

THE BASICS YOU NEED, REGARDLESS OF FIELD

PART I

Do not copy, post, or distribute

WORDS TO LIVE BY



Suzanne Struglinski

“While it is unclear how much longer the traditional newsprint versions of newspapers will remain, the need for journalism — and those who help get information to reporters — should never go away.”

—Suzanne Struglinski

Public Relations Manager, Industry Dive

For more helpful hints and sage advice from Suzanne, see the “Professional Thoughts” feature later in the chapter.



KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- Define an audience based on several characteristics, including demographic information, psychographic information and geography.
- Understand what readers want from you as a media professional, how you should deliver it to them and ways in which audiences change over time.
- Discuss the key interest elements that attract most readers, including fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact.
- Identify key needs of audience members and explain how to meet those needs through your writing.

Media outlets today have a singular purpose: Serve the audience. This truism applies to advertising and public relations, where practitioners craft messages to convince clients to create campaigns. In turn, those campaigns release messages that attempt to persuade consumers to purchase a product, trust a candidate for office or change their beliefs about an issue. This statement also relates to the field of news, where print, broadcast and online reporters gather material from sources and craft messages to inform their readers and viewers.

According to research published in the *Journal of Communication*, media users engage in selective exposure.¹ This means audience members will gravitate to topics they know, writers they like and information providers they trust. This can be good for media professionals who apply strong ethical tenets and good communication skills to reach readers, but it can also be bad, if people insulate themselves too much from outside information and opinion. A Pew Research Center analysis conducted in the lead-up to the 2020 presidential election found that people tend to gravitate toward information that confirms their own ways of thinking, creating what some have termed “media bubbles.”² This makes it harder, but not impossible, for us to break through to our audience members and inform them about things they need to know.

As audiences continue to fragment and specialize, media professionals can’t assume that broad messages or generic bits of information will influence a wide swath of people. Instead, the goal for today’s media professionals, regardless of the specialty they practice, is to learn as much as possible about the people they serve and put forth content that targets those people.

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the importance of the audience as it relates to media writing, determine ways to define the audience and explain which information elements attract the most readers.



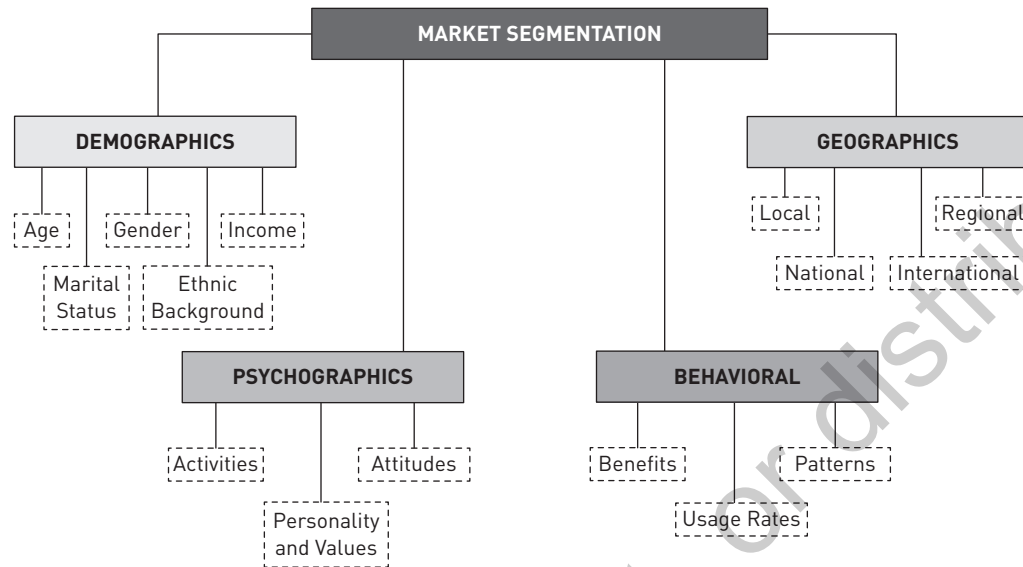
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HOW TO DEFINE AN AUDIENCE

Before you create effective content, you have to define your **audience**. When it comes to the various media disciplines, advertising professionals best understand the value of analyzing and segmenting an audience. In order to sell products, advertisers need to know who uses their products, why these people use the products and how best to reach active and potential users. Public-relations practitioners often deal with some of the most difficult audiences to reach, namely, news journalists who can use their media outlets to amplify the practitioners’ messages. PR professionals understand the needs of these fellow media practitioners as well as the needs of the public as they craft a valuable and engaging message. News journalists began to focus on audience centrality a bit later than their colleagues in other areas of the discipline. In years past, reporters viewed **audience segmentation** as unnecessary, because their job was to tell people what mattered based on predetermined news values. In addition, many news outlets held virtual monopolies over geographic areas, thus allowing them to operate with impunity. However, with loss of unilateral control over what people receive via news outlets, mainstream news operations now spend ample time catering to their audience.

