of writing for people

*not* in your field because there are actually tried-and-true strategies you can use to make the biggest impact. And understanding these strategies could make or break your job search, your career, or possibly even your love life.

I'm serious about the love life thing. If you need more convincing, watch what happened when Jimmy Fallon *failed* to understand the rhetorical situation when he met Nicole Kidman a few years ago. (Watch at least through minute 3:00.)



[Watch on YouTube](https://youtu.be/qtsNbxgPngA)

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Remember the good ol' [rhetorical triangle](#)? Well, Jimmy made some classic mistakes when he analyzed the rhetorical situation before meeting Nicole Kidman. He clearly didn't understand his audience (a sophisticated, talented woman who was interested in him), he clearly misinterpreted the purpose and context (movie meeting vs date), and he clearly blew the message (wearing sweats and playing video games). No amount of brie cheese could salvage that meeting, and even years later he had to ask, "Did I date Nicole Kidman?"



What your staunchest, most serious professor might look like at a dinner party. Photo by [ThePlaz](#) on Wikimedia Commons

Don't be like Jimmy—recognize when you're on a date! You've learned tools for analyzing your situation; use them! It pays to learn the best tools for translating your message to a general audience. It turns out even your staunchest, most boring, serious professor—you know the one who has a monotonous voice and always puts you to sleep—has to be able to explain their job to their next-door neighbor or at a dinner party or to their significant other (unless their significant other is also an expert in the same field, which means they probably have really boring, serious children. But I digress.).

If, on the other hand, the love of your life is in a different field from you like, say, the field of mechanical engineering and neuroscience while you teach English literature and writing classes (just to pick a random example), then you need to learn how to translate the work you do to a more general audience in order to keep your relationship strong and show that you care. And that takes a new set of strategies that help bridge the gap between you and your general audience such as adding stories, using an engaging voice, and even including humor. See, I told you this chapter would be good for your love life!

In addition, if you want your work in your field to make a big difference and get attention, you need to know how to highlight it so that people will listen. That's why these days so many people post articles on *LinkedIn* and *Medium.com* and even *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *Twitter*—to highlight what they do for the greater public to understand, which in turn increases their reputation and personal brand. You, too, can get the attention you deserve! But you have to learn how to appeal to a general audience. And that's where we're going to start: audience.

## 14.2 Audience in the Real World

The most important thing we can teach you about writing for general audiences is to analyze your audience. Companies spend millions of dollars a year analyzing their audiences to convince people to buy their products. They've learned that understanding their audience's preferences, motivations, and values is a key to good sales. This is often called market

research. For example, here's a one-minute ad from IBM for an artificial intelligence-powered marketing platform whose sole purpose is to try to help companies understand their audience better:

Watch this video to see how you become a company's target audience.

It makes you re-think how you spend your time (and clicks) online, doesn't it? Or at least how many times you post on social media about eating waffles. The bottom line from IBM and this section on audience is that audience matters—if you can really understand who you're presenting to, you can make your message appealing to them and in turn effect the change you'd like them to make.

So when you think about your audience, spend some time trying to imagine them. Consider demographics. Age. Gender. Socioeconomic status. What other companies would your target audience follow? Consider where your audience gets their social media content. Do they spend their time on Facebook? Or do they prefer Instagram or Twitter? Do they use the Google App or the News App on their iPhone? Consider "problems." What problem are you providing a solution for? You should empathize with their dilemmas and provide an answer to their issues. Let's practice.

## Audience Analysis

### Nike Audience Analysis

For this assignment, let's look at Nike. Go to [nike.com](https://nike.com) and see if you can answer the following Audience Analysis Questions. Note that you might not be able to answer all of them. Thinking through all of this information, write a short paragraph 3-4 sentence analysis of Nike's audience.

1. What is the approximate size of Nike's audience? Are they addressing a small population or a sizable group?
2. Who, specifically, are they targeting? (Think demographics)
3. What is the demographic makeup of Nike's audience (age, gender, education level, ethnicity), and how might they use that information to develop and shape their content?
4. What personal and professional traits does Nike have in common with the members of their audience?
5. Are there any cultural considerations that may influence how their audience responds to their content?
6. Does their audience expect to be entertained as well as informed?
7. Does Nike target certain members of their audience, and if so, which members?
8. How does Nike earn their audience's trust? How do they demonstrate their knowledge or expertise?
9. What preconceptions or biases might be held by some members of their audience?
10. What expectations will their audience have regarding Nike's social media content?
11. What expectations does their audience have regarding the format of their social media content?
12. What key questions does Nike's audience expect them to answer?
13. What key objections are audience members likely to raise?
14. To connect to the needs and interests of their audience, what particular appeals does Nike include in their social media content?

