

Who is Your Audience?

Chapter 1 listed some examples of things a Technical Writer might prepare:

- a document to explain a computer game to a middle-school student
- a summary of a financial report to a CEO
- instructions for a home computer user on to install a memory module

Notice that for each of the above examples, two points are made: the purpose of a document, and the intended reader. The intended reader is the audience of your materials. Without defining your audience, a document will flounder.

To define your audience, find out:

- What is their age, education level, or computer literacy?
- What are their working conditions – are they at home, in an office, or a busy place of business?

When you begin a project, make a list of the expected readers for your material.

Example: Middle School Audience

You work for a company that has produced a computer game for middle school age students.

The audience of this document is immensely important. Their age dictates the vocabulary and language the writer should use, as well as the complexity of the content. If this document were written at an adult level, these readers would likely give up on it, and game sales would suffer.

Example: One Product, Three Readers

A small, start up company has asked you to provide documentation for their product, an inventory package for retailers. The software works with their existing cash registers. You need to explain how to:

- Install the software
- Use it on a day to day basis
- Run extensive reports to track usage, cost and loss on a monthly basis

As you examine the project further, three distinct audiences surface:

- The person who will install the software, likely to be a manager comfortable with computers and their current cash register system.
- The daily users who work the cash registers, college students and other adults familiar with the retail industry.
- Upper managers, who rely on its analytical capability for monthly data.

What Do They Want?

Now that you understand the importance of audience, you have to meet the next hurdle: *give them what they want*.

Why are they turning to you for help? Jot down a list of what your audience needs; for example:

- Quick help when they're taking data over the phone.
- Reference material for deeper understanding.
- A diagram to walk them through a process.

Keep your list general; summarize similar topics such as "instructions to perform the software capabilities." You can turn this into a more detailed list later.

Once you have a complete list, it should give you an idea of what topics belong together. Group topics together by what the reader needs. Target each document to a specific reader and that reader's needs.

If you discover you have multiple types of readers with widely different needs, create different documents. A major mistake writers make is to covering too many audiences in one document.

Example: One Clear Objective

The middle school readers who bought the video game have a clear objective – they want to have fun playing their game, right away.

You decide to prepare a booklet to slip inside the CD case. Since the installation process is fairly simple, and will likely be done by the same person who will play the game, you'll include both topics in one booklet.

Your booklet includes a section on how to install the game, then a section on playing the game. Your language is carefully chosen, your directions are brief and to the point.

Example: Three Different Objectives

In the earlier example of a software package for retailers, you came up with three distinct readers. You suggest preparing three separate pieces:

- An installation guide to get the software up and running.
- Quick, step-by-step procedures for the daily user, ideally in the form of help messages embedded in the software.
- A more detailed guide for managers with information on how to interpret and use the data collected by the software.

Each piece targets one audience and type of need.