



# Write for Your Readers

Consider...

A set of spotlights containing instructions only in French perplexed and frustrated the English-speaking buyer.

An environmental services brochure that was sent to purchasing managers used such technical language (an “aquifer characterization” and “in situ volatilization to treat the vadose zone”) that many confused purchasers chose another source.

A direct mail piece with a pro-life message sent to a pro-choice audience actually caused those people to feel more vehemently opposed to the pro-life position.

A Web page designed for college students tried to arouse a sense of activism in the students; unfortunately, the Web page referred to famous activists like Ralph Nader whom the students didn’t recognize.

The dean of a college sent an e-mail to the chairmen of five departments. Three of the five were women.

Chevy committed a faux pas years ago when it marketed a car called the Nova in Mexico. No va in Spanish means “It doesn’t go.”

These real-life examples show what can happen when you don’t know your audience. Your communication can confuse, anger, or simply fail to connect with the people you want to reach. This chapter focuses on knowing your readers and how you can connect better with them.

## Know Your Readers

The first tip to effective writing is to know your audience. The more you know, the more you can tailor or customize your message for an individual or group.



### It Helps to Know...

When you're writing to someone, consider:

- Age, education, income, gender, race or nationality, religion
- Interests, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, values
- Reader's knowledge of the topic

you write. Try to obtain information such as age, education level, income, and gender.

If you can discover interests, opinions, and values, you can persuade your readers more effectively. You need to know the reader’s knowledge of your topic—Is she an expert? Does he know nothing about it? Let’s go back to the opening examples.

If the person who wrote the instructions for the spotlights had known the *nationality* of the reader, he could have avoided using the wrong language.

Whoever created the environmental services brochure did not take into account the educational level of the readers or the *readers’ knowledge of the topic*, confusing potential purchasers.

The pro-life group ignored the *values* of the people who would read its message.

The person who designed the Web page to arouse activism in college students ignored an important demographic, *age*: the students were too young to remember or care about Ralph Nader.


The dean should have considered *gender* and addressed his e-mail to “chairs” or “chairpersons.”

Chevy’s marketers ignored the *nationality* of Spanish speakers, who would interpret the car’s name as a major negative factor.

You can see that if the writers of these pieces had known their audiences, they could have avoided serious blunders.

## What If You Don’t Know Your Readers?

The scenario: You have fifteen minutes to write a memo and you don’t know much about the manager you’re addressing. Here are some quick tips.




**Audience types** Basic categories of readers, according to their knowledge of the subject and their interest: layperson, expert, executive, user, complex, and mixed.

In most cases you just need to spend a few minutes determining which of the following categories most closely fits your reader. Then you can easily adjust your writing.

It’s helpful to evaluate whether your reader is a *layperson*, an *expert*, an *executive*, a *user*, or a *complex* type. Here are some guidelines to help you categorize your readers, with some “Dos and Don’ts” and a few examples.

### Layperson

A layperson has little expertise in a subject matter and usually no particular motivation to read what you write. So to be effective, you must motivate or attract your reader; starting with a benefit helps. A



**Layperson** Someone with little expertise in a subject and usually no particular motivation.

layperson is not knowledgeable, so you must adjust your tone, style, and vocabulary.

**Do:** Find a way to attract attention.

**Don't:** Bore your reader with detail.

**For example...** If you're writing to employees (laypersons) about various health care plans, find an interesting fact or a reason (benefit) for them to read your first paragraph, like how they can receive 100% coverage for dependents. If you're writing for people who use computers but do not know any software program well, you might attract attention by using an easy-to-understand analogy. You might also present one of the benefits of using a particular software program, like the grammar- and style-checking feature of a word processing program.

### **Expert**

An expert cares about process and detail. An expert who is a



**Expert** Someone with considerable knowledge about the subject and great interest in details.

chemist, for example, would want to know how to reproduce your results by using all the procedures you followed. Give experts the specifics. The

same detail would scare or bore the layperson.

**Do:** Focus on procedure or process.

**Don't:** Only give bottom-line data.

**For example...** If you write to an expert in health care benefits, spell out the details of the policy. The expert will understand and appreciate the specifics. If you're writing about computer software for programmers, you'll want to go into particulars about how you developed a particular program.



**Executive** Someone interested in bottom-line information, not details, delivered in a straightforward way.

### **Executive**

An executive audience wants bottom-line information. Detailed descriptions that work for

experts would not work with this audience. Use straightforward language and tone. Give a benefit and the critical information first.

