

# How to Conduct Audience Analysis

To make any type of writing as effective as possible, it is important that the writer understands his or her audience. What the reader wants, needs, knows, and feels about a topic are important factors in how the work will be received, and...

## Sample Audience Analysis

Picture 1 of How to Conduct Audience Analysis

Sample Audience Analysis

Part 1 of 3:

### Planning your analysis



**Decide who your audience is.** In other words, who will be reading this document? You probably won't be able to provide a detailed answer to this question yet; that's why you're doing an audience analysis. You should, however, be able to answer the question in general terms.

1. For example, will your document be read by someone trying to install some shelves? Employees of a certain company? Computer programmers trying to work out a bug in some new software?
2. Consider why this audience will be reading your document. What task will it help them perform, or what do they need to know?

2.



**Decide what you need to know about your audience.** Depending on who you're writing for, there are different types of information that it will be helpful for you as you work to make your document as useful and/or persuasive as possible.

1. You will almost always want to ascertain your audience's levels of knowledge about and interest in the topic.<sup>[1]</sup>
2. Depending on the audience, the situation, and the type of document you are preparing, there are many other pieces of information that might be valuable, such as where the audience is likely to read your document, and a variety of demographic factors such as age, gender, education, professional background, cultural background, and so on.<sup>[2]</sup>

3.



**Decide how to conduct your analysis.** Your audience analysis can be formal (i.e. using a survey or other questionnaire, structured interviews, etc.) or informal (i.e. based on more casual conversations with members of the audience). The best method will depend on the audience you are trying to reach, how

much information you need about them, and what resources you have available for conducting your analysis.<sup>[3]</sup>

1. Sometimes, you may be able to find information that someone else has already collected in the form of surveys or marketing research that can stand in for collecting your own data.



**Create your analytical tool.** Your analytical tool is the instrument you'll use to gather your information, e.g. your actual questionnaire or interview questions. The content should be driven by your brainstorming in step two.

1. Try to avoid creating questions that lead your participants toward a given answer, even if you think it is correct. For example: "Now that we've shown you how effective our product can be, how likely are you to buy it?" or "How do you feel about the president's oppressive tax policies?"
2. Avoid "double barreled" questions. Questions that ask about more than one thing at a time may confuse your participants or result in unreliable data.<sup>[4]</sup> For example, you shouldn't ask: "How often do you read articles about science and share them with other people?" Instead, break this into two questions: "How often do you read articles about science?" and "How often do you share articles about science with other people?"
3. If you use a survey, keep it as simple and short as possible. <sup>[5]</sup>

Part 2 of 3:

## Conducting your analysis

1.



**Select your sample.** Once you've decided which questions to ask, it's time to decide who you should ask them to. If you can't include everyone in the audience in your analysis, try to select a group of individuals who you think are representative of the audience you hope to understand.

1. For example, if you think your audience is mostly women, try to select a sample that reflects that.
2. Other characteristics that might be useful in selecting participants could be their occupation or employer (especially if you are writing something for people in a particular field), their ethnic backgrounds, the city or neighborhood in which they live, or their membership in a particular organization.
3. Which characteristics are most important will vary based on the type of document you are producing and the audience you are hoping to reach.

2.



**Collect your data.** Conduct your survey, interviews, or conversations with potential audience members.

1. If you are using a survey, you may want to let your participants remain anonymous, especially if you are asking them about anything sensitive or personal. This can lead to more honest responses.
2. If you are interviewing participants in person, you may find it useful to ask clarifying questions or probe for more information by saying things like "can you tell me more about that?" or "tell me why you feel that way." At the same time, how you conduct the interviews can affect how people answer your questions, so you'll need to work hard not to show your own biases or make your participants feel like they should answer in a particular way.<sup>[6]</sup>
3. For interviews or informal conversations, it's often a good idea to record the conversation for later reference, if your participants agree to this. Never record anyone without their permission, as this may be a violation of state law.



**Analyze your findings.** Now it's time to have a look at the information you've collected and see what it tells you about your audience. How knowledgeable or interested are they about the topic you'll be writing about? How old is the average person in your sample? What proportion of them subscribe to the publication you are writing for?