Now that you understand Nike's audience, you are much better prepared to know how to appeal to them, what tone to use with them, and how to present information so they will pay attention. You can and should analyze your audience in similar ways before you communicate to them—which leads me to this textbook.



## Under the Hood



Photo by [Hosea Georgeson](#) on [Unsplash](#)

I'll let you in on a secret. When we decided to write this textbook, we had a dilemma: should we model academic writing by using a formal, serious, and scholarly tone? Or should we as authors use a less formal, conversational voice that would appeal more to a general audience?

To answer this, the first thing we authors did was analyze you—our audience. We talked about what type of textbook would appeal to you, what kind of content we should include, what kind of strategies we should use in our approach, and what kind of language to choose. We looked at previous textbooks, talked to our students, consulted other instructors, and even read [a book](#) explaining recent research scholars have done specifically about your generation. How does it make you feel to know your textbook authors are thinking about you so much? We hope that rather than feeling creeped out, you feel flattered and happy that we care. Because we do. But either way, our audience analysis of you was very enlightening.

We came to the conclusion that even though lots of other textbook writers choose to model a stiff, academic tone, you probably wouldn't like that. Instead, we thought you'd appreciate if we wrote to you in our own voices as if we were having a conversation, as if you were sitting right there. So we threw caution (and typical textbook conventions) to the wind and chose to treat you more like a general audience rather than an academic one in this book.

And even though some of our colleagues worried that you'd mistake our conversational tone as the way *you* should write your *academic* papers, we've found that you're smarter than that—that you can do your own audience analysis and recognize that we're writing like this because our purpose (to teach college students about writing) is different than yours in an academic paper (to make a logical argument for your professor to show how well you've researched a topic).



When writing this textbook, we tried to imagine what college students like you would want. Photo by [Naassom Azevedo](#) on Unsplash

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In that vein, we determined that in this textbook, you'd want us to keep the paragraphs short, include personal stories, add images and videos, incorporate lots of white space and headings, and perhaps most importantly of all, make the textbook open source and free of cost. We did all this for you! Because we care. So far, we've had very positive feedback about our choice of conversational voice and interactive elements (not to mention the fact that it's free). But if you think of ways we can improve, please feel free to tell us in the end-of-chapter surveys. The beauty of an online textbook is that we're continually revising it, so bring on the feedback!

Like our audience analysis of you, your analysis of your own audience will help you develop effective strategies to get your message across. And asking for feedback will help you figure out if you're hitting the mark. Now that you know your audience, let's talk about what else to consider when writing for general audiences.

## 14.3 Purpose, Context, and Message

As Jimmy Fallon taught us, when we communicate, it helps to think through the rhetorical situation first. When you're writing to general audiences, once you have a sense of your audience and their values, you also need to think about the context you're writing in and delineate your purpose—*why* are you communicating? Generally, most public communication falls into three categories:

1. **Informative**—like reporting on the latest research coming out of computational linguistics
2. **Persuasive**—like convincing your city to install a stoplight at a dangerous intersection
3. **A mix of the two**—like explaining how germs are spread during flu season in order to persuade your audience to get a flu shot.

Ask yourself, What exactly do I want my audience to think after reading/hearing my message?

## Informational Writing

If your goal is to inform, your focus will be on clarity. Keep the language simple and think through how much background information you need to give your audience. You can quote from experts—general audiences love appeals to character—as long as you keep the jargon to a minimum and explain where your information is coming from.

You'll probably want to draw your reader/listener in with some kind of hook or interesting fact that introduces the topic and catches their attention. Then as you proceed, make sure there's a logical progression through your points. One way to test this is to have people read it and give you feedback—find people who fit the demographics of your audience if possible.



Choose clear diagrams, tables, figures, and/or images to illustrate your point. Image in [Public Domain](#)

You also want to use strong visuals—especially if you want to portray data. Informational writing relies on facts, data, and statistics, but these need to be portrayed in easy, understandable ways, and visuals really help with that. Choose clear diagrams, tables, figures, and/or images to illustrate your point. [Document design](#) can also help—things such as bullets, headings and subheadings, bolded key terms or definitions, call-out boxes, color, and even white space.

Even in informational writing, you can appeal to the emotions of your audience. For instance, consider including some type of story, example, or case study that connects with your audience because it will help them see the relevance of



your point. You can even consider whether adding some humor would be appropriate. When you conclude, try to tie in your conclusion to your introduction and leave your audience with something memorable. Ask yourself, "What do I want my audience to remember?" End with that.

