

# KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

“Knowing your audience” is often recommended but seldom understood. Understanding this concept helps to ensure that your writing is as persuasive as possible.

Audience demographics help writers consider what information is common knowledge, what terminology is appropriate, and what topics may be taboo.

## THE THREE “C”S OF ACADEMIC WRITING

1. **Create** an intellectual connection with your audience.
2. **Cultivate** your audience’s understanding of a particular topic.
3. **Challenge** your audience with a new persuasive argument or perspective.

## WRITING FOR A GENERAL AUDIENCE

- **Scholarly essays** address the community within an academic discipline.
- **Popular Press** articles fulfill a publisher’s vision and address the intended audience.
- **Literature reviews** address other literary critics as well as the potential or interested readers of the work reviewed.
- When in doubt, authors should write for the **common reader**.

## WRITING FOR A SPECIFIC AUDIENCE

- Sometimes, you will be writing for outlets that attract certain types of readers. If you are aware of the audience, you will be able to refine your language so that it is more amenable to their influences.
- Some possible factors to consider:
  - The age range of your readers
  - Their religious beliefs
  - Their political stances
  - Their professional standards
  - Their cultural traditions

## PRACTICAL EXAMPLE 1

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A would-be political commentator pens the following passage:

*All conservative opposition to climate change legislation is fundamentally immoral. Those opposing liberal climate change initiatives believe that human affairs matter more than those of the animals and the plants. What they do not recognize is that the process of natural selection gave no more thought to humans than it did to the most rudimentary amoeba. If humans want to make this world as just as it can possibly be, they need to abandon their arrogant idea that they have dominion over nature and give equal weight to the claims of all the other animals.*

- This passage was clearly written with a passion to impact the policy process. To instigate change, the author decided to submit this passage for publication in as many internet outlets as he possibly could—regardless of their political bent.
- **Zeal, however, is not enough without any consideration of your audience.**
- It would be misguided for the author to publish this for exposure for *all kinds of audiences* instead of sending it to outlets that are largely sympathetic to his belief.
- It can be expected that this passage would appeal to political liberals, given its explicit endorsement of “liberal climate change measures” and its indictment of conservatives who oppose these measures as “fundamentally immoral.”
- Additionally, the author should consider that this passage is unlikely to find a lot of friendly readers at Christian outlets. Though some Christians do indeed favor liberal climate change policies, this particular passage insists that humans were not created by God but were instead crafted by an impersonal “process of natural selection” that “gave no more thought to humans than it did to the most rudimentary amoeba.” The passage denies that humans are any more dignified than the animals, and thus rejects the Christian belief that God created man alone in His Image.

## WHAT SHOULD THIS AUTHOR DO?

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**Given this conundrum, what are the author’s options?**

- If he wishes to publish this for a wide audience that includes both Christians and conservatives, he may opt to make use of *hedges* that nuance his language. He can also strike out words that give the passage a strongly critical tone:

*Many who oppose climate change legislation **do not adequately recognize** the moral necessity of such laws. They **typically** insist that human affairs matter more than those of the animals and the plants. What they do not recognize is that, **if Darwin’s theory is true**, then the process of natural selection gave no more thought to humans than it did to the most rudimentary amoeba. If humans want to make this world as just as it can possibly be, they need to abandon their ~~arrogant~~ idea that they have dominion over nature and give equal weight to the claims of all the other animals.*

- Another way to appeal to a wide audience would be to strike a less militant tone and to add in sentences that may appeal to Christians and conservatives even while advancing the same position.

*Many who oppose climate change legislation do not adequately recognize the moral necessity of such laws. They typically insist that human affairs matter more than those of the animals and the plants. What they do not recognize is that, if Darwin's theory is true, then the process of natural selection gave no more thought to humans than it did to the most rudimentary amoeba. **Even those Christians who reject Darwinian evolution should consider that the Bible enlists humans to treat animals with respect, not simply as objects to be exploited.** If humans want to make this world as just as it can possibly be, they need to abandon their idea that they have dominion over nature and give equal weight to the claims of all the other animals.*

- A final option: The author could simply keep it as it stood originally—without revising it—but make no effort to publish it at Christian or conservative outlets. This would lead to less exposure but would allow him to express his views more candidly since he could write for secular and liberal readers that share his ideas.

## PRACTICAL EXAMPLE 2

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An essayist pens the following passage:

*Though Alexander Hamilton is sometimes considered to be a traditionalist conservative, a close reading of his essays reveals him to be a consistent classical liberal in his political principles. Unlike 18<sup>th</sup> century conservatives, he rejected the notion that religion or virtue is the end of political society. Instead, he maintained with contractarian liberal theorists such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes that the “purpose of society is to secure the absolute rights of individuals.” In a repudiation of both Christian and Aristotelian political philosophy, Hamilton argued that man is by nature an isolated individual who would prefer to live apart from political society. Government, far from being an outgrowth of man’s social nature as Aristotle claimed, is instead merely a “voluntary compact between the rulers and the ruled” fabricated to advance individual self-interest. He denied the existence of human obligations to one another apart from considerations of property. “Humanity,” he argued, “does not require us to sacrifice our own security and welfare to the convenience, or advantage of others. Self preservation is the first principle of our nature.” Hamilton’s rejection of teleological virtue ethics, his affinity for natural rights, his embrace of social contract theory, and his reduction of all individual interests to considerations of property place him squarely in the classical liberal tradition.*

- This passage presents a plausible case for the thesis that Alexander Hamilton should be recognized as a proponent of classical liberalism. Additionally, the passage strikes a scholarly tone and shies away from generalizations or outbursts.

## SO, WHAT'S THE ISSUE WITH THE PASSAGE?

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- The key issue for the author to consider has little to do with the composition of the piece; it has to do with the audience.
- Is the author writing to a *wide* audience? If so, there may be a serious problem:
  - The author makes use of **jargon** that only academics would be likely to understand. Even scholars who do not specialize in political theory or the history of ideas would be unlikely to make sense of a lot of ideas expressed here.
  - Commenting upon concepts such as “contractarian liberal theorists,” “Aristotelian political philosophy,” and “teleological virtue ethics” may throw off an audience which lacks fluency in the field.
  - Additionally, mentioning people like John Locke and Thomas Hobbes in passing may be appropriate when writing to scholars who are aware of their theories, but if they are mentioned in a popular press article it would be better to elaborate about the basics of their theory.
- If the author is distributing this to an academic audience or writing for outlets focused upon political philosophy, he is likely in good shape.
- If, however, he wants his ideas to be considered by a wider audience, he should consider **omitting the academic jargon** and **elaborating a bit on the crucial abstract ideas** that are mentioned but not explicitly defined.

PRACTICE NOW