**Do:** Get to the point immediately.

**Don't:** Explain in detail.

**For example...** Give the executive audience a summary of the medical benefits package in one paragraph or less. Then proceed with other important points. The manager in charge of selling the software product isn't interested in how it works, but in how she will sell it.

## User


The user must carry out your instructions. For example, users of a software package must read your documentation in order to do their job. These people don't care how you wrote the software; they want to know how to make it work.

**Do:** Realize that this person might not know as much as you do.

**Don't:** Be too brief.

**For example...** The *user* in our health care plan example would need to follow the complicated medical policy. Help the user by explaining clearly how to use each policy. The person who must use the software and understand how he can make it work needs the basics and in sufficient detail.

Writers make a common mistake with user audiences: they overestimate the readers. This error seems to be particularly true in technical matters. In one instance, an employee was trying to use a new software program, but the manual didn't help. It began with the command to type in a password after the prompt. Unfortunately, the employee didn't know how to turn the computer on or to find a prompt, so he was unable to use the software. The writer simply had neglected to start at the beginning, to provide the basics.



**User** Someone who wants or needs to know how to make something work. Any other information might be superfluous.

### Complex

You must write to fit your reader, to establish a connection that will make your writing more effective. This is especially difficult when the reader might be a *complex* audience, a combination of styles. Here are a few examples.

- The person who serves as your supervisor may be a *layperson/executive*, a manager with no particular expertise in your specific field. You must motivate him to read your work. Use benefits to catch his attention and a bottom-line style to keep his interest.
- You might report to an *expert/executive*, an engineer who has worked her way up in the company to become CEO. An executive summary followed by a detailed explanation will work for this CEO.
- A communication manager who still writes and edits newsletters is an *expert/user*. Tell the expert/user how the process works and how she can personally implement it.
- An employee using the Internet could be a *layperson/user*. This person needs motivation and information. With no particular expertise, he may have difficulty accessing e-mail messages through the Internet. Give the layperson/user the necessary information in a way that motivates him to use it.

Sometimes you may write for a mixed audience, meaning that your readers comprise all four types. When writing a company newsletter, for example, you must address laypersons, experts, executives, and users as well as complex types. In this case, you must write for the “lowest common denominator,” the layperson.

### Dealing with the Differences

Now, let's look at an example. Imagine that you're writing a series of letters to promote your company's newsletter about baseball, *Buzz around the Bases*, and your promotional campaign includes a free copy of a booklet titled *The Story behind Major League Baseball Contracts*. In preparing the pitch letters,

you need to appeal to a fan, an agent, an owner, and a player—four very different types of readers. Notice how you write to deal with the differences among your readers!

### Layperson (baseball fan)

Dear Kate:

How do you get to watch your favorite baseball player? How does an athlete make it from the amateur ranks into the big leagues?

An agent, acting as go-between for a team owner and a player, negotiates contracts based on salary caps or limits. When you see your favorite major league baseball player, you may not be aware of the behind-the-scenes discussions among these agents and owners to contract with valuable players.

When negotiating, agents must consider the player's compatibility with a team, length of contract, and available monies. The result you see may be a star player.

Note the simple vocabulary and informal tone. The fan may not care about contract negotiations, so you use a benefit (watching a favorite player) to attract attention. Then you describe in simple terms how an agent negotiates.

### Expert (Agent)

Dear Pete:

To negotiate a major league contract for your new client, you will need to take the following factors into account:

- current rules on salary cap, including how much of the signing bonus counts against the cap,
- whether players are plentiful or in short supply, and
- the team's needs versus your player's skill.

Once you narrow the number of teams based on your client's geographic preference, you'll need to obtain comparable salary data among players of similar skills, age, and performance. Once you locate a team on your preference list with the needs that match your client's skills, you'll need to determine whether the team has available money under the cap. If so, begin to negotiate. If not, move to the next team on your preference list.

Note the emphasis on the explanation of the process, with more details, and using terms familiar to Pete. The agent

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would want to know how—what process to use when negotiating a contract for a player.

### Executive (owner)

Dear Marge:

As an owner, you must assemble the right combination of players and decide what type of packages to offer based on your budget and the income you desire. Depending on your motivation, determine the balance you'd like between your desire to win and the amount of money you want to make.

