

C H A P T E R

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Audience Analysis

If you don't know your audience, effectively communicating with members becomes a matter of luck.

Growing up, most children learn the practice of audience adaptation quickly. One style of communication works better with one parent than with the other; perhaps we whine with one parent and calmly present facts with another. In school, some teachers appreciate and use student suggestions; others punish students who make suggestions. We learn quickly whom to approach, whom not to approach, and how to formulate our requests or suggestions. These lessons transfer into speech-making.

Author C. Kent Wright suggested that, “To sway an audience, you must watch them as you speak.” But more important is to watch your audience *before* you speak, to conduct a thorough audience analysis *before* you create your message, and to give careful thought to the rhetorical situation. If you don't know your audience, swaying them becomes a matter of luck, no matter how much time you've spent preparing and practicing. A speech that is wildly successful for one audience in one context will fail miserably with another.

Analysis and adaptation are crucial first steps in the speech-making process. After all, if you don't intend to have some connection with or influence over your audience, there is no point in giving a speech. Communication is other-centered, and this chapter offers you suggestions for connecting with others.



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AUDIENCE COMPOSITION

The composition of your audience is your first consideration. Who is in your audience? What do members have in common? How can you incorporate that information into your message? The question, *Who is in your audience?* asks for a breakdown of demographic information, or the characteristics shared by your audience members that allows them to be categorized, for example, by age, sex, and occupation. We will go down the list of some of the major groupings you should consider, but by no means will this list be complete. It offers you a starting place.

Age

The age of your audience members may make a difference in how they hear your

Analyze your audience before you begin speaking to create a message that is effective, targeted, and adapted.

message. Even if it is in their best interest, young audience members may not be as interested in hearing about Social Security as older audience members that are nearing retirement. Understanding that doesn't mean you can't talk about Social Security, but you may have to think of strategies that draw in a younger audience, like incorporating humor or stressing immediate impacts. Senior citizens may not appreciate a speech on rap stars Eminem or Tupac unless you find a unique way to connect to them. While there are always exceptions, it's important to look to your specific audience and decide what information and what style will connect. For instance, research indicates that the Veteran Generation (today's seniors) is not as open to a casual style or very personal information about the speaker, while Generations X and Y are much more interested in personal anecdotes and a casual atmosphere.

Sex

While it might be difficult to connect a speech on conducting a makeover to many men (and some women), most topics apply to both sexes and all genders. At times, however, the speaker must remind the audience that the connection is there. It is possible, for example, for some men in an audience to tune out during a message about eating disorders or anorexia. In that case, it can be helpful to remind all members of the audience that eating disorders and body image issues affect men as well as women and that the number of men affected is increasing. An even more effective strategy might be to stress that regardless of whether you struggle with these issues or not, you might be contributing to other people's struggles without realizing it; then give a speech explaining how. Or focus on the role that both men and women can play in recognizing symptoms in their friends and

loved ones and give strategies for how to respond (i.e., identify a place on campus to get information or to take your friend to talk to someone). What are the right and wrong things to say to your friend if you suspect he or she might be affected? (You might be surprised by some of this information.) Again, most topics can be focused in a way to have appeal to all genders or sexes, but audiences members often accept stereotypes that tell them what is or is not interesting. It's your job to break through the stereotypes and expand the audience's knowledge.

Race/Ethnicity

People of different ethnicities often have very different life experiences from one another. There are people for whom ethnicity plays a very small role in their life, but often, especially for people of color, race and ethnicity have a profound impact on the way they see the world. This impacts the way a message is heard. Please be aware, it is not the person's race that makes him or her see something differently; it is their experience. For example, in Peggy McIntosh's essay, "White Privilege," she makes the claim that people of color are often seen as a representation of their entire race instead of as an individual, i.e., if someone makes a mistake, it makes the entire race look bad ("Oh, *those people* are always late/lazy/rude/etc."). She argues that when Caucasian people make the same mistakes, they are only judged as individuals. An example might be that after the Oklahoma City Bombing, white terrorist Timothy McVeigh was judged as an individual, but after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, there was a widespread fear of the entire Muslim and Arabic communities in the U.S. and around the world. So for a student in the minority, there might be stress attached to an experience that is stress-free for others.



