

Audience analysis

Considering the audience

Whether we are presenting or writing, how effectively we communicate our message is determined by how well we know the audience. The audience being considered may be a single person, small or large group of people, or a broad section of the population. The audience is the receiver of the message, and for the exchange of information to be effective they must find value in the content. To become proficient as a communicator, and before crafting any document, we need to analyze who is the intended audience. Failing in this task can result in being ignored, or worse, generating negative feelings in the audience.

Purpose of the analysis

When we speak of analyzing the audience, we are asking, what is their expected background? What are their knowledge needs? What is their attention span? The message we hope to convey to the audience is then correspondingly adapted. Knowledge of the topic. The degree of expertise in a topic will determine how well the audience will be engaged in the message. Remaining interested in the topic requires that the message is just slightly above the audience's knowledge level so that it is novel, but understandable. Generally we have some control over who is the audience by selecting to present our message at a specific conference or in a well known journal. As a result, being completely unfamiliar with the audience is rarely the issue for a speaker or writer. However, every time the audience is composed of more than one person, we can expect variability in what they know, what they care about and what they want to learn from you. When ascertaining the makeup of the audience, the focus should be on who normally represents the audience, even though some members of audience who are not well described by this definition may become disengaged. You can't satisfy everyone.

Assigning value

While it is generally a good idea to craft the message for the normal audience members, there are exceptions. There are often cases where one or two members of the audience will dictate how your message is given. For example, a CEO attending an R&D meeting about a new discovery. The instructor of a course evaluating a group's presentation. An angel investor at a pitch competition. An audience member who is the subject of the message, like an awardee.

Picturing the audience

Gathering information on the audience and their knowledge on the topic should be the first task. Learn about the socio demographics of the audience that will matter to the message. Age, race, creed, language, education, knowledge, expertise, interests, social groups, et cetera.

Size of the audience matters. A small group will interact differently. Usually less formally with the one delivering the message compared to a large group, which tends to listen without interruption. The goal should always be to create as inclusive of a message as possible for the content.

Examples of how we gather audience information:

- Searching the website of a conference will typically describe who should attend.
- Or, most peer review journals have a webpage specifically focused on its aims and scope. Though, looking at some of the Journal's issues can also be pretty informative.

- Asking a meeting coordinator about the audience and talking to someone who previously presented to the same audience.

A shared perspective

The focus should be on how the audience perceives the world, not the speaker, writer delivering the message.

For a message to have impact, the audience needs to either have a shared experience with the speaker or writer, or be able to relate to the experiences that give the message importance. Those experiences will determine the attitude of the audience towards the message's content.

Delivery of the message will differ, whether the audience's attitude is generally going to be positive or negative.

Cultural cues

Cultural context can matter a great deal but can also date the relevance of the message.

VIDEO CLIP:

“And I say with all sincerity to every woman, you can get expert results with everything you bake.” - Betty Crocker

“That's what every woman wants, Betty Crocker.” - Winn

“Indeed it is, Winn.” - Betty Crocker

Cultural context can be a powerful facilitator to audience members being impacted by the message. For or an oral presentation, it can often be very effective if slang or common phrases are used to communicate ideas, especially if emotionally triggering, so long as the audience shares the same culture.

VIDEO CLIP:

“ All right, so let me ask you the obvious question, all right? What does your dress mean? What does it say? Does it mean anything or what?” - Bernie Sanders

“It's just basically saying, "To heck with society, to heck with law and order." You can do whatever you wanna do and it doesn't matter. I can be punk rock if you wanna say. I don't like the way society is run.” - Punk Rocker

“Okay, well that's...” - Bernie Sanders

“The cop out, everybody's plastic.” - Punk Rocker

A recorded presentation or a written message meant to be seen by any audience for years to come is unlikely to continue to have a positive impact over time if heavily reliant on cultural cues. Similarly, don't expect local cultural references to be understood by an international audience. Other cultural factors for international consideration include monetary and numerical differences, political differences, humor, geography, weather, et cetera.

Knowing the needs of your audience

So far we have covered the background of the audience. Another element of analyzing one's audience in psychographics.

Psychographics in this case refers to the psychological motivations of the audience. Their attitudes, beliefs, emotions, opinions and lifestyle.

Effective communication considers the cognitive factors impacting how the audience receives a message.

Needs and interests

Psychological motivators for communication generally break down to the needs and interests of the audience. Often, self-reflection can address many of what are the needs and interests of the audience, but in circumstances unfamiliar with the speaker or writer, surveying the opinion of supervisors, potential audience members, former attendees, for example, can help.

Consider the expectations of say, the audience in writing an owner's manual of a smart TV, or imagine what you would focus on for a presentation of reducing fossil fuel consumption.

What you would write in a report to convince a boss to invest the company's money to upgrade computing resources. Would you say it was for your benefit, or present a case of increased productivity and profit.

Failing to recognize the expectations of the audience can have a negative impact on the message. Consider a tenant's meeting called to discuss building renovations, and the superintendent uses the time to talk about rent increases instead.

Attention span

Even if the general attributes of the audience are understood, some understanding of receptiveness of the audience to the length of your message is important. Often only the shortest, most concise message will be fully received by the audience.

Consider your tolerance for, a long presentation at the end of a full day of talks is unlikely to keep the audience's attention, unless emotional, powerful, humorous, shocking, et cetera. Or, a long news article that takes five to 10 paragraphs before revealing the headlining content, and a lengthy video vlog on the reviewer's dinner.

Another factor influencing the attention span of the audience is whether they are present at a talk or reading a document by choice or requirement. The latter case being much harder to give a message with positive impact since the topic may not be of interest to the group.

Adapting the message

Some forms of communication give an opportunity for questions to be asked for clarification, like a class lecture or a thesis defence, but many others offer little chance to explain what you meant. And so, conveying the message correctly to the audience is crucial.

Use the findings of your audience analysis to find common ground with the members of the audience, otherwise known as a process of identification. Determine what the communicator and the audience share in common, and craft the message based on this shared viewpoint.

This is a common approach for politicians to motivate a group of people to respond in a desirable way to news.

VIDEO CLIP:

“When you're trying to engage an audience, it's important that they can relate to the things that you care about. And therefore it's often important to have an anecdote or an example that can then be applied to what you're talking about. Recent example was in a business pitch where someone was basically talking about creating a network to help engineers find work and share jobs, et cetera. And the easiest way to do that without going into all of the programming details and the AI that ended up behind the technology, was to talk about Facebook. So it's like a Facebook for engineers where people can post jobs and find work and tell people about themselves. The importance of an analogy or something that they can relate to to describe what you're doing is really helpful in addressing the gap that often exists between concept and reality, especially with an audience that's not familiar with your topic.”
- Dr. Andrew Maxwell

Anticipating questions of the audience on the topic is a very advanced form of identification and generally amplifies the positive impact of the message.