Note the emphasis on the bottom line and the direct approach. This executive needs to know how to quickly and effectively negotiate for selected players. She's not necessarily concerned about the complete process because she relies on an agent to negotiate for her, so you don't tell her every step the agent must take. This letter is concise, direct, and informative.

### User (player)

Dear Lenny:

How do you negotiate a major league contract? It's relatively easy, but many players make crucial errors.

Select an agent who will represent you well. Decide which cities you would like to live in and how long you would be willing to stay there.

Also, determine the range of salary you would accept. Discuss with your agent the importance you place on a winning team and on your chemistry with other players.

Note the step-by-step approach to telling the player what to do to get the best contract. Lenny needs to use the information you're providing to work with agents and owners to join the team of his choice and make the salary he desires. He must live with the results of the negotiation. Just because he knows baseball doesn't make him an expert in contract negotiations. Spell it out for Lenny in a simple, benefit-oriented way.

Isn't it amazing how you can deal with one topic in several very different ways, depending on your readers? Be sensitive to your particular audience and the response will reflect your



### Men and Women



Don't approach men and women in the same manner, because they generally view the world differently says Deborah Tannen, a sociolinguist and author of *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* and *Talking From 9 to 5: Women and Men in the Workplace*.

Women tend to approach the world as individuals in a network of interpersonal connections. For them, the aim of communication is to create and maintain relationships, to get and give support, and to reach consensus.

Men, on the other hand, usually look on the world as a hierarchy in which it counts to achieve high status and to preserve independence. For men, communication is part of the struggle to gain and keep the upper hand and to challenge others.

effort. If you addressed our executive, Marge, as if she were a player like Lenny or if you wrote to Pete, the agent, as if he were simply a fan like Kate, they probably wouldn't respond as you'd like. Make every effort to adjust your vocabulary, tone, and approach for each type of reader.

### Check for Readability

Writing for your readers includes knowing their knowledge level and their interest. Those two key factors vary greatly, depending on whether your readers are laypersons, experts, executives, users, complex, or mixed.

There's another key factor—reading ability. That's not just a matter of literacy. It also involves attention span, the environment (time and distractions), and comfort level. That's why you want to be sensitive to the reading level of your writing, to minimize what experts call fog.

Many managers seem to feel that they should use big words and long sentences to impress their readers. Unfortunately,

**Fog** Linguistic obscurity, anything in writing that makes the message less clear.



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their efforts just tend to fog up their communication and make their writing less effective.

How can you avoid this problem? By testing your writing to determine the *fog index*—then editing it to bring it up or (generally) down to a reading level more appropriate to your readers.

Here's how to determine the Gunning-Mueller Fog Index™, as presented in *How to Take the Fog out of Writing* by Robert Gunning and Douglas Mueller:

1. Select a sample of your writing that consists of 100 words.
2. Divide the number of words in the sample by the number of sentences to get the average sentence length.
3. Count the number of words with three or more syllables in your sample. Don't include proper nouns (names), compound nouns (such as "briefcase" or "bookkeeper"), or verb forms that have three syllables because of a suffix (e.g., "created" or "entering" or "advises").
4. Divide the number of long words by the number of words in your sample to get the percentage of long words.
5. Add the average sentence length (from Step 2) and the percentage of long words (from Step 4), dropping the percentage sign. Multiply the sum by .4 to find your fog index.

That index represents the number of years of education needed to understand the writing easily. An index of 7, for example, would mean that the writing is appropriate for a reader with seven years of school, while 12 would be the level of a high school graduate and 16 would be the level of a college graduate.

Let's check the fog index for the following writing sample:

Knowing your audience might be the most critical factor in effective writing. The more you know, the easier it is to tailor your message for an individual or group. Sometimes all you know is that your audience has a short attention span.

I once wrote a report for eighteen-year-old readers. I referenced a classic musical, *My Fair Lady*; unfortunately, this group

was too young and had no idea what I was talking about. I lost credibility and the attention of my audience. If you know the demographics of your audience, you can dramatically improve your ability to communicate.

This writing sample conveniently has 100 words in seven sentences, which gives us an average sentence length of 14.3 words. It contains 16 words of three or more syllables; divide that number by the 100 total words and we get 16%. Then, we add 14.3 and 16 and multiply the result, 30.3, by .4. Our answer—12—shows that this sample would be appropriate for readers with at least a high school education.

Most newspapers in the United States are written at a twelve-year-old reading level, a fog index of 7 or so. That's generally a safe index when you don't know the level of your specific readers. If you write too high or too low, your readers may find your writing either difficult to understand or insulting.