With the shift of news to digital **platforms**, more people have access to more news than ever. In addition, advertisers are now awash in even greater levels of message competition, and

FIGURE 1.1 ■ Market segmentation allows you to figure out who is in your audience and how best to reach them. For media writers, understanding the demographic, psychographic and geographic backgrounds of their readers will help them write better for those people.



public-relations campaigns are expected to yield greater results with fewer resources than ever. As digital media continues to grow and to create fragmented audiences, all media professionals must be more vigilant in defining and understanding whom they serve. Here are the key ways in which you should look to define your readers:

Demographic Information

The most basic way to define an audience is through **demographics**. These statistics reveal the measurable aspects of a group you hope to reach. Demographics commonly include age, gender, race, education and relationship status.

Marketers traditionally use these population characteristics to divide a larger group into more manageable segments. For example, the purchasing habits of divorced women, ages 54–65, who have no children will differ from the purchasing habits of married men, ages 25–36, who have multiple children living at home. If you targeted both groups with the same types of material and the same products, you probably would fail to reach at least one of those groups.

Websites have also tapped into demographics in terms of audience centrality. For example, the website BuzzFeed has engaged in a series of **microtargeting** posts that Chadwick Matlin calls “demolistics.” These postings target people based on specific interests, such as attending a certain college or growing up in a certain religion.³ According to an article on Slate, these posts are wildly successful because people have an inherent interest in specific personal attributes and how other people with similar attributes engage in shared experiences.⁴ Thus, lists such as “32 Signs You Grew Up in Ealing” and “33 Signs You Went to an All-Girls Public School” tap into that demographic background and highlight the audience members’ shared experiences.

Microtargeting has become a huge factor in political campaigns over the past decade. A 2020 Los Angeles Times article outlined the ways in which big data analytics are used to find the demographics of voters, as well as other public information about those individuals. Analysts then use this information to target individuals with specific information that is most likely to resonate with them, thus maximizing the impact of the message and minimizing waste. Critics argue that this approach further exacerbates the differences between individuals and can play havoc with important social systems, like elections.⁵ However, like every tool we discuss in this book, demographic targeting can be used for societal benefit or detriment. It comes down to the media professionals using the tool and their conduct.

Geographic Information

People relate well to events that happen near them and care somewhat less about those happening far away. When you consider that a single death can draw more attention than a massive genocide simply based on where the event occurs, you realize that **geographic information** plays a large role in how to target your audience.

Area placement means a great deal to advertisers and event organizers. A person might fit a demographic range for a particular event, such as a 5K run. The person might also have an interest in the charity that the run supports, such as breast cancer awareness or muscular dystrophy. However, if the event takes place 500 miles from where that person lives, it is unlikely the individual will consider participating in it. This is where geography becomes important. Also, advertisers know that the needs of citizens of Madison, Minnesota, are not the same as the needs of those of Madison, Florida, when it comes to snow-removal equipment or alligator deterrents.

People want to know what is happening near them. When a restaurant burns to the ground in a small town, news reporters know that readers likely have eaten at that establishment or know its owners. When a school district requests a tax increase or fires a teacher, the issue of proximity figures prominently into audience members' interest in the issue.

Psychographic Information

Just because someone is your age, is your gender and has your level of education, it doesn't necessarily follow that the person has anything in common with you. **Psychographics** allow media professionals to examine an audience based on concepts like personal values, interests and attitudes. This category incorporates topics such as the strength of opinion on certain issues as well as general likes and dislikes associated with certain topics, activities and ideologies.

For example, if you were to examine the demographics of College X, you might find that it has a 55% to 45% split between men and women, with an age demographic that primarily sits in the 18–24 range. You might find that this school sees about one-third of its students come from within the state and has an 85/15 proportion of white students to those of various other racial groups. College Y might have similar demographics that show a 52–48 split between men and women, a similar age range and about one-half of the students coming from within the state. However, if you were to run a promotion at the first school for a bar's "Drink Like There's No Tomorrow" specials, you would probably do horribly poorly in sales, given that Brigham Young University has a policy and tradition against alcoholic consumption. If you did the same at the second school, you might do pretty well, given West Virginia University's consistent ranking among the top 20 party schools in the country.

CONNECT

THE PERSONIFICATION OF YOUR AUDIENCE

One approach you can take to conceptualize your readers more clearly is to view them in a way that makes them more real for you. Some media specialists refer to this as the **personification** of the audience. This approach to audience understanding has you create a mini-biography about your prototypical reader that lets you to reflect on his or her wants and needs as you approach your writing.

