What to Think about When Writing for a Particular Audience
Amanda Wray (2012)

Writers must have a clear sense of to whom they are writing (the audience) and what the audience's values and/or opinions related to the topic are.

"What to Think about When Writing for a Particular Audience" was written by Amanda Wray.¹

Imagine a history professor who opens her lecture on the Victorian era by asking her undergraduate students, "Did you see the Victorian-era furniture on Antiques Roadshow last night?" Can you imagine how many in the class would raise his/her hand? Can you hear the confused silence?

Most of the students in the audience are under the age of thirty, with the majority falling between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. They do not own property and probably have little interest in antiques. The target audience of Antiques Roadshow, though, reflects middle-aged and older middle class folks who, most likely, own property and, perhaps, antiques of their own. How effective of an opener was this professor's question given her audience? Not very.

TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY AND PERSUASIVELY writers must have a clear sense of to whom they are writing (the audience) and what the audience's values and/or opinions related to the topic are. When in conversation, we often shift our tone and/or language to adapt to our audience.²

Consider how you talk differently to young children than you do to your professors. When communicating with a child, you may use simple language and a playful or enthusiastic tone. With your professors, however, you may try out academic language, using bigger words and more complex sentences. Your tone may be more professional than casual and more critical than entertaining.

For example . . .
Imagine that you need money. When you craft an email to your parents asking for money, your approach might be different than if you were to ask your roommate for money. Your tone, language, and means of appeal will adapt to who your audience is.

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The **tone** of your email is casual, conversational, and upbeat ("School is great!").

The **language** that you use is simple, easy to read. Sentences are short and rely mostly on action verbs.

You **appeal** to your parent first by recalling positive memories of home, as though you know your mom is missing you ("reminds me of home"). This is a tug at the heartstrings (or *pathos* appeal). By offering specific details about the cost of your chemistry textbook, you make a *logos* appeal (to her sense of logic). You also highlight your responsible nature, which develops an *ethos* appeal: "I study nearly all the time," "I try to sleep," and "books [more than] I budgeted." Telling your mom that books were more expensive than you imagined links your request for additional cash to your pursuit of an education, something that makes her happy and that adds to your credibility.
For more information about ethos, pathos, and logos, see "Rhetorical Appeals."

- When asking your roommate for cash, the **tone** may remain casual though it will appear less conversational. I mean, after all, you talk to this person every day. Also, noting “I’m totally okay with” buying two rounds of groceries creates a feeling of generosity rather than resentment.

- The **language** gets even simpler. Notice how much shorter the sentences are and how quickly the writer gets to the point; there is less need for “window dressing” your appeal. Colloquial language appears here—“could you spot me some cash”—rather than the more formal request the writer made to his mother, “I’m out of funds for groceries and gas. Can you help?”

- Reminding the roommate that you bought the last two rounds of groceries functions as an **appeal** in two ways: first, it establishes your credibility as a good friend; and second, it appeals to the roommate’s sense of logic (of course you need some extra money; you’ve got a free loader kind of roommate!).

**A WRITING ASSIGNMENT…**

Your professor asks you to write an academic argument paper on a topic of your choice. Academic writing is usually directed to an educated audience interested in critical, analytical thinking.

Let’s imagine you choose to write about adoption rights within the LGBT community. More specifically, you’ll argue that stable LGBT couples deserve the opportunity to adopt children just as stable heterosexual couples are allowed to do.

You’ll adapt **tone**, **language**, and **appeals** to suit the writing project’s

- **Audience**
- **Purpose**
- **Context**
- **Medium**

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3 Click here for the Saylor Foundation’s PDF version of Rhetorical Appeals

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**BRAINSTORMING AND PLANNING**

**Academic Audience**

I will argue that gay couples deserve equal adoption rights in North Carolina.

**Purpose**

I want to educate the audience about how current adoption laws and practices exclude gay couples. I hope to convince the audience that same-sex couples should have equal rights to adopt children once they've completed all the background checks and requirements that heterosexual couples must adhere to in order to adopt.

**Action**

I want the audience to advocate for equal rights for all couples, gay and straight. And, if possible, to encourage the audience to vote against Amendment One.

**Characterization**

My essay will offer personal experiences from children adopted into a family with same-sex parents. Current dialogue focuses mostly on regulations, rights rhetoric, and/or the religious debate of homosexuality. Few seem to be talking about the kids who need to be adopted and about the kids who thrive in families with same-sex parents.
When you write to *all* readers, you, in fact, write to *no one* at all.

Novice writer may assume that their writing can be directed to a *broad, unnamed, faceless audience* and that their words can be read and experienced universally by diverse individuals. No so. Such an assumption contributes to ineffective and boring writing. Writers should tailor their tone, language, and appeals to suit the audience (to whom are you writing?), the medium (how can you help the reader to understand and be attracted to your writing?), and the context (what is the dominant conversation about this topic? What kinds of evidence will be most valued?).

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