Who Is Your Audience?

MEETING THE AUDIENCE

When making a demand, what is the first thing that you consider? The best logic to make the argument convincing? The right words to say? The appropriate tone to use? All of these factors can play an important role in the writing process, but they are all quite meaningless if the individual does not take into account one very important detail: the audience. The audience is, in reality, the factor that will make or break your argument. One way of arguing may be very effective for one audience, yet simultaneously disastrous for another (maybe that’s why politicians are always contradicting themselves…). In college writing, knowing your audience is essential to understanding how to write a paper.

AUDIENCE OF ONE

In most undergraduate courses, the audience will consist of one person: the professor (or the T.A.). It is very important to keep your “audience of one” in mind. Students often will write a paper as if they are speaking to an audience that is unfamiliar with the subject matter, or write it as if they are merely talking to themselves. It is always important to keep in mind who you are really talking to.

THE KNOWLEDGEABLE AUDIENCE

One thing to keep in mind when your professor is the audience is that he or she already knows the topic, and likely has an opinion on it as well. Because of this, you don’t need to spend copious amounts of time explaining the material, for it is already understood. Your audience is looking for new information, thoughts, and ideas. However, providing a little background information for context is important. A brief synopsis is generally a good segue into more complex thoughts. You must be careful, however, not to include too much summary. Your audience wants to know your thoughts on the matter.

THE OPINIONATED AUDIENCE

If you are writing an argumentative essay, it is wise to know your audience’s opinion on the issue. This is especially essential if you are arguing against your audience’s point of view, because your argument will need to be twice as strong and twice as tactful. Take into account all the arguments that your audience could bring to the table against you, and neatly fold those criticisms into your paper. In a written argument, the audience cannot ask questions. So, you must anticipate and answer them before they can be asked. Otherwise, the questions will likely still be asked, but in little red letters in the margin of your essay when it is handed back.
THE HYPOTHETICAL AUDIENCE

Sometimes professors will give you a hypothetical audience to write for. In this case, evaluate your topic according to that audience: where are they coming from? What are their assumptions and opinions about your topic? What criticisms will they have? What are some commonalities between your opinion and theirs? Taking the time to ask the questions and do research will help you implement stronger content and write a more successful essay.

THE UNKNOWN AUDIENCE

There are also times when your audience will be unknown to you. In that case, argue the best you can. Bring the strongest evidence you have, present it as neatly as possible, and try to anticipate various points of view on your topic. At least one of these points is likely to coincide with your audience’s perspective.