Here are a couple of personification examples:

“Anne is a 50-year-old public school teacher who has lived in the same medium-sized city for her entire life. She always wants to keep up with what is happening all around her, but she places a premium on local information. She still subscribes to the daily newspaper and reads it from cover to cover every day before work. She listens to local news radio during her daily work drives. She will shop where she gets the best deal, and she is an avid coupon clipper. She puts the needs of her two teenage children above her own, in terms of purchase intentions and educational opportunities. She owns a mobile phone, but it is several years old, and she turns it on only for outgoing phone calls.”

“Burt is a 19-year-old college sophomore at a small, private college. His school is rooted in a Christian belief system, but Burt puts more emphasis on the quality of his education than the underlying religious aspects of the institution. Burt has limited finances, but he enjoys being at the front of most trends. What his friends think about who he is and how he acts matters a great deal to him. Burt gets all of his information through social media sites and avoids mainstream media. He is never without his phone, and he uses various apps to manage his news, his schedule and everything else around him.



He loves cheap eats and other great bargains, but he won't carry around a wad of coupons. He relies on internet codes and digital sharing to find good deals.”

Personifying your audience can allow you to better conceptualize who is reading your work. This will also help you figure out if you are meeting the needs of those people you serve.

KEY QUESTIONS TO ASK IN SERVING YOUR READERS

As a media professional, you will be expected to ask a lot of questions during your career. Interviewing, which is discussed in Chapter 5, is a key way you will gain knowledge and gather information. However, to fully understand what you must do for your readers, here are three key questions you should ask of yourself:

What Do My Readers Want From Me?

In many cases, media writers write from their own perspectives. In other words, they ask, “What do I want to tell people?” Many writers believe that if a topic matters to them, it should matter to the audience. In some cases, your interests and your audience members’ interests will intertwine, especially when you operate in a **niche** area.

If you start a blog that is all about knitting because you really enjoy knitting, you will have a lot in common with knitting aficionados who frequent your site. That said, some of the people will be interested in spinning their own yarn by hand, whereas others might rely solely on processed materials. Some knitters enjoy knitting socks, and some love sweaters. Even more, some sock knitters will only knit “toe up,” while others are fervently “top down” knitters. Just because you prefer certain ideas and approaches, you shouldn’t become myopic about them.

In writing promotional material for a company, an organization or a department, you can easily fall into a rut of writing lead sentences like “The Boone County Chamber of Commerce will host a comedy event on Saturday to benefit a local charity.” It makes sense to you because you are writing what you think is most important: Your organization is doing something.

Don’t write for yourself. Write for your readers. Ask yourself, “What is it that will be most compelling to those people who pick up this press release or read this promotional material?” As you answer this question, rely on information elements like fame, oddity and immediacy, which we will discuss below, to amplify the value to your readers.

Bill Smith, the only man to ever eat an entire elephant, will perform his comedy routine “One Bite at a Time” on Saturday, with all proceeds going to the Boone County Make-a-Wish Foundation.

Work for the readers and figure out what those people want from you. If you give it to them, you will likely have a lot of readers who are interested in what you have to say.

How Do My Readers Want the Information?

Think about the last meal you ate. How much did it cost? Did you prepare it or was it prepared for you? Did you eat at a restaurant or did someone deliver the food to you? Did you eat your meal at a leisurely pace, at a table, with other people, or did you grab it on the go?

The point is, you were consuming something based on a variety of factors, and how you needed to eat played a big role in what you ate. If you were in a hurry to get to class this afternoon, a bagel from the school’s food cart might have been your best option because you could eat it on the go. A porterhouse steak with mashed potatoes and a side of asparagus might have sounded much better to you at that point, but cost, time and portability made the steak an impossible choice.

Companies have been making these kinds of adaptations for years. For example, during the 2020 coronavirus outbreak, many restaurants were forced to shut down during the initial wave, as health experts worried about the spread of the disease. However, numerous restaurants adopted “touchless” protocols to allow them to safely provide services without fear of contributing to the problem. Restaurants that lacked delivery services began offering curbside pickup and other similar innovations to get people restaurant-quality food without violating social-distancing policies and public health concerns.

Delivering media content to readers is like delivering a pizza to a dorm room in some simple ways. How your readers want to get their information should factor into how you write and how you transmit your content.

Some readers want all of their content in a central location that will allow them to sift through everything at their leisure. Other people want bits of information sent to them as each item becomes available. Still others will want a mix of both forms, depending on the type of content involved.

In many cases, the lives of your readers dictate what they want, and intelligent media professionals will use that to their advantage. A recent Pew Research Center study found that 8 in 10 U.S. adults used their mobile devices to access news content either “sometimes” or “often.”⁶ An earlier study, this one by Deloitte, found that mobile devices have become essential for U.S. citizens, with more than 40% of them checking their phones less than five minutes after they wake up. In addition, the study notes that people review text messages, check email and surf the web via the small screen.⁷ To that end, writing in a way that is easy to read on a smartphone and looking for ways to push content out to readers as it becomes available make sense. If you can be a convenient source of information, your readers will hear more of what you have to say.

