

# Audience and Purpose

We all adjust our language depending on whom we are speaking to. You speak differently to your five-year-old niece than to your parents or colleagues. The same idea carries into your writing: your **audience** (who you are writing for) and **purpose** (what you hope to achieve by writing) help shape the **format**, or the language and style you use.

## Who are my readers?

Keep in mind who your readers are and what kind of response you want from them. For example, consider a paper about writing instruction in high school. How you frame the topic, the information you provide, and your goals would change if the reader was a CEO of a company to whom you are marketing a writing program, as opposed to a classroom teacher who might use it. Ask yourself:

- What do they need to know? Consider your readers' interests and what information will help them understand your ideas. For the CEO, you might describe current practice and statistical trends in high school writing to justify the need for your program. For the classroom teacher, you could illustrate how your program will benefit them and students without adding undue burden to their prep time.
- How familiar are they with the field? Most fields use specialized terms, or **jargon**, that are less familiar to people outside that group. When used appropriately, the occasional jargon can signal your **affiliation**, showing that you are well versed in this world. However, you should always strive for **accessibility** and the clearest possible explanation, given your audience. This means using jargon only when necessary and defining any terms.
- What do they already know? Avoid repeating information the reader likely already knows or does not care about. For example, the teacher is probably familiar with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), so you needn't explain the process at length.
- Which ideas might they resist? Consider objections or counter-arguments your readers might raise, and address them proactively. The CEO will want to know about the financial viability of your program, so you should probably include key points about the budget and justify any significant costs.

## The three most common audiences

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### Academic

An academic audience is primarily other scholars publishing in peer-reviewed journals or research institutions. The main purpose of writing for academics is to enter a research conversation and to add to the collective body of knowledge.

Academic papers typically begin with an **abstract**, which summarizes the paper in a paragraph. Then, in the **introduction**, you'll share your position—your **thesis**—and your contribution, right from the outset. The introduction also includes an **organizational roadmap** to briefly guide the

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reader through the argument and the "intellectual landscape" or "the literature" that their work contributes to.

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**Policy**

Writing for a policy audience means writing for decision makers. They might be administrators, funders, legislators, or anyone who will be persuaded by your argument and make a decision based on what you present. They are usually busy, so it is important to explain even complex concepts in succinct, clear language. Strong policy papers are brief and demonstrate expertise by synthesizing information as efficiently as possible. You can likely use specialized terms from the sector or field, but you should use academic jargon sparingly and always define the terms you present.

A policy paper has a specific action you want your audience to execute, such as voting for or against a law, adopting certain strategies, or providing resources. Usually these papers include a brief executive summary of key points so the decision-maker can quickly assess your purpose. If they find it relevant, they will read (or have their staff read) the rest. If the executive summary is not clear or compelling, they might stop reading, preventing you from achieving your goal.

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**Practitioner**

There are many practitioners: teachers and school leaders, youth workers, community organizers, nonprofits, and others. These busy people rarely have time to wade through dense papers, so you will want to use memorable language and perhaps images to capture their attention and illustrate your points. The main emphasis will be on what the practitioner can and should do with the information they just read.

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## Purpose

All writing is purposeful, but papers have different purposes, which are often influenced by the audience. A pitch to classroom teachers is more persuasive if it evokes the care they feel for their students. A journalist strives to present facts neutrally in a news story, but showcases their own voice and perspective in an op-ed. Common functions of writing include:

- Neutrally present facts or information
- Explore, analyze, and interpret evidence
- Tell a story, build a narrative
- Showcase the writer's voice and perspective
- Communicate or evoke emotion
- Capture readers' interest and curiosity

- Argue or persuade readers of a point of view
- Illustrate a concept
- Propose actions or recommendations

One paper may serve multiple functions, for example, analysis in the background section and persuasion in the conclusion.

## Summary

Common audiences and paper features			
	Academic	Policy- or Decision-makers	Practitioners
<b>Format</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abstract</li> <li>• Standard academic structure</li> <li>• May contain figures or tables</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Executive summary</li> <li>• May use bullet points, headers, and styled fonts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Memorable language</li> <li>• May use graphics and images</li> </ul>
<b>Context</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizational roadmap, framework, or background</li> <li>• Dialogue with other authors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the problem and why your solution is needed.</li> <li>• Connect to policy, business interests, mission, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Makes explicit connections to practice</li> <li>• Uses real examples to illustrate</li> <li>• Selective use of research to make significant points.</li> </ul>
<b>Argument</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear thesis statement.</li> <li>• Having read the research, what do you conclude about the topic?</li> <li>• What are the implications of this argument?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Propose a clear solution to the problem you've outlined</li> <li>• Recommend actions or decisions for the reader.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses on the "so what": Why should the reader care about your paper?</li> <li>• Answers "what now" by showing the reader how to use the information.</li> </ul>
<b>Style and tone</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concise, but thorough</li> <li>• Use jargon and complex language when appropriate.</li> <li>• Extensive use of academic research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear and brief</li> <li>• Use policy/industry terms, when appropriate</li> <li>• Avoid academic jargon.</li> <li>• Selective use of research to back up key points</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear and brief</li> <li>• Use specialized education or professional terms when appropriate</li> <li>• Avoid academic jargon.</li> <li>• Selective use of research to back up key points</li> </ul>