The race and ethnicity of your audience members affects their life experience and, as a result, the way they interpret your message as a speaker.

Because people of different cultural backgrounds don't always have the same experiences in the same situations, they often don't understand each other's reactions to the same messages. "Why are people so sensitive? You can't say anything without offending someone!" or "Why can't people see the importance of this issue? It's so easy to be respectful and make small changes; why won't they do it?" As communicators, it's important to consider these reactions and understand why they exist.

It is not the responsibility of white people alone or black people alone or Asian, Hispanic, or any other person alone to bridge that gap in understanding. It is the responsibility of all people to understand the audience with whom they are communicating. As a speaker, regardless of your cultural background, it is important for you to understand your audience members and strive to connect with them.

Occupation

Do members of your audience work in offices, or do they engage in physical labor outdoors? Is there danger inherent in their work situation? Does their job exist to sell a product or to better a community? Is the organization motivated by profit, or is it charity based? Artistic? Number-oriented? Quick-paced? If you are lucky enough to be speaking to audience members who have similar occupation or work-experience, the answers to these questions can give you clues about what might be the best way to approach them. For audience members in a quick-paced, number-oriented occupation, you may want to get to the point quickly in a shorter presentation that

In Review and Going Deeper

There are many possible demographic categories you could look at when analyzing your audience. Four examples discussed in this chapter include . . .

- age
- sex
- race/ethnicity
- occupation

Others you may want to consider include . . .

- geographic location
- education
- political affiliation
- religious affiliation
- sexual orientation
- income

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Speaking Your Audience's "Language"

Audience analysis can tell us so much about our audience members and, if we use that information effectively, we have a good chance of connecting with them. As suggested throughout this chapter, knowledge of your audience helps you make every decision in the course of developing your speech, from topic selection to delivery style. Sometimes, one of our greatest challenges in developing the message is stepping outside ourselves enough to look at the speech as others will see it. Even with a thorough audience analysis, it is still easiest to do what would work for *us*, not what will work for *others* (particularly the people in the audience). One area where this can be a significant issue is with language choice, particularly the decision about whether to use slang and jargon, and to what degree.

Slang refers to informal words or expressions that are generally not considered part of the formal language ("What up, Dawg?" or "That concert was off the hinges!"). The definition itself highlights one of the issues with slang. Speeches tend to be more formal occasions; therefore, informal language structures should be avoided. Some audiences will be more tolerant of informal language than others, so your audience analysis will let you know how far you can move away from formal language structures. The key with slang is to be sensitive to your audience. The issue is not how comfortable you are with informal language, but how comfortable your audience members are. Even if you are comfortable using slang around your friends, you would want to use less of it in a formal speech setting. So, be sure not to undermine your credibility by using overly informal language.

Additionally, if you make the choice to speak using slang that is representative of the audience demographic, but not your own, you risk offending audience members. It is possible they will see you as insincere or patronizing.

The final issue relates to clarity. Both jargon and slang risk an unclear message. Jargon refers to language structures and words that are specific to a particular group of people. For example, when you watch *ER* or *Shark*, the doctors and lawyers on those shows use language that is specific to the medical and legal professions. You might not know what they mean, but doctors and lawyers watching the show will know them. Jargon in each field does tend to have its own degree of formality, so the issue here is not so much one of comfort and credibility, but one of clarity. If your audience members are not as familiar with the jargon associated with the topic area of your speech as you are, they may not understand your message. It is tempting to use jargon because the words tend to be very efficient descriptors of the concept you are discussing. However, as efficient as the words may be, if they are not clear to the audience, your speech will not be effective. So, use your audience analysis to identify a vocabulary your audience will understand.