ADAPT

SHIFTING CONTENT TO SATISFY AN AUDIENCE

When thinking about how to write, you should consider the platform (paper, television, desktop, mobile) and the **outlet** (New York Post, Vogue magazine, ESPN.com).

Some people will want a quick burst of information, and that’s it. It could be a notification that a company is having a sale on a particular date or a simple sentence that reveals the results of a football game. Other people will want to sit down and study an extended analysis of why a company’s stock is performing well or read a personality profile about a local community leader.

Analyze your audience for outlet and platform preferences. What your readers use and how they use it will help you tailor your approach. Most people won’t want to read a 10,000-word profile on their mobile phone screen. However, those same people won’t want

to wait until a print newspaper arrives on the doorstep to find out who won that night’s baseball game.

Take advantage of these preferences. You could use Twitter to alert the readers to that 10,000-word feature, thus piquing their interest and inspiring them to read the full version later on their tablets or laptops. You could pair that sports score alert with a link to other short pieces available on your mobile site, thus sponsoring more audience engagement on the topic while not forcing the readers to shift platforms.

In the end, you want to use the right tool for the right job and meet your readers where they are. Then you can use your writing and promotional skills to guide those readers to additional information that matters to them.

Does the Audience Change Over Time?

In some cases, audience characteristics remain constant over time, but the members of that audience will change. It is your job to figure out how this will influence your approach to content and what you need to report to your readers.

For example, the magazine *Tiger Beat* started in September 1965, catering to teenage girls with an interest in music, fashion and the inside scoop on the teen idols. The first magazine featured photos and stories on the Beatles and Herman’s Hermits. It offered an “intimate, personal” examination of David McCallum and asked the all-important question: “The Righteous Brothers: Breaking Up?”

The cover of a 2019 issue of *Tiger Beat* offers posters of Max & Harvey, Why Don’t We and Makenzie Ziegler. It offers a quiz to find out “Will you have a bae by Valentine’s Day?” The main story explains why we are all “Hooked on Jacob Sartorius.”

The magazine still meets the audience needs outlined above: teen gossip, music scoops and inside movie information. However, over the 50+ years between the first issue and the most recent one, the audience has changed. The idols of the 1960s don't cause the girls of 2020 to swoon. The people who read the magazine in 1965 have long since moved beyond the makeup tips and teen drama outlined in the pages of *Tiger Beat*. Although the specific information might change over time, the basic underlying tenets of this magazine have not.

Magazines often follow this pattern of writing as new members filter in and out of the audience. New parents will want to know if their children are eating properly or if their babies will ever sleep through the night. Engaged men and women will want to know how to plan a wedding, what to do about family drama and how to save enough money to make their dreams come true. In some cases, the underlying questions and answers the audiences have remain the same. In other cases, changes to social norms, trends or technology might lead writers to approach these topics in different ways.

A long-held tradition had the parents of the bride paying for a wedding, so early wedding magazines would list ways to address these issues with parents or how to establish the amount of money available to the couple. Now that tradition isn't as rock solid as it used to be, so while money still must be addressed, writers in this field must look at issues such as how couples can set aside money to pay for their own weddings or how to balance their current financial obligations with their nuptial desires. Even more, second weddings, same-sex marriages and melding families have become more prominent and thus are likely to be more germane to this generation of brides and grooms.

The core values and interests of a publication can remain the same over time, whether it is a corporate newsletter or a gossip publication. However, writers must continually assess the needs and wants of the audience as the members of that group change and grow over time.



iStock.com/David_Ahn

Magazines that cater to teens, brides and fashion will often have audiences that change over time. The editors will keep the content thematically constant, but will alter the stories and photos as the teen idols, wedding standards and fashion trends change.

WHAT ATTRACTS AN AUDIENCE?

As media outlets continue to divide audiences along demographic, psychographic and geographic lines, several concepts remain interesting to many audiences. You want your audience to see what you wrote as an important focal point of their lives, and these **interest elements** can help you do that. To remember them, you can use the mnemonic **FOCII**, like the plural of “focus” but with two I’s.

Fame

In some cases, it's not what someone does but who is doing the deed that matters. For example, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than 1.5 million people are arrested each year for drinking and driving. However, when “Vampire Diaries” star Zach Roerig was arrested on suspicion of driving under the influence in 2020, it became big news. In this case, the status of the person drew the attention of readers and viewers to what is usually a minor criminal offense. The more important the person, the more likely people will pay attention.



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News publications rely on the FOCII interest elements to determine what stories and photos they want to publish on a daily basis.

Oddity

“Holy cow! Did you see that?”

When a friend asks that question, he could be pointing out a thunderous dunk at a basketball game, a classic sports car rolling down the highway or someone eating the bark off of a tree in the park. Very rarely will someone be wowed by a free throw, a 5-year-old Toyota Corolla or someone jogging on a trail.

In other words, we like to see rarities.

