

Things to Consider Before Writing: Purpose, Audience, Medium, and Topic

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Imagine trying to mind map without knowing what you're going to write on. Have you ever tried writing without first determining what you're going to use that writing for?

Before writing a single word, there is work for a writer to do. Even before idea generation or writing exercises to generate those ideas, like mind-mapping or freewriting, there is work to do. How can we mind map if we don't first have a topic or purpose? What to freewrite about when there are over a million words in the English language and innumerable combinations of those words?

A writer must first consider a writing's *purpose*, *audience*, *medium*, and *topic*. Otherwise, how do we know which words to write? There are arguably over a million English words if we include slang, jargon, and officially recognized English words. There are nearly innumerable combinations of those words into sentences, and so, a writing can take any path. This is the difference between wandering and traveling with purpose and a road trip. A road trip with no destination can be fun, but there's no guarantee that it will be fruitful, coherent, or good.



Why Consider Purpose, Audience, Medium, and Topic?

Most good writers have a purpose in mind. For instance, a well-researched academic essay; an entertaining story; or a thoughtful account of a personal experience, like a travel story or life experience. How could we write if we didn't at least have a topic and a purpose?

It's also important to consider the audience, or the reader of your writing. What you include in an academic essay and what words you write differ depending on whether it's your Teaching Assistant, Professor, or conference peer reading your work (we might play on the desires and expectations of the TA if we know how they grade). A romance novel for tweens will have different words and ideas than a romance novel for adults.

The medium—the physical way the writing will take form—will have different words depending on whether you're writing for a website or for a small pamphlet, even on the same topic and with the same purpose. Imagine someone sitting at home leisurely browsing a website versus standing on a busy street corner handing a people walking by a pamphlet or card. The pamphlet will have to be much more memorable, eye-catching, and concise, since they have less time or attention to devote. If people don't read the writing, it has no effect. If nobody is reading what we wrote, this wastes time, energy, and resources.

Knowing your topic and its scope can help limit your writing to relevant ideas. This can save time later in the editing and revision stage as you sort through and cut material (cutting material can sometimes be the hardest part—which one of our darlings do we kill?) By limiting the scope and topic beforehand and refining it within a manageable scope, we will write less to begin with, saving time and potential material to cut later. Good writing is focused, concise, and on topic. We could spend hours running down a rabbit hole, but if that material is not relevant, it can be wasted resources. Few will read for hours on every single detail unless they are very passionate or want to become a specialist.

Some thought and preparation in advance can help solve issues later. One of my favorite sayings: "An hour of planning can save days of headaches." This is true for longer, complex, and polished writings, such as research essays. This is another reason to consider all these aspects of writing.



What is Purpose, Audience, Medium, and Topic?

So, I've mentioned *purpose*, *audience*, *medium*, and *topic* as important in good writing. What do these mean exactly? Let's look at each of them.

Purpose

Purpose is why you're writing in the first place. It is the intent, function, or what the writing means to do. What will this writing be used for?

For instance, the purpose of a student assignment is different from an advertisement created by a company. If you plan to write a short story or novel for the purpose of entertaining, your approach will be different than if you were to have the purpose of informing, such as in writing a learning document. Knowing the result gives a destination. Yet, how you travel to that destination will differ depending on your own writing methods as well as audience, medium, and topic.

You might also consider your personal purpose as a professional. Your own purpose and where you want to be can inform what kinds of things you write and how you write them. If we aspire to be a world-renowned author, our path will look different than if we just want to be known for informing people of important events.

Audience

Knowing who will ultimately engage with your written content is arguably one of the most important aspects of writing.

Who will read this writing? What is the typical reader, or what ideal reader are you aiming for? Who do you write for? Who do you want to engage with your content? The more specific, the better.

Ask yourself, from the perspective of your reader (imagine these questions are from the prospective reader):

- What do I (the reader) need to know?
- What do I already know or believe?
- What matters to me?
- What sources do I turn to for information?
- What kind of evidence will convince me, the reader?

Being too broad is difficult, because the more people you try to appease, the less specific you can be in appealing any one specific person. If your audience is indeed general, it's important to note this too. Sometimes we write for general audiences, like in newspapers, television advertisements, or mass market paperbacks.



Identifying your ideal audience can take some sleuthing to figure out all the psychological desires, features, and habits of the reader. For instance, a writing will differ depending on whether it is intended to be read by a 50-year-old mother of three with only a high school diploma, an 18-year-old college student, a business professional, or someone with a PhD working in industry.

It can help to identify an avatar or persona of the ideal reader for your content. Create an avatar or profile of the ideal reader for your writing. Then imagine yourself writing for that person. It helps to have someone specific in mind. Give them a name. Craft a picture or cartoon of them. Make a profile of them. This doesn't have to be any real living person, but if you wanted to imagine writing for someone like a friend or an important person, you could imagine writing for them. Find a profile template that you can use for this tactic in Appendix 1. This document is also given as an editable Word document for your convenience, available in our Writing Center.

Ask yourself:

- How old are they?
- Where do they live (geographical and environmental)?
- What cultural environment do they live in?
- What do they do (work/student, profession, hobbies)?
- Do they have any desires?
- Do they have any presuppositions or worldviews?

See Table 1 for an example of what such a profile might look like.

Once you have identified all these questions and created a profile of an ideal reader, imagine yourself writing for them alone. If the characteristics of that person also inhabit the ideal audience of your writing, then if your avatar would like it, most likely would anyone highly related to that person (similar desires, socioeconomic profile, etc.)