## Persuasive Writing

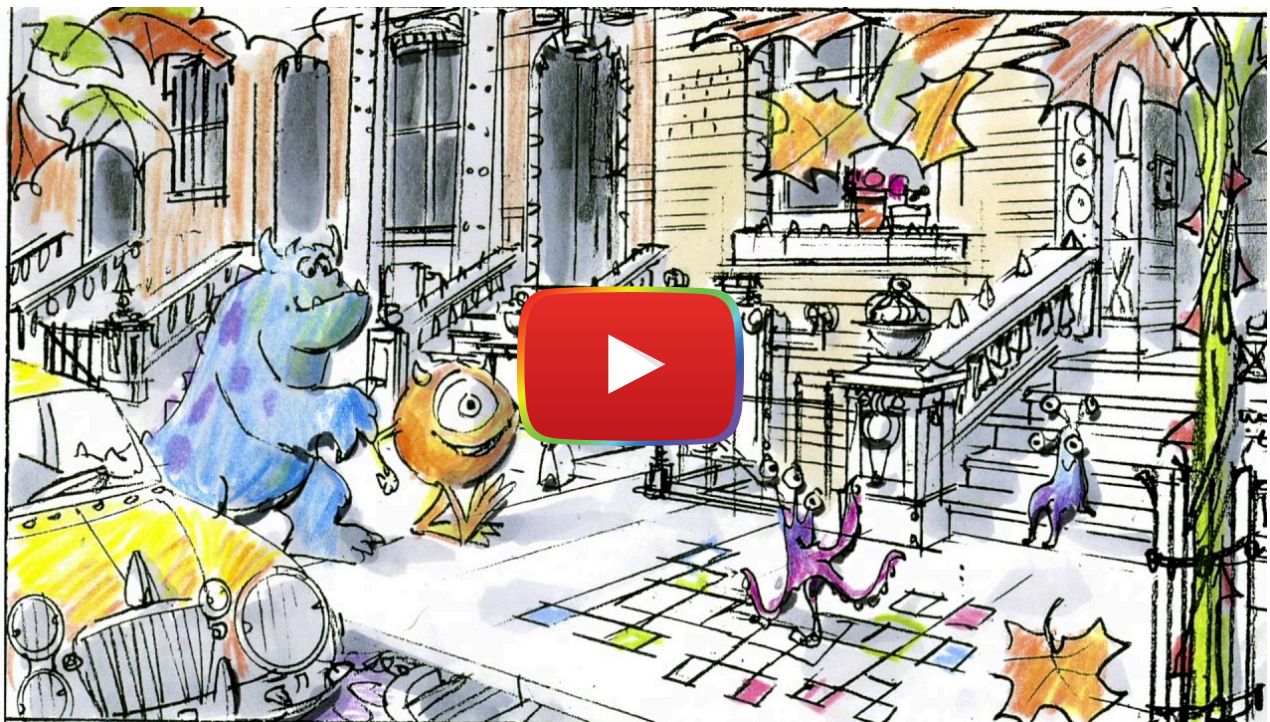
As opposed to informational writing, if your goal is to persuade or get your audience to do or think something, then you're making an argument. There's a whole field of study called rhetoric that goes back to ancient times where people examine the best ways to persuade or influence others. When writing an argument, your objective is to propose a solution to a current problem, to have your audience see your opinion, point, or research claim as valid, true, and valuable. In other words, your purpose is to persuade, convince, motivate, or move readers toward a certain point of view or action. In fact, a lot of persuasive writing ends with a "call to action" where you overtly ask your audience to—you guessed it—take some kind of action.

In academic circles, persuasion is best done through published articles or presentations that focus on methods, data, results; but when it comes to general audiences, the focus changes first, to catching people's attention and then to convincing them with a mix of appeals to logic, character, and emotion.

## A Word on Narrative

One particularly poignant tool to use in general audience writing is narrative—especially personal stories. As mentioned in [Chapter 5: Style](#), we as humans are hard-wired to remember stories. Narratives that are personal, detailed, and interesting can be a point of convincing evidence that has the power to mold and change your readers' thinking much more than statistics or data alone can.

Watch this 3-minute video about the power of storytelling from one of the greatest group of storytellers in modern times: Pixar.



[Watch on YouTube](#)

The Power of Storytelling <https://youtu.be/1rMnzNZkIX0>

Harness the power of storytelling by adding global storytelling (having an arc to your writing with a beginning, middle, and end, etc.) and local storytelling elements (like including an incident that happened to you). Review [Chapter 5: Style](#)



for more ideas.