The reason a video of a cat flushing a toilet gets 4 million views on YouTube is because not all cats flush toilets. The reason sports fanatics celebrate a perfect game in baseball is because of the nearly 220,000 professional games played since 1900, only 21 such games meet the standard of perfection, according to mlb.com. The Hope Diamond mesmerizes people because no other gem of its kind exists.

In the field of media, we focus on these rarities and highlight the elements that make them different from everyday occurrences. Advertising professionals accentuate the aspects of their products that separate them from competing products. These features could include having the lowest price in the field or having the best safety rating among the category’s competitors.

Fundraising campaigns often use **oddity** to draw attention to a cause. For example, charities often use gimmicks such as important people who sit on top of a billboard until a certain amount of money is raised.

News is filled with oddities, such as Chuck Shepherd’s classic “News of the Weird” features. In these cases, the writers promote weirdness to attract readers. Inept criminals who injured themselves breaking into a bank and had to call 911 for help make for great stories that keep people entertained. Beyond bits of weirdness, the novelty of firsts, lasts and “onlys” also engage audience members, whether the novelty involves the first person to walk on the moon or the only person to vote against the impeachment of a state official.

Fame falls into two main categories. The first category is for people who are famous over an extended period of time. This can be due to their positions, such as president, prime minister or pope, or to their value to popular culture, such as actors, singers and sports stars. In some cases, fame can rest with the infamous, such as serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy. The name Charles Manson still sends shivers up the spines of people, even though he spent the majority of his adult life in prison. The more famous the person, the more the audience members care about what that person is doing.

The second category of fame is based on artist Andy Warhol’s well-known statement that “in the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.” In many cases, circumstance thrusts ordinary people into the spotlight, and they become the center of our attention for a limited amount of time. Once the fervor around them dies down, these people often drift back into anonymity and life moves on. People like Jeff Gillooly, Capt. Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger, Samuel J. “Joe the Plumber” Würzelbacher and Brian Collins became part of everyday conversations throughout the nation (and in some cases around the world) when they found themselves the subject of media fascination. If most of these names mean nothing to you, it only serves to further the point about this form of fame.

Conflict

Anytime two or more individuals or groups seek a mutually exclusive goal, **conflict** will arise. The idea of watching people, teams, organizations or nations fight draws on an almost primal desire and tends to attract a lot of attention.

Celebrity feuds and Twitter wars happen frequently and provide a simple way to see one-on-one conflict. Perhaps the strangest feud of this nature in 2020 occurred between Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin and Axl Rose, the lead singer of the classic rock band Guns N' Roses. After Mnuchin appeared on television to tout travel during the COVID-19 outbreak, Rose tweeted, "It's official! Whatever anyone may have previously thought of Steve Mnuchin he's officially an (expletive deleted)." Mnuchin responded by asking what Rose had done for the country lately, whereupon the singer ripped the secretary for the 70,000 coronavirus deaths (at that point) and for telling people to travel during a pandemic.⁸

Conflict also relates to sporting events, where teams attempt to exert dominance over each other. In some cases, geography can intensify conflict issues in sports. For example, Duke and the University of North Carolina have a strong rivalry in basketball, enhanced to some degree because the schools' campuses are only 8 miles apart. Other rivalries, such as between Ohio State and Michigan or Florida and Florida State, are also geographically enhanced.

Aside from these clear-cut examples, conflict also tends to weave into the day-to-day lives of media professionals in every background. Advertising agents want more people to like their products or services as opposed to a competitor's offerings. Drinkers of Powerade are likely to remain loyal to that beverage and thus reject Gatorade's attempts to sway them.

People who raise money for a specific charity or cause know that people tend to set aside a finite amount of money that they will donate in a given period. If the money goes to Cause A, it can't go to Cause B. Conflict can also arise when organizations seek support and funds but are diametrically opposed in terms of philosophy, such as the National Pro-Life Alliance and NARAL Pro-Choice America.

In a news setting, conflict is ever present. When a company wants to build a store, conflict can emerge between that company and other companies that want to put facilities on that land. In addition, members of the boards and councils that approve land use might argue over the value of that type of land use. Citizens could protest the loss of green space associated with the construction.

In looking to serve an audience, you want to understand the multiple facets of an issue. Depending on who wins, the outcome will mean something to the people you serve. It could be good, or it could be bad, but it will matter.

Immediacy

The classic goofball comedy "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby" contains the immortal line "If you ain't first, you're last." If you skip past the grammar issues and logical lapses in that sentence, you see that Will Ferrell's statement perfectly captures the importance of **immediacy**.



Lisa Lake/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

Rock icon Axl Rose took to Twitter to mock U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin's comments on air travel during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Pool/Getty Images News/Getty Images

Mnuchin used Twitter to respond to Rose by asking, "What have you done for the country lately?"

