**Response to questions about “Audience”**

From: Gail Brenner, Lecturer, Writing Program

1. *What role does audience play in determining “good writing”?*

2. *When you are writing a paper, how do you imagine your audiences?*

With today’s global network of communication, and even the current President of the U.S. using Twitter to speak to the world, it seems that the role of audience in written communication no longer matters: all communication is expected to reach and serve all audiences, whoever and wherever they are. However, effective writing at university level must consider and imagine who might read the writing beyond the professor and fellow-students, and what purpose or goal the writing serves, or might serve, beyond simply fulfilling an assignment. Talking ‘audience’ into account when writing, helps writers shape and focus their ideas, and explain and clarify their views because they (the writers) are actually ‘speaking’ to someone, joining a conversation, a dialogue, or providing information to ‘someone’ in a clear and helpful way.

Writers need to consider whom they are speaking to; what background their readers have, and what the reader needs to know to understand and appreciate the writing. Good writing must also considers where the piece will (or hypothetically, might) be read – a university newspaper? a professional journal? a letter to the editor? an academic data-base? an anthology? a blog? Why would readers be interested in the piece, and what would they expect to learn and gain from reading it? In today’s global readership, writers must also consider whether or not they intend their writing to be fully understandable and accessible to readers across cultural & linguistic lines. For, example, the use of sarcasm, irony or humor (often specific to a cultural or linguistic background) may be unclear to some readers – thus, making the writing inaccessible to a broader audience. These are all questions about ‘audience’ a writer should consider.

Also, of course, the specific genre of the writing can largely determine how a piece is written & where/why/by whom it might be read.

3. *What mistakes do most students make when they are imagining their audience?*

A mistake students make in writing is not considering or imagining an audience at all. This error causes writers to assume that the writing will speak for itself, that the reader will ‘know what the writer is saying’, and this error results in 1) generalizations that are too broad or vague to be meaningful; thus, the lack of specifics, details, examples, explanations; 2) unexplained terms (e.g. those related to certain video games), references and comments, that leave the reader to figure out what the writer is talking about or how the comments relate to the topic; 3) overlay casual/non-academic language, such as ‘lots of’, ‘stuff’, ‘etc.’, ‘and so on’ to mention a few; 4) overuse and random use of pronouns and other referent words (she, he, it, they, that, those), again leaving the reader to figure out what the writer is referring to; 5) lack of diligence in proofreading; 6) lack of background information and clear explanation of the relevance of the topic that would give readers necessary context and help readers appreciate why they should care about the topic and your views; 7) ‘fabricating’ an audience that isn’t appropriate to the writing or trying to write to a very specific audience, which causes the writing (and the writer) to be limited and shackled by that decision. Most academic writing should speak to, be accessible and interesting to, a broad audience.

4. *Do you have any suggestions to the students who want to improve this?*

Assume that your audience (the reader) knows nothing about the topic, your ideas or the sources you are using to support your writing. Talk to the reader as if you are explaining the issue and your ideas for the 1st time (which you are), giving plenty of background, context and explanation of why the issue or topic is of interest, relevant to our lives and worth talking about. Give the reader all the details and explanation s/he needs to truly appreciate what you’re saying and why you’re saying it. In other words, the writing must present information as if the reader is not at all familiar with the topic or issue you are talking about and why your are spending your time communicating about it. Avoid the mistakes mentioned in #3. Follow the conventions of the specific genre you are writing about as they often define, or relate to a specific audience. Always use expanded “Quotation Sandwich” for all quotes and paraphrasing of source material so the reader comes to know what you already know about the topic, your research and your views. All of this shows respect to your reader, and support good writing.