

For Whom It May Concern: Writing For Your Target Audience

By Faye Quam Heimerl

How many times have you started reading a book only to get part way through it and think who cares? Does it feel like the author doesn't care if you care: the author has a story to tell and, by George, she's going to tell it — "the reader be damned?"

Writers, do you know who will care about your novel, memoir, inspirational book, reference book, or biography? Do you know who will benefit from reading your book? Do you know for "whom it may concern?"

Why Identify Your Audience?

You say, "I don't have to define my reader because everyone will get something from my book." But, what if you're going to write a book called *The Anatomical and Mechanical Bases of Human Motion As Demonstrated Through the Nutritional and Training Practices of Figure Skater Kristi Yamaguchi*? Who is your audience? It might be kinesiology buffs, exercise physiologists, sports nutritionists, young figure skaters, Yamaguchi fans, or Japanese Americans. How are you going to make all of those readers happy? You can't: You need to narrow your audience and, therefore, the focus of your book.

In *Words Fail Me: What Everyone Who Writes Should Know About Writing*, (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), Patricia T. O'Conner says, "It's a big world out there, and before you write you have to narrow it down. Once you've identified your audience, everything you do—every decision you make about vocabulary, tone, sentence structure, imagery, humor, and the rest—should be done with this target, your reader, in mind."

How Do You Identify Your Audience?

Not only will defining your audience make your book more manageable but it will give you a head start on marketing. One way to define your target audience is to develop a checklist that includes some or all of the items (on the following page). Be thorough and, please, add to this list. Of course, not everything here applies to your book—it is up to you to decide what does.

Describe these elements about your target reader as best as you can—

- Age
- Background experience(s)
- Children
- Desired depth of the topic
- Diet
- Economic status

Education
Ethnicity
Familiarity with your topic
Gender
Location
Loyalty to your writing
Marital status
Pets
Profession
Religious affiliation ...

How Do You Know If You Are Writing For Your Audience?

Once you start writing, you can refer back to your list to see if you are staying focused on your target audience. For example, you've decided the audience for *Kinesiology: The Anatomical and Mechanical Bases of Human Motion* is adult men and women studying kinesiology. While editing you see, "Before morning practice, figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi eats a cup of yogurt and a handful of candy... Stepping onto the ice, she prays she doesn't rip a soleus muscle (or her tights) when she falls." Your target audience expects to learn about kinesiology, not about what Kristi Yamaguchi eats for breakfast. Of course, you will change the text to reflect the audience's needs.

Another example is from a biography you are writing, *Kristi Yamaguchi, the Girl and the Skater*. The target audience is young-adult girls who are interested in the life of an ice skater. If you write, "The predominance of slow-twitch fibers in the soleus suggests that the muscle is able to perform sustained tonic activity," you will be off target because you are writing for kinesiologists instead of young-adult girls learning about an ice skater. What do you do when this happens? Delete the sentence or rewrite it to reflect the interests of your readers.

Ask Yourself...

Patricia O'Conner advises, "Draw a mental picture of your reader and carry it with you as you write. Stop working now and then, and, like Lily Tomlin's telephone operator, ask, 'Is this the party to whom I am speaking?' " If the answer is yes, then you are on your way to writing for whom it may concern and increasing your book's chances for success.

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