

## Assessing the Audience

In assessing your writing situation, audience is your most important constraint. To understand this constraint, you must first decide who your readers are. Are they professors, managers, engineers, scientists, or technicians? You also assess what your audience knows about the subject. What terms will you have to define? What background information will you have to include? Another consideration for audience is why your audience is reading the document. This consideration is often referred to as the purpose of the document. Is the document supposed to inform or to convince? Finally, in assessing the audience, you assess how your audience will read your document. Will they read it straight through like a story or will they turn to specific sections? Consider the example of the Sandia engineer [Carlson, 1982] who designed an implantable electronics device that delivered insulin to the human body. In documenting his design, the engineer had two distinct audiences. One audience consisted of electrical engineers familiar with the electronics, but not with diabetes. Another audience consisted of medical doctors familiar with diabetes, but not with the electronics of this device. Given the different backgrounds of these two audiences, the engineer had to define different terms for each audience. The engineer also had to provide different background information for each audience.

Not only were the audiences different in what they knew about the subject, but they also had different purposes for reading about the design. The electronics engineers were, for the most part, curious about the electronics design. The medical doctors, on the other hand, were interested in whether they could safely use this device to treat diabetic patients. Notice that this second audience had much at stake as far as whether they would actually implant this device into patients. For that reason, the engineer's report documenting the design had to be not only informative, but also convincing.

Finally, the engineer had to consider how his audience would read the report that documented his design. Because the engineers and doctors wanted to read different background information and were interested in different aspects about the design, the engineer realized that neither audience would likely read the report straight through from front to back. Rather, the audiences would move from section to section. For that reason, the engineer parceled the information into sections with descriptive headings so that the audiences could quickly find specific information.