But how do you account for situational factors that impede understanding? After all, you can't expect your readers to concentrate on your words if they're in a hurry or trying to do several things at once. If you want to make your writing easier to read without insulting your readers, the best bet is to shorten your sentences (and your paragraphs), but not necessarily to find shorter words. (We'll consider word choice in Chapter 3.)

Now that you know your readers and the best level at which to write for them, how do you get them to read what you write? That's crucial no matter what you're writing. Whether you're developing a pitch letter for your latest product or sending out a memo or e-mail, you want the



### Fog Alert!

Don't use the fog index on everything you write. Just use it from time to time or when you're concerned about the level of your writing.

Also, remember that the fog index is just a rough guide, since the length of a word or a sentence is in itself no guarantee of ease or difficulty. Plus, punctuation can do a lot to help or hurt the clarity of your writing.

recipients of your golden words to actually invest the time and energy to read them.

### Writing from the Reader's Perspective

Perhaps the most effective way to get people to read your writing is by taking the reader's perspective. Focus on the benefits for him or her. Why should that person read your e-mail, memo, letter, or report? How will your document benefit the reader?

There's a simple way to work from a "you" perspective. When preparing to write any form of communication—e-mail, memo, letter, report, or whatever—just put yourself in your readers' shoes and ask the question, "Why should I care about what you're telling me?" That should help you focus on your readers from their perspective.

It's easy to take the reader for granted. In fact, we've been doing so in this chapter, using the term "reader" as if we could assume that all those people out there are necessarily going to read what you write. You've got to motivate them to read your words. You've got to hit them immediately with the benefits for them. You've got to answer that old question on their minds, "What's in it for me?" Otherwise, you're less likely to connect with them—and your masterpiece may just get dumped into the vertical file or the recycle bin.

Which of the following two paragraphs would make a better opener to a letter?

#### Sample A:

This is to announce that as of June 18 Bagin Technology will begin manufacturing computerized controls for power lawn mowers in order to enter an expanding market that will allow the company to take advantage of its leading position in the electronic controls market.

#### Sample B:

As one of our loyal customers, you should be among the first to know our big news: as of June 18 Bagin Technology will begin manufacturing computerized controls for power lawn mowers.

You've helped make us the leader in the world of electronic controls and we'd like to show our appreciation for your trust by expanding to serve your needs for electronic controls.

If you received two letters and read those two opening paragraphs, which letter would you continue reading? Where is the reader in Sample A? The information is all from the perspective of the company. Sample B appeals to the reader from the first line through the last.

## Build Reader Rapport

Catching the attention of the reader is crucial. But you've also got to hold it long enough to get your message through. What should you do for the reader with a short attention span? What about the reader who's confused or upset or even hostile? And how do you deal with the growing number of people who have just too little time to do too many things?

Try the following tips:

**Establish common ground.** Begin with something you share. Bond with the reader. If you're writing to persuade your CEO to add an on-site day care center, for example, don't start by listing all the things you need to accomplish. Instead, start by reminding her of your common interest in making the company a better place to work. You can do this even more effectively by writing from her perspective, emphasizing reduced tardiness, better morale, higher productivity, and a lower attrition rate. In other words, don't start with your dream; start with her reality.

**Agree (at least partially) with readers if you know their position.** Acknowledge the validity of the readers' positions and recognize their objections to your positions. Reduce any adversarial distance. For example, beginning with "I understand why you're reluctant to set up a day care center and I appreciate your concerns about the expenses" is certainly better than opening with "We really want a day care center and we'll do whatever it takes to set one up."

**Overcome your audience's objections.** Eliminate objections or constraints one by one by providing evidence. If you know the CEO won't want the insurance implications of an on-site day care center, suggest that an outside company come in to run the center and assume liability.

**Use short paragraphs to hold interest.** Particularly for the audience with a short attention span, keep your evidence succinct and clear. Focus on the reader's perspective. Don't become repetitive just to reinforce your position. State your evidence, dispel any objections, and sum up your position.