1. If you need to conduct in-depth statistical analyses of your data, there are software programs that can help you, such as Stata or SPSS. These programs are costly though, and for most purposes, calculating simple percentages is more than adequate. Common applications like Excel can help you with organizing and analyzing your data. Putting your questions across the top row in a data sheet and then placing each participant's responses in the rows below will allow you to quickly summarize the range of responses you got for each question.
2. If your analytical tool used open-ended questions, i.e. questions that do not specify a limited range of possible answers (for example "How do you feel about Company X?"), you will probably want to classify people's responses into categories (for example: "skeptical," "hostile," "uncertain," or "positive") so that you can summarize how large numbers of your participants responded (e.g. "the majority had a negative impression of Company X").

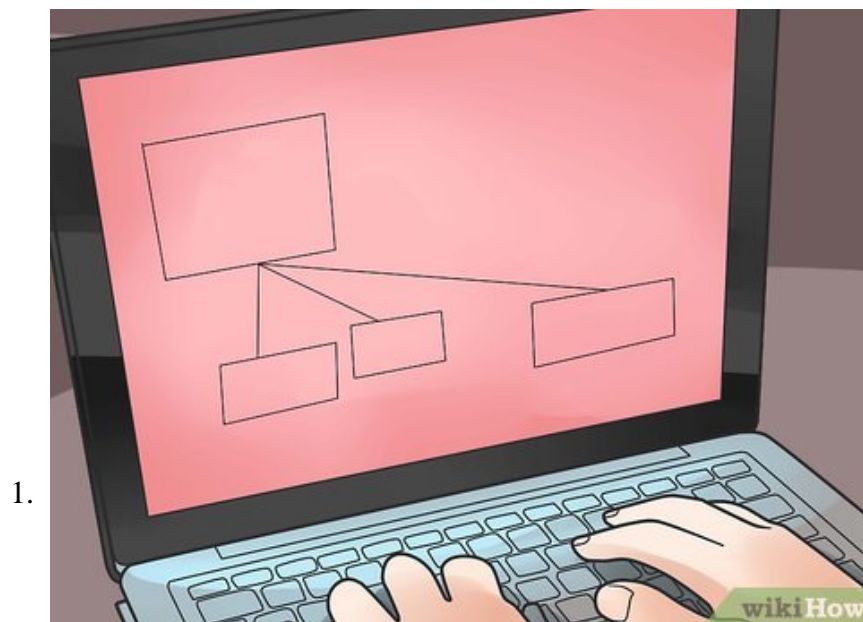


**Create an audience profile.** Once you've analyzed your data, collect your findings into a single document that summarizes who your audience is and what their needs are. Putting this together will help you organize your thoughts and create a coherent picture in your mind of who your audience is.<sup>[7]</sup>

1. The sample document at the top of this article is a good example of an audience profile.

Part 3 of 3:

## Creating your document



**Consider your format.** Depending on your audience, some formats might be more effective than others. If this decision hasn't already been made for you by your employer, pick a format you think will be appropriate for your audience.

1. If your audience will be reading your document while carrying out a task, a technical manual or instruction sheet made up of bullet points and possibly diagrams may be most effective.<sup>[8]</sup>
2. On the other hand, if you are hoping to inform professionals about new research in their field, an article or newsletter format might be best.<sup>[9]</sup>



**Create an outline.** Before you actually write your document, create an outline to organize and plan your content. This will not only make writing easier, it's also a good way to ensure that the information you have deemed most important will all be present, and that it will be organized in a way that will make sense to your audience.<sup>[10]</sup>

1. Outlines are also a good way of developing headings for the different sections in your document, which will be useful in helping readers identify the key pieces of information they are looking for.<sup>[11]</sup>



**Set the tone.** One of the most valuable things about audience analysis is that it allows you to select a writing voice that will be compelling and effective for reaching your audience. The right choice of words and sentence structure can make a big difference in getting your message across to your audience.

1. For example, if your audience is highly educated and/or well versed in the topic you are writing about, the use of highly specific and technical vocabulary may be acceptable or even helpful. If your audience is not well informed about your topic, such language should be avoided.
2. Likewise, if your audience is likely to be reading your work while carrying out a specific task or in a work environment with many distractions, the use of short, simple sentences is advisable. If they'll be reading your work at home and giving it their undivided attention, varying sentence length and structure will make your writing more compelling and enjoyable.<sup>[12]</sup>

4.



**Address the audience's needs and objectives.** Most importantly, knowing what your audience hopes to learn from the document you are crafting will allow you to make sure that the information they need most is presented in a way that is easy for them to locate and understand.<sup>[13]</sup>

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