People want to know what is happening around them at any given point in time, and they want to know before anyone else does. The surveillance need that people possess dominates the digital world, and media professionals need to understand how to meet it. In 2011, AT&T took advantage of the immediacy concept with its series of ads that demonstrated how quickly its phones could get users information on its 4G LTE network. A pair of men were at a football tailgate party while people asked questions such as “Did you guys hear that Chapman rolled his ankle?” or “Did you hear someone stole the other team’s mascot?” Each time, one of the men responded with a statement like “That was so 10 seconds ago.”

News journalists also value immediacy when they “break” news that is important to readers and viewers. Broadcast journalists cater to this interest element when they interrupt current programming to update people on a developing situation. During the 2020 presidential election, several states had not reported their vote totals on election night, because of a heavy level of absentee and early voting during the COVID-19 pandemic. When each crucial state, including Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin, finalized its total, television stations announced the results immediately as their journalists scrambled for information. Almost 20 years before that event, television networks cut into their morning shows and went directly to New York City after the first plane slammed into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

Today, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are used to provide users with information on a 24/7 basis. Audience members who choose to follow people, organizations and businesses can get up-to-the-minute updates on everything from product launches to celebrity sightings. As immediacy remains an important interest element, digital platforms and mobile devices will see their value increase exponentially.

Impact

This element of importance helps you explain how the information you put forth will directly affect the readers. In some cases, readers can feel the **impact** on an individual level, such as the amount of money a tax increase will cost each citizen. In other cases, the impact can be felt on a broader level, such as the positive effects that building a theater will have on a community or the negative effects of global pollution.

In most cases, you can measure impact from a **quantitative** or **qualitative** perspective. Quantitative perspectives measure the numerical reach of an impact, and qualitative perspectives examine the severity of the impact.

For example, a newspaper might report the death of a single citizen who was killed in a car crash. Death, something from which you can’t recover, is a qualitative impact. In most cases, people have not experienced a fatal car crash, so the story has not only a serious impact but also an oddity factor.

However, that publication might also report ways in which people can deal with an illness, such as a cold. Although you might feel like you are dying when you are sick, you will probably recover from a cold within two weeks. Since the average adult gets two or three colds each year, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the quantitative reach of the impact is worth noting.

Some situations, like the coronavirus pandemic, have both qualitative and quantitative elements to them. When the impact is both wide-reaching and severe, people have a vested interest in keeping track of what is happening in a given situation. This is why news outlets provided wall-to-wall coverage and advertisers shifted their messaging to address changes in the way people consumed goods during the outbreak.

Make sure you examine the ways in which your writing can affect your readers and then focus on that during the writing process.

PROFESSIONAL THOUGHTS

SUZANNE STRUGLINSKI

In a career that spans two decades in the field, Suzanne Struglinski has worked at nearly every type of media job possible. At each stop along her professional life, one of the most important aspects of doing the job well was knowing her audience, she said.

“Knowing your audience is not just an empty phrase,” she said. “Sometimes it is easier to know when something is wrong for your audience than describing what is right. Who do you want to read whatever you are writing or see what you are creating? A business proposal sent to a law firm is going to use much different language than a brochure encouraging someone to join an organization.”

Struglinski spent the majority of her career after college as an online and newspaper reporter in Washington, D.C. She spent time at E&E Publishing’s Greenwire, an online subscription-based news service focusing on environmental and energy news, before heading to a newspaper job. In 2003, she worked as the Washington correspondent for the Las Vegas Sun, and in 2005, she became the Washington bureau chief for the Deseret News. After the Deseret News closed its Washington bureau in 2008, Struglinski turned her suddenly shortened journalism career into one as a successful communications strategist.

“Some of my favorite elements of being a journalist were telling stories, meeting new people, making connections and the ability to figure out things quickly,” she said. “Every job I have had since has used these skills. On top of this, journalists take for granted that we know how to write, meet deadlines and can juggle several projects at once.”

Struglinski has worked as the press secretary for legislative affairs at the Natural Resources Defense Council, a writing specialist at global law firm Baker McKenzie,

director of membership engagement at the National Press Club and a media relations manager at the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

Today, she is the public relations manager at Industry Dive, a business journalism company in Washington, D.C., where she continues to rely on her writing, editing and storytelling skills to reach difference audiences with information about the company.

“I am curious when someone who wants to go into public relations says they do not need to know how to write, what they exactly think their job is going to be,” she said. “The broad category of public relations has many roles and responsibilities under it, but solid writing, how to tell a story and how to know how to organize information are skills that apply across the board.”

Even as the journalism world continues to change around her, Struglinski said the ability to know who is in your audience and how to their needs will always be valuable skills that employers will prize above all else.

“Whatever your job, you need to define your audience before you can meet their needs,” she said. “If you are working for a cosmetics company’s blog, that is one audience and style of writing versus an investment bank. Imagine if a preschool parent magazine’s content appeared on a political news website and vice versa. Your audience is coming to you for a certain type of information so you need to deliver it in a way they will understand.”