## Context and Genre

One last consideration to keep in mind is the context in which you're communicating and whether there's an established genre or form your writing needs to fit into. To review the concepts of genre and context, see [Chapter 2: Writing Tools](#). Whether it be an online blog post, a resume, a poster presentation or a tweet, you need to understand the conventions people usually use when communicating. In fact, sometimes knowing the genre is all the information you need to understand the message.

For example, in the town where I live, there's an odd tradition that when high schoolers ask someone to a school dance, they usually do so in a creative way. Like, really creative. Like, Instagram-worthy. So one day, my family found this message on our doorstep.



My son understood this date invitation because he knew the genre and context. Photo by the author, used with Abby's permission.

Even though the words of Abby's message themselves weren't intelligible, we immediately understood the message because we understood the *genre* (unusual items left on doorsteps are usually dance invitations) and the context (we've seen the movie *The Guardians of the Galaxy*, so we caught the reference to the plant creature who speaks using only one phrase: "I am Groot."). In fact, by referencing a popular movie and challenging the typical genre of dance invitations, Abby made a better—and funnier—invitation than if she'd simply said her message straight out. This is why understanding genre and context can really help you get your own message across—even in your love life.

The rest of this unit of the textbook (General Audiences) will be devoted to specific genres of general audience writing, so for help with particular types of communication like resumes, blog posts, or presentations, go to those chapters. In the meantime, let's finish our discussion with the best strategies for connecting with general audiences.

## 14.4 Strategies for General Writing

Where academic audiences are made up of people who generally study the same things as you, general audiences are just that—general. You can assume that your readers/listeners have generic knowledge about many different subjects, but they don't know any particulars about your field, so you'll have to fill in those gaps. But be careful not to use jargon from your field because they'll get lost in the language and ignore your message. The best way to figure out what strategies work best for general audiences is to see this kind of translation writing in action.

### Academic vs General Audiences: Reporting on Research

We're going to use our analytical skills again to figure out what characteristics are best used in general writing. Here's an example of how writers have translated academic research into the public sphere. First, read the abstract of this academic article called "[There's No Place Like Home: The Associations Between Residential Attributes and Family Functioning](#)" (click on the link or scroll down below). Then skim through the article. You don't have to read everything—just understand what it's about and notice how the authors use academic language to portray their message.

Next, read [this newspaper article](#) that introduces this research to a general audience (click on the link or scroll down below). Note the tools the author uses to appeal to this broader, less academic audience.

#### Make the Connection

List 2-3 strategies that the author of the newspaper article used to translate the academic research article to a more general/public audience? Which strategies do you think are the most helpful and that you can use when you write for a general audience?

I hope you noticed things like the use of good visuals to draw the reader in, the conversational tone, the easy explanations of the research, the lack of jargon, and the use of direct quotes from the article's author himself. This made it feel like the writer was telling the story of how the research came to be rather than just reporting on data. These are all strategies that can come in handy when you're translating something academic into something for the public.

Here's a table that sums up the contrasting strategies generally used in Academic versus General Writing.

#### Academic Audience Writing

- Long paragraphs
- Serious academic tone
- Synthesized claims/heavy referencing
- Clarity to avoid misunderstanding
- Focus on knowledge and scientific advancement
- Objective writing with solid backing
- Focus on data, methods, and results
- Most appeals are to logic and authority/character
- APA in-text citations and reference lists

#### General Audience Writing

- Short paragraphs
- Engaging, friendly tone
- Logical progression/light referencing
- Clever wording to encourage insight
- Focus on practical application
- Passionate writing with conviction
- Focus on narrative and relevance to audience
- Most appeals are to emotions and authority/character
- Hyperlinks or endnotes for references

As you can see, when you change audiences, you need to change your strategies. Some of these differences might not be as pronounced in some genre outlets; for example, some blogs operate more like academic outlets, are serious in

tone, and require heavy, scholarly referencing. However, this table generally represents good rules to follow.

## Top Seven Hints for Writing for General Audiences

Here are some last tips that will help your writing shine.

