Motivation

The content and form of every technical document you write are determined by the writing situation: your audience and your purpose. Understanding the writing situation helps you devise a strategy to meet your readers' needs—and your own.

Audience and purpose are not unique to technical communication. For example, when a classified advertisement describes a job, the writing situation is clear:

*Audience:* prospective applicants
*Purpose:* to describe the job opening and motivate qualified persons to apply

Identifying Primary and Secondary Audiences

Start by classifying your readers into two categories:

1. **Primary audience**—People who have a direct role in responding to your document. They might be readers who use your document in doing their jobs. They might evaluate and revise it, or they might act on your recommendations. An executive who decides whether to authorize building a new facility is a primary reader. So is the treasurer who has to determine whether the organization can pay for it.

2. **Secondary audience**—People who need to stay aware of developments in the organization, such as salespeople who want to know where a new facility will be located, what products it will produce, and when it will be open. A secondary audience will not directly act on or respond to your document.

The needs of your primary audience are more central than those of your secondary audience. For example, if several members of your primary audience need to know a project’s financial details, you should provide that information prominently. But if only members of a secondary audience will need that information, you should probably put it in a less prominent part of the document.

Basic Categories of Readers

Although each person is unique, try to classify your readers according to their knowledge of your subject. In general, every reader can be classified into one of four categories:

1. the expert
2. the technician
3. the executive
4. the general reader

**The Experts**

These are the people who know the theory and the product inside and out. They designed it, they tested it, they know everything about it.
The Technicians
These are the people who build, operate, maintain, and repair stuff that the experts design and theorize about. Theirs is a highly technical knowledge as well, but of a more practical nature.

The Executives
These are the people who make business, economic, administrative, legal, governmental, political decisions on the stuff the experts and technicians work with.

The General Readers
These readers have the least technical knowledge of all.

Individual Characteristics of Readers

Who Is Your Reader?
- The reader’s education
- The reader’s professional experience
- The reader’s job responsibility
- The reader’s personal characteristics
- The reader’s personal preferences
- The reader’s cultural characteristics

What Are Your Readers Attitudes and Expectations?
- Your reader’s attitude toward you
- Your reader’s attitude toward the subject
- Your reader’s expectations about the document

Why and How Will Your Reader Use Your Document?
- Your reader’s reasons for reading your document
- The way your reader will read your document
- Your reader’s reading skills
- The physical environment in which your reader will read your document
Determining Your Purpose

Once you have identified and analyzed your audience, it is time to examine your purpose in writing. Ask yourself this: “What do I want this document to accomplish?” When your readers have finished reading what you have written, what do you want them to know or believe? What do you want them to do? Your writing should help your readers carry out a task, understand a concept, or hold a particular belief.

In defining your purpose, think of a verb that represents it. The following list of examples has been classified into two categories: verbs used to communicate information to your readers and verbs used to convince them to accept a particular point of view.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicating Verbs</th>
<th>Convincing Verbs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>to describe</td>
<td>to outline</td>
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<tr>
<td>to explain</td>
<td>to define</td>
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<tr>
<td>to inform</td>
<td>to summarize</td>
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<tr>
<td>to illustrate</td>
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<td>to assess</td>
<td>to forecast</td>
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<tr>
<td>to request</td>
<td>to evaluate</td>
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<tr>
<td>to propose</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>to recommend</td>
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</table>

Here are a few examples of how you can use these verbs to clarify the purpose of your document.

- This report *describes* the research project intended to determine the effectiveness of the new waste-treatment filter.

- This letter *authorizes* the purchase of six new PCs for the Santa Monica facility.

- This memo *recommends* that we revise the website as soon as possible.

Sometimes your real purpose differs from your expressed purpose. For instance, if your real purpose is to persuade your reader to lease a new computer system rather than purchase it, you might phrase the purpose this way: to explain the advantages of leasing over purchasing. Many readers don’t want to be persuaded, but are willing to learn new facts or ideas.

References

Exercises:

1. For each of the following tasks
   - Identify your audience (i.e. “who is the audience?”)
   - Identify your purpose (i.e. “why is the report needed?”)
   - Identify your audience’s expectations (i.e. “why is the audience reading this report?”)
   - Summarize your strategy (i.e. “how should the report be written based on the above three points?”)

   (a) Analyze the failure of component X in GizmoJ, and report your findings to the GizmoJ engineering team.
   (b) Analyze the failure of component X in GizmoJ, and report your findings to the GizmoJ PR spokesperson.
   (c) Present your preliminary design concept to your department manager.
   (d) Present your preliminary design concept to a group of venture capitalists and investors.

2. Imagine that you have an audience of real estate developers and sales representatives for whom you are writing an informational report on solar devices, which they are considering as options on housing within a new development. Decide which of the following topics you’d select for this specific audience and how you’d discuss the selected topics.

   - Basic components of a solar device
   - Current research in solar device technology
   - Costs to purchase, operate, and maintain solar devices
   - Historical background on the use of solar power
   - Architectural considerations in using solar devices
   - How to determine angle of inclination for a collector
   - Basic operation of a solar device
   - A survey of solar device manufacturers
   - Results of consumer tests on solar devices
   - Economics of solar power
   - Dynamics of heat transfer
   - Tax programs to benefit users of solar power
   - Comparison to other common energy sources