Suzanne Struglinski

WHAT AUDIENCES NEED TO KNOW AND HOW TO MAKE THEM CARE

The interest items outlined in this chapter can help you draw an audience, but once you have your readers’ attention, you need to communicate with them in an effective way. If you focus on what the audience members need, you will improve the likelihood that your writing will do its job well. Outlined below are three key needs and the questions they evoke as well as the best ways to meet those needs and answer those questions:

Key Need: Value

Question: Why Does This Matter to Me as a Reader?

Media professionals often write their copy from the wrong perspective. They construct a story, a pitch or a proposal to emphasize the issues they see as important or ideas they would prefer as consumers. However, the audience and the writer aren't always on the same page regarding **value**, and since the audience matters most, the writer needs to adapt.

When rookie news writers cover stories on topics like tuition increases, they tend to focus on the numbers from a collective perspective. It sounds stunning when they write "School officials said the university would collect an additional \$12.4 million from students due to this increase." The number sounds big and it sounds scary, but it lacks value to the individual readers who will see their tuition bills rise.

Self-interest is a human trait that media writers need to embrace. The people who are reading news releases, watching commercials, analyzing marketing pitches or surfing a news site aren't doing so for the greater good of humanity. They are looking at the very basic question of "what's in this for me?" Good writers will look for the opportunity to present the value of material in a way that clearly answers that question.

Meet the Need: Explain

Answer: Show Your Reader a Personal Impact

As a writer, you should use your expertise to help other people understand important concepts. The more difficult each concept is, the slower you need to explain it and the more detailed you should be in your descriptions.

In the tuition-increase example, the writer needs to explain the value on an individual level: What does this mean to me, as a student, in terms of the dollars and cents I need to come up with to stay in school? This is where self-interest drives the value.

A good writer would note, "This tuition increase means the average student will pay \$130 more each semester to attend the university." In explaining the tuition increase this way, the journalist would create a more direct line between the story and the reader. Students who read this sentence can figure out whether they need more hours at their jobs or need to take out additional loans.

Regardless of the media platform you use or the purpose of your communication, you want to present your readers with value. Look for ways that you can effectively give your readers a clear sense of why they should buy a product, donate to a cause, take part in an activity or look at a specific side of an issue. People are more likely to pay attention to items and look at issues if they know what is in it for them.

Key Need: Engagement

Question: Can You Tell It to Me in an Interesting Way?

When small children dislike a book or television show, their complaint is usually voiced in a specific and clear way: "This is BORING!" The material the child is consuming might have value or contain interesting information, but the way in which it is being put forth has not engaged the child's interest.

Contrast this with the reaction of children who loved the "Harry Potter" book series. These school-age children would line up with their parents for hours outside of bookstores in anticipation of the midnight release of each new volume. They would voraciously tear into the books and read until they had consumed every page. Clearly, author J. K. Rowling tapped into something when it came to **engagement**.

The most important information in the world doesn't matter if the people who need it aren't paying attention.

Meet the Need: Stimulate

Answer: Tell a Story That Will Pique Reader Interest

How you tell a story is the difference between having an enraptured audience and having people who are bored stiff. The way you emphasize certain elements of your story will determine how well you stimulate your readers.

For example, children enjoy stories that contain characters who are like them. Successful children's novelists like Beverly Cleary and Barbara Park tapped into this with main characters who were dealing with the trials and tribulations of children. Stories about the "Stupid Smelly Bus" and sibling conflicts at age 8 helped engage children because the tales met the readers at their own level.

This basic idea can translate well to help pique the interest of your readers. If you work in a field where you are promoting financial growth products, chances are your readers will want basic numbers and facts. Use a direct approach in your writing that will outline the best numbers first and use them to draw readers into your work. If you work for the National Marrow Donor Program, instead of using numbers to draw in your readers, you might use a more narrative approach, focusing on a single individual. This personal approach, known as using an exemplar, will create an emotional tie between the readers and message, as you put a human face on a larger issue.

Key Need: Action

Question: What Can I Do With What You Just Told Me?

A classic New Yorker cartoon by Robert Weber has two people sitting on a couch at a party. One says to the other, "I used to be in advertising. Remember 'Buy this, you morons'? That was mine." Although most advertisers would avoid this kind of blunt and insulting statement, the underlying concept has merit: You have to tell people what to do if you want to succeed in this field.

Advertising copy often has a clear **action statement** because advertisements should persuade consumers to purchase the product. However, most other forms of writing fall short in this crucial area.

In opinion columns or persuasive pitches, action is about telling people what to do if they agree with you. Most writers assume this element is implied, but you don't want to rely on the readers to take that last step alone. You want to bring the main idea home and help your readers see what they should do next.

For example, when students write opinion pieces in the student newspaper that complain about the parking conditions on campus, they can clearly demonstrate value to the readers. On most campuses, parking is often at a premium, and students usually feel they don't get enough of it.