In a speech, words are the means by which we communicate our messages. Be sure to use language that will make your message credible and clear. Appropriate language choice is one of the primary keys to an effective speech, and your audience analysis will help you make effective choices.

clearly presents a bottom line. With a community not-for-profit, you may want to stress the social benefits of your idea.

You can see how these four demographic characteristics might influence your audience analysis. Other demographics work the same way. Consider income, education level, political affiliation, geographic location, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and any other common traits your audience members might have.

The above demographics are listed individually, but they should be considered together. The fact that your audience is made up of college students is helpful, but college students at a college in the Midwest may have different experiences and worldviews than college students in Southern California. Students at a private four-year university may have different experiences and expectations than students at a public community college. The audience members may share the trait of being students, but they are impacted also by the region in which they live, their socioeconomic status, and many other of their demographic characteristics. Don't rely on one trait. Look for as many as you can reasonably determine. Then use that information to help construct and deliver your speech to meet the unique needs and concerns of your audience.

Obviously, some of the previous examples may seem stereotypical. In this case, that happens because we do not have a specific audience to analyze, so we rely on generalizations. However, when you are preparing your speech, you will hopefully have some specific information about your audience. Upon reviewing that information, a warning is in order. While it is useful to examine the common traits of audiences, be careful not to overgeneralize or rely on false stereotypes. Generalizations can be helpful, but they rarely hold true for all members of

every group. Additionally, it can be easy to oversimplify. Remember that each member of your audience has unique experiences and perspectives. Take that into account. Use qualifiers with your statements; don't assume you know your audience members better than they know themselves. And ultimately, recognize that people are complex. They deserve to be treated with respect and not reduced into caricatures.

AUDIENCE TYPES

In addition to figuring out who is in your audience, it is important to know how they might feel about you and your topic. Sometimes doing the demographic analysis described above can help you move to the next step, a psychographic analysis. In this analysis, you determine your audience type based on interest, knowledge, and attitudes. There are generally four types of audiences: Unaware, Indifferent, Favorable, and Unfavorable.

Unaware

An unaware audience is one that has little or no information on you or your topic. You may be speaking on modern-day slavery, which exists around the world, including very large numbers in the U.S. But because there is little media coverage, many audiences will be surprised to hear that slavery did not disappear with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. You may be speaking on the violence that exists in the Darfur region, but your audience may not know which part of the world you are talking about.

With unaware audiences, you may need to give more background information than you might with other audience types. Consider explaining why members of your audience may not be aware of your information and why it is important.

Sometimes just giving them the information is enough to make a difference.

Indifferent

An indifferent audience may be aware of your topic and information, but members are not interested in learning more about it. Although the significance of a topic might be obvious to you, your audience may not share the same interest level. You might think it is crucial to be informed of local history, but your audience members may be focused on the present and future, not caring about the past unless there is a direct impact to them. Your job is to show the direct impact to your audience. Some of the examples from earlier in the chapter apply here, too. Why should a young audience care about Social Security? Why should an older audience care about hip-hop music? Why would audience members need to know how to correctly apply makeup or change the oil in their car? Think of an answer and stress that answer throughout your speech. If you don't have an answer to why your audience should care, you might consider a new topic.

Favorable

A favorable audience is one that is likely to agree with your point of view and/or support you as a speaker. Often, people assume this is the easiest audience to talk to, and in some ways, it is. However, to be truly effective, a slightly different style of speaking is required. While a favorable audience is likely to agree with you, members do not necessarily share your level of passion or commitment. They may agree with the point of view, but lack the confidence or conviction to express or act upon it. Your goal as a speaker is to increase the level of commitment of the audience members, to leave them feeling something that lasts beyond the speech itself.