- **Anchor each new point, taking the reader on a journey.** Use the first part of the sentence and subject skillfully to keep your audience engaged (sometimes flip the order of the sentence to achieve this level of engagement); be aware of the same principle as you transition from paragraph to paragraph. Use one-sentence zingers and varied sentence and paragraph length to maintain high interest from point to point.
- **Ax anything unessential.** Look at writing through the metaphor of finding a pot of gold in the woods. It can be found within 400 feet, but in the searching for it, you walk a mile. Which does your audience want—the 400 feet or the mile? When you have to cut things out, you are often cutting out the mile. These parts are hard to cut because they were personal to you and to the journey of finding the pot of gold, but the audience is not part of that journey. They generally want your message in the 400 feet.
- **Attribute sources with very short, but impressive elements.** When citing a source and choosing what to include (e.g., author's name, credentials, affiliation with an institution, professional background, name of recent article or book, etc.), try to include no more than two attributions and use those that are most impressive for the audience of your piece. Add quotes in places that are consistent with the original text to not misuse another author's intent.
- **Angle your insights to help readers gain a new perspective.** Know the point you are driving towards, even if the reader does not see it from the beginning. Consider starting with some of the most interesting parts of the idea or a story or place them closer to the first of the article (once interested, the reader can better deal later with the less interesting parts of the topic if they are already “hooked” on the article). Refine the ending to make sure readers finish with an unstated invitation to continue to think about your point. Don't “overstay your welcome” by doing too much of a summary.
- **Allow authentic use of narrative to be real and to touch readers.** Paint a picture by using great adjectives; don't be afraid to add emotional words to human experience to bring it to life. At times, this means that you slow down the pacing in order to give rich detail. If you begin or end with examples or stories, make sure that the tone stays consistent throughout, so the story is woven into the piece, rather than used as a stand-alone piece. Carefully consider the use of “you” and “your” since this speaks directly to the reader. When you choose to speak “second person” be sure you are speaking generally enough to include all of your audience, that you don't inadvertently offend them by putting on a label or suggesting a belief or behavior they have that might not be very complimentary (to avoid making sweeping or inaccurate judgements). With a call to action, also be aware of how this might be taken by your audience.
- **Analyze or interpret data or statistics to guide readers.** When describing research, simplify (it may help to think of a friend or neighbor); state findings in present tense and explain the conducting of a study in the past tense. Be careful about “dumbing down the research” so much that it confuses terms or overgeneralizes findings (e.g., consider whether the original researchers would be happy with your clarity and accuracy in describing their work). For your most important points that hinge on research or when introducing charts or graphs, take time to guide readers through complicated findings with helpful analysis, rather than assuming they will get the point if you only just mention the presence of findings in this area.
- **Apply good APA protocols & hyperlinks to build transparency and trust.** Use a good variety of resources that would be considered credible by your audience. Where you can, hyperlink to the original, using a key word or two to hyperlink the resource. In those cases and in other cases where the source is not internet based (e.g., a book), provide an endnote. (See this video, for example, with a brief information about how to [insert endnotes](#) in Word.) Key points need good references to build credibility, but in public scholarship pieces, synthesis is not generally needed, nor is it necessary to be obtrusive about a heavy focus on naming or explaining sources in general—just be transparent and wise in the selection of sources (e.g., if all your sources are blogs that no one has heard of, the piece may not feel very authoritative).

## Representing a Company or Group

In some cases you will be writing under your own name; other times you'll be writing for a company or group. You always want to consider what your writing tells the reader about yourself and if you're building and protecting your reputation. But once you're writing on behalf of a company or group you have the added responsibility of representing them as well. If you can consciously keep your purpose, audience, genre, and context in mind every time you send out an email or text or post or reply on Slack, you will become much more adept at using the rhetorical situation for your and their benefit. Try to use the [mindful writing techniques](#) from Chapter 3 and imagine you're reading your piece from your audience's perspective. Or even better, test your piece on actual readers and get feedback. Either way, you'll want to make sure you follow any Style Guides or standards that your company has.

## Read an Example

Finally, one of the best ways to learn how to write for a general audience is to read pieces written for general audiences. Shocking, I know. As a last exercise, choose of these examples of articles by undergraduate students in BYU's School of Family Life written and published for a general audience. Notice the strategies they use to make their article more appealing for a general audience, even when they're reporting on academic research that's been done on their topic.

Option #1: [Love: The Greatest Motivation to Change](#)

Option #2: [Longevity Secrets of Utah Centarians](#)

### General Audience Examples

Which article did you read? What strategies did the author(s) employ to appeal to a general audience? How can you incorporate these strategies into your own writing?

With practice, you'll learn how to easily transition between writing for an academic audience versus a general audience. The last three chapters of this textbook will take you through the most important genres for general audiences: professional portfolios, public texts, and presentations.

#### [Chapter 15: Job and Graduate School Applications](#)

- Resume
- Cover Letter
- Interview
- Graduate School Application Letter
- CV (Curriculum Vitae)

#### [Chapter 16: Public Texts](#)

- Memos and Email
- Social Media
- Online Writing
- Infographics and Data Visualization
- Opinion Editorials

#### [Chapter 17: Presentations](#)



- Oral Presentations
- Poster Presentations

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