The column can then engage the readers with anecdotes about students who have to park several miles from the main part of campus. The writer can then support these claims with numbers that show how students get far less good parking than do faculty members.

At the end of reading the column, the readers will likely see the writer's point and feel the writer's outrage. However, if there's no action element present, the writer leaves the readers wondering, "OK, now what?" Should they complain to administrators? Boycott the parking system? Ride bikes to school? Take part in a protest at the parking office?

Meet the Need: Propose Options

Answer: Offer Readers Ways to Act

When you have the opportunity to tell people what you want them to do with the information you provided, you should do so. This concept extends beyond opinion pieces or promotional material and can be useful across all forms of writing.

In advertisements, the action is clearly implied: If you like what we are saying, go buy our products. However, other levels of writing in advertising require a more nuanced explanation of how action should occur.

For example, a creative pitch (see Chapter 13) should include not only the campaign ideas but also how much money should be spent, what types of ads should be purchased and how long the campaign should take. In addition, information such as start and end dates need to be explicit.

In terms of news, if you write stories about tax increases or changes to public policy, do so far enough in advance to give people a chance to attend meetings where officials will debate these issues. You can also include contact information so the members of your audience can reach out to the decision makers.

If you promote events, you must include time, date and place information so people know where to go and when to get there. You also could include other helpful information, such as whether tickets are necessary.

If you write “how-to” pieces, you should address every important issue at each step in a process so that people can make sure they are doing it right. In some cases, images can be extremely helpful, but your writing alone should be able to do the job properly.

The Big Three

Here are the three thoughts you should take away from this chapter:

1. **Focus on the readers:** You are the writer, but you aren't writing for yourself. You are writing for an audience that has specific wants and needs. The better you understand who these audience members are and what they need, the better chance you will have in reaching them.
2. **Content is king:** You need to reach people on a variety of platforms and devices, but what you tell these people will always trump any element of technology. If something is important, well written and communicated effectively, people will read it. Focus on the ways in which you can meet your audience's needs as you create your content.
3. **Rely on core interest elements:** Fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact are the primary interest elements for media writers. When you start writing content and you are unsure what to do, consider each of these elements and look for ways to emphasize them as you try to reach your readers. This will provide you a solid foundation upon which you can build the rest of your work.

Key Terms

action statement 15
audience 3
audience segmentation 3

conflict 11
demographics 4
engagement 14

fame 10
FOCII 9
geographic information 5

immediacy 11

impact 12

interest elements 9

microtargeting 4

niche 7

oddity 10

outlet 8

personification 6

platforms 3

psychographics 5

qualitative 12

quantitative 12

value 14

Discussion Questions

1. What media do you tend to consume to gain information? Discuss this in terms of both the outlets you use and the platform or format. For example, do you read the student “newspaper” in print or only online? Do you watch television on your mobile device? What about the content drives you to consume it, and what makes you prefer the platform you use?
2. Of the three types of audience segmentation listed in the chapter, which one is most important to you as a reader? Why do you think this is? Which one is least important to you? Why do you feel that way?
3. Reread the information associated with the three key needs listed near the end of the chapter (value, engagement, action). When you look at the media you consume, do you think the writers do a good job of working through all three needs? Which ones are traditionally handled the best? Which ones are usually handled poorly? Why do you think this is?

Give It a Try

1. Take 10 minutes and look up some basic statistics about the students your school serves. Most universities and colleges have this information on their websites. Then, look into some basic information about media consumption habits associated with people who fall into those statistical categories. Finally, write up a short personification of your audience that mirrors the approach in the chapter. Compare and contrast your personification with those your classmates have created. Take particular note of specific similarities and differences you find during your class discussion.
2. Find a story that is of interest to you on a website you frequently visit. Then, boil that story down from the computer version to something you would send out as a tweet or an alert. Make it a single sentence that fits the parameters of what you tend to see on your mobile device.

Write Now!

1. Review the five interest elements listed in the chapter and determine which ones are most influential when it comes to things you consume in the media. Then determine which ones are least important. Finally, pick a story that interests you from a local media outlet and see which interest elements are present and absent. Write up your findings.

2. Find a story topic multiple media outlets have covered and select two articles on that topic that serve different audiences. For example, you might look at a specific movie review that ran in a teen publication versus one that ran in a general-interest publication. You could also look at a story on a political topic on sites that tilt toward one side of the political spectrum or the other. Read through each of these and note how the coverage meets the needs of the audience. How much of the content is similar and how much is different between the two? What are your thoughts on how these publications covered these topics.
3. Explore the demographic details of your school in terms of age, gender, race and the in-state/out-of-state gap. Write a paragraph that outlines these details. Then select another institution that has a similar demographic breakdown and take the same approach. Now, compare and contrast your schools in terms of other details, including geography and psychographics. How similar are your schools and why do you think that is? Use examples to illustrate your point.

Notes

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