While all our speeches should be based in logic, the balance between logic, emotion, and source appeals should be reflected more toward the emotional end. Favorable audiences more readily accept emotional appeals, “extreme” examples, “bigger” delivery, and opposition attacks. The construction of the message can include a two-sided message as a way of inoculating audiences against counter-persuasion, but it is not absolutely necessary. It is often helpful to place the strongest portion of the message toward the end, building momentum throughout the speech, leaving the audience with the strongest sense of emotion.

Do not merely give the favorable audience information that members already know. Seek information and examples that are likely unfamiliar to them. Stress the idea that the problem is bigger, more urgent, or has more far-reaching impact than they have previously realized. Also, remind them that the situation is not hopeless and they personally have the power to make a difference. Create a sense of personal power in the audience.

Unfavorable

An unfavorable audience is often seen as the hardest to convince because members are predisposed to disagree with your information and claims. The biggest mistake speakers make is to ask an unfavorable audience to take giant leaps instead of baby steps. Leaps are for favorable audiences. With an unfavorable audience, your goal may not be to have members adopt all your views; your goal may be only to weaken opposition, to question some of their current beliefs, or to reframe some of their current ideas. Your audience is only capable of giving you so much money, so much time, so much movement on an idea. If you ask for too much, members will reject you. Set moderate goals. If an audience of hunters has used guns safely for years, it is

more reasonable to ask them to consider more thorough background checks for future gun purchases or bans on certain types of weapons, rather than to immediately ask them to give up their guns.

In addition to moderate goals, unfavorable audiences typically need more logical appeals to be convinced. Research, statistics, and citations are especially important. Attempt to find sources the audience already trusts. Frame the issue as relating to the audience directly, whenever possible. Find local examples. A two-sided message is essential. You must refute opposing arguments, but you must do it in a gentle and respectful manner. Unfavorable audiences

will not respond well to being insulted.

In terms of organization, it can be helpful to begin with the claim you think the audience is likely to accept. It can help establish some common ground. Additionally, once the audience rejects an idea from the speaker, it becomes easier to dismiss the following arguments. It is also a good idea to end with a strong idea the audience will likely relate to or accept.

As a speaker, you must work hard to earn credibility. Establish goodwill and com-

In Review

The four common types of audiences are . . .

- unaware
- indifferent
- favorable
- unfavorable

GOING DEEPER

Using Your Audience Analysis

Throughout this chapter, we have looked at many ways you can study your audience, and we have identified the types of information you should gather. We have also mentioned some of the ways that information can help you construct an effective speech that will connect with your audience. Once a thorough audience analysis has been conducted, the following questions may help you decide how to use that analysis in constructing your speech. This is not a complete list of questions; it is meant to help you begin the process. Keep this list in mind as you move through the next several chapters and work through the process of developing your speech.

1. **Topic:** Is my audience interested in my topic? If not, how can I relate the topic to the audience? How can I stress the importance of my topic?
2. **Purpose:** Does my specific purpose make sense for my audience? What are they capable of “giving” in terms of time, money, interest level, attitude change, etc.?
3. **Content:** I cannot put everything about my topic into the speech. Have I chosen my content in terms of how it relates to the audience? Have I made sure not to merely repeat what the audience already knows? Do I have new and unique information? Have I made sure not to offend my audience or overwhelm members with information that is too complex for their background?
4. **Style:** Am I adopting an appropriate tone or mood for my audience and situation? Have I considered whether my audience/situation requires a more or less formal tone? Am using enough/too much humor? Am I dressed appropriately?

mon ground whenever possible. Emotional appeals are necessary, but use them with restraint. Emotion is more likely to backfire with an unfavorable audience and result in decreased credibility.