### Consumer Complaints

When responding in writing to a consumer complaint, try these five steps:

1. **Recite the facts.** Repeat them exactly as the consumer outlined them. Cite specific contacts with you or your organization. This will establish that you understand the complaint and intend to deal with the issue.
2. **Empathize.** Say, "How badly you must have felt when you counted on us but our product/service failed you." Don't just sympathize. Empathize. The consumer must know that you understand and that you feel the same.
3. **Put the problem in its place.** Make certain the consumer knows that the problem is an exception. Cite your record, your reputation, the number of satisfied customers. Why? So that the consumer will feel confident that you can solve the problem.
4. **Cite a specific remedial action.** Don't just offer promises about someone looking into the problem. Give the names of people who will work on it and dates when they'll take action.
5. **Reinforce empathy and future contact.** Show your empathy. Repeat the date or time you'll get back to the consumer and invite him or her to contact you again until the problem is solved. Then send a goodwill gift as an apology and a sign of your sincere commitment to resolving the problem.

Source: *communications briefings*, reprinted with permission.

**Conclude with an action statement.** Answer the question, “OK, now what?” When summing up your arguments for a day care center, suggest a date to resolve the issue. No imperatives, no ultimatums—just a specific time frame to discuss your plan.

## Come to Terms with Gender

Unfortunately, many managers work hard at communicating, but undermine their efforts with language choices, sometimes quite innocently, even unconsciously. We’re all aware of the issue of “politically correct” language. What can we do?

First, we should not characterize the issue as “politically correct.” That’s a disparaging term that shows limited understanding of the issue.

Second, we should acknowledge that we will never make it through life without offending somebody with some word that we use. Our paranoia can only hurt our communication.

Third, we should understand that this issue is fundamentally a matter of sensitivity, of respect, of not making people feel excluded or bad.

The purpose of communication is to connect and convey. Avoid anything that gets in the way of that purpose. Focus on what matters. Words that call attention to unimportant things distract from your message.

It’s impossible to avoid offending somebody, but it’s easy to minimize the chances of offending. Try these commonsense guidelines:

- Avoid unnecessary mention of physical appearances, race, marital status, or other characteristics.
- Focus on the positive. For example, “physically challenged” makes more sense than “handicapped.” (After all, you hired that person because of what she or he could do.)
- Avoid using gender-specific words (such as those listed later in this section).
- Avoid gender modifiers (e.g., “female engineer” or “male

nurse”). If gender specificity is necessary, pair the modifiers (“female engineer” and “male engineer”). The key here is equality: “men and women” or “ladies and gentlemen” or “males and females” or “girls and boys.” (If you wouldn’t say “man doctor” or “gentleman lawyer” don’t say “woman doctor” or “lady lawyer.”)

- Refer to women and men in the same way. Equality again. Refer to them all by their first names or their last names or “Mr.” and “Ms.”

To what extent should we use gender-neutral language? Because English does not have neutral pronouns, we’re caught between such forms as “she or he” and “he/she,” which may be awkward, and the grammatically incorrect plural “they.” It’s generally best to use the plural or to alternate between “he” and “she” forms. (See box for examples.)



### **Gender Alternatives**

An employee should consider his/her options before signing the waiver.

**or**

Employees should consider their options before signing the waiver.

The sales rep cares about how he or she will sell the product.

**or**

The sales reps care about how they will sell the product.

If a sales rep makes a big sale, congratulate him. If a rep lands a new account, give her a bonus.

Here are a few suggestions for avoiding unnecessary gender references.

<b>Gender Sensitive</b>	<b>Gender Neutral</b>
mailman	mail carrier
congressman	congressperson
chairman	chairperson
spokesman	spokesperson
layman	layperson



repairman	repairperson, mechanic
fireman	firefighter
salesman	salesperson, sales rep
policeman	police officer
deliveryman	delivery person
manpower	workforce
mankind	humankind, humanity, society
manmade	manufactured, artificial, synthetic
man-hours	work hours
foreman	supervisor

The bottom line—it doesn't make sense to use words that make people feel excluded or bad or uncomfortable—especially when it takes just a moment of thought to choose more appropriate words. Sure, it's awkward to be using new expressions, but our ancestors somehow adjusted to using “you” instead of “thee” and “thou.” We've all had to learn at least a hundred new terms in the past few years just to use our computer systems. If you did that to get along better with machines, what small sacrifices should we endure to get along better with people?

### Manager's Checklist for Chapter 1

- Find out as much as possible about your reader.
- Take the reader's perspective.
- When in doubt about your reader's reading level, it's safest to aim at a fog level of 7 or so, a twelve-year-old reading level.
- Identify your reader—layperson, expert, executive, user, or complex—and shape your message to that person's knowledge and interests.
- Remember: all readers want to know what's in it for them.
- Be attentive to the impact of your word choices on other people.