As you remember with the favorable audience, not all members will have your information or your level of commitment; there will be a range. The same is true with unfavorable audiences, or with any audience type. There is a range of attitudes and information. Some people will be slightly uninformed, and others will know absolutely nothing about your topic. Some will be mildly opposed to your point of view, and others will never agree with you. And within an audience, you may have members of all four types. You may be required to come up with your best combination of strategies based on who is in your audience. In any case, audience analysis is crucial to success as a speaker.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS

The focus of this chapter is analyzing your audience, but the purpose of analysis is to effectively adapt your message to the specific audience. While you are making decisions about your message and delivery, it is also important to consider the rhetorical situation. All elements of the situation can affect how another person hears your message, so take some time to consider this as well.

In Review

When analyzing the rhetorical situation, you should always consider . . .

- size and design of the speaking space
- technological capabilities
- time of presentation
- purpose for gathering
- your relationship with the audience

Perhaps there are visual obstructions between you and your audience; you may need to determine where you can and cannot be seen. You may need to be aware of lighting and remain in a certain portion of the room or stage or risk becoming a mere silhouette. Arrive early and determine how your space may affect your message; make choices that will lessen interference between you and your audience.

With technology being an integral part of many speakers' messages, it is also crucial to be aware of the technological capabilities of the setting. Does the room have the capability for PowerPoint or other computer graphics? Is there a projector or a large enough screen for your purpose? Is the lighting such that it will interfere with how the audience will see the screen? Questions like these will be considered in the chapter on presentation aids, but they should also be considered in your analysis stage. Many speakers prepare messages that they are not able to give without PowerPoint or overhead transparencies, etc. Find out in advance if your physical setting will support this strategy (and, as suggested in chapter thirteen, have a backup plan in case something goes wrong).

It is important to consider your setting beyond the physical constraints, as well. How does your location or time affect the communication? An audience in a classroom might require a slightly more serious tone than the same audience in a bar on a Friday night. An evening presentation may require a different tone or length of time than a morning seminar. Consider, also, the reason the audience has gathered. Did members come to learn, to be entertained, or a little of both? Examine all elements of the communication environment and respond accordingly.

How will the room affect your communication? Is it large or small? Will it require a louder voice or a larger visual aid? In a large auditorium, you may need to be more animated and use slightly larger gestures. In a small room, you may need to be careful not to overpower your audience.

Another point of consideration for analysis and adaptation is your relationship with the audience. Have you had prior contact with this audience? If so, how is that likely to have affected members' perception of you? The cliché is true; you only get one chance to make a first impression. There is no rewind. If your audience perceives you as having low credibility for any reason, you must think about ways to counteract that perception. Your speech is being filtered through every interaction you have ever had with your audience.

As you have most likely gathered from the examples throughout the chapter, the analysis you conduct in preparation of your speech requires you to make choices in every step of the process. In fact, audience analysis is the first step of the process. Your audience influences your topic choice, your narrowing of the focus, your specific goal, content, length, organization, and style. In other words, it affects everything.

SUMMARY

Communication is other-centered. In order to be effective as speakers, we must adapt to our audience. It is important to engage in a demographic analysis and find ways to incorporate information into your speech that connects to your audience. A psychographic analysis is also necessary; determine your audience's likely attitudes to your topic, purpose, or claims, and present them in a way that is acceptable to the audience. Additionally, analyze the rhetorical situation. What is the context in which the speech is being given, and how is that likely to affect the relationship between the speaker and audience? Use this information in every step of the speech-making process. Ultimately, our purpose as communicators is to connect with others, to share understanding and experiences. That will not happen if we do not know who our audience members are.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION AND STUDY

1. What facets of your speech could be more effective with a comprehensive knowledge of your audience?
2. With which audience type is it most difficult to be successful? Why?
3. Perform an audience analysis of this classroom. What did you find?
4. Knowing what you do about the audience, what might be some strategies for connecting with this audience?
5. Can a speech be truly effective without a sense of audience? Why or why not?
6. Is there a difference between slang and jargon?
7. Is it ever appropriate to use slang or jargon during a speech? Why or why not?
8. When is it necessary to define terms for your audience?

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