You might also consider what your audience or avatar wants, needs, and expects. Writing with these in mind will appease your reader and make it more likely that they engage with and continue to engage with your content. If a reader doesn't get what they want or need, they may not engage with your content. Think of the pushback with the older audience and seasoned Star Trek fans with the release of *Starfleet Academy*. Many seasoned Trekkies complained that it wasn't what they expected.



	
Name: Elizabeth Ellis	Race: Caucasian
Gender: Female	Age: 40
Work: • Profession: Communications Advisor • Income: \$42k	Religion: Christian—Protestant
Location: Sandy Springs Georgia, USA	Education: College degree in Communications
Marital Status: Married	Family: • Husband: Joshua Ellis • Child: Madison Ellis, female, 19 • Child: Joshua Jr. Ellis, male, 15 • Dog: Bark Twain
Activities: • Baking • Reading • Travelling, outdoors, dog walks • Watching TV and series • Chatting with friends	Interests: • Intellectual growth • Supernatural/metaphysical mysteries • God, theology • Electronic forms of communication
Challenges: • Balancing time between work, family, friends, and interests. • Keeping pace in an increasingly technological world	Values: • Family & friends • Outdoors • Effective communication • Good organization

Table 1: A Profile of a Fictious Ideal Reader

Medium

The medium is *how* the writing is to be communicated. How will it be presented and in what form?

Will it be a Word document? A virtual writing on the web? Will it be published in a physical book? A PDF? All these media differ and should inform your writing. The expectations of different genres and media differ by medium.

For instance, if I pick up a pamphlet, I don't expect six pages of the history of the purpose, cause, or group. I would expect illustrations. In contrast, a Word document might be suited with fewer images and more historical justification. A website could also contain a section for the history. A fiction novel is expected to have characters, have a story arc, and entertain.

You would also consider headings, titles, and word choice. A pamphlet does well with headings, and so does a 20-page PDF. Large, catchy words might be suited for a pamphlet, but not so much a PDF.

Topic

One of the most important aspects of writing is the topic. Which words you write are informed by what you're writing about. You would write very different words when writing a recipe than if you were to write the by-laws for an association. The topic is basically what your writing is about.

The topic is simple when writing something advertisement copy for a company (it's about the product or service and its merits!). For something like a novel, your topic might be more abstract or general, like the life of Suzette in the Romantic Era of France.

You can't write about everything, so the more focused the better.

The topic is usually the first thing you identify, although purpose might come first, too.



Putting it All Together: The Relation Between Purpose, Audience, Medium, and Topic

We discussed each of purpose, audience, medium, and topic alone. Now, let's look at how they work together. Are any of them primary or more important?

The main thing is to translate your topic through the desired medium for your desired audience and in line with its purpose. See Figure 1 for how all these considerations might relate.

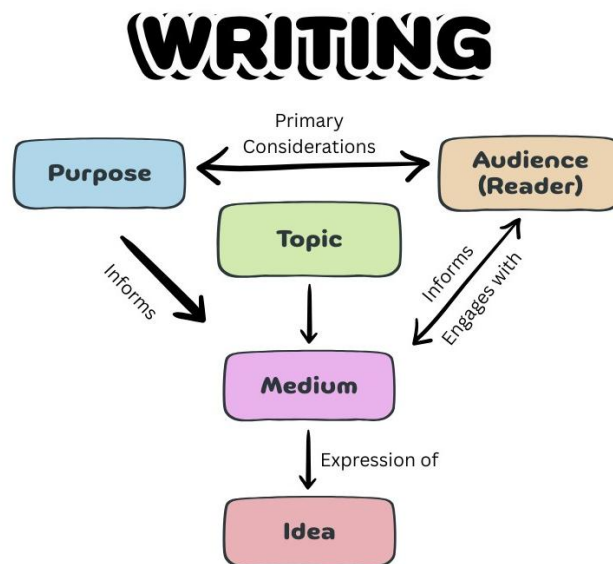


Figure 1: The Relation of Purpose, Audience, Medium, and Topic

The medium you use will have different expectations from the reader depending on the ideal or targeted audience. Hence, if a writing is done for multiple media, the wording or format will differ depending on the audience for that media.

How do I get this specific reader or audience to do *[insert your purpose here]*? This is the relation between your purpose and the audience.

How does this media affect what the reader expects? This is the relation between the medium and the audience.

Again, the audience is probably the most important aspect. Most writing has an intended audience that is not us, the writer. Well, unless you're writing a journal entry or to-do list, perhaps—those are private. Without an audience to engage with the writing, the purpose is usually deflated. This is because we write to publicly express ideas.

Purpose is equally important as audience. The main thing to consider is what the audience wants and needs, and how to fulfill that want or need, depending on the purpose of the writing. I suppose you might consider purpose and audience as primary considerations in the expression of writing.

The medium and topic come as secondary considerations. Topic doesn't change much depending on the medium, nor does purpose. Although the audience might. Those who drive to work might not see written ads on public transit. The latter group might have a higher income bracket or not be as eco-conscious. An older audience might not engage with web content as much, or content on social media sites like TikTok.

Consider different purposes, such as if we want to gain prestige, build a portfolio of work, or get an 'A' on an academic assignment. Consider also if we wanted to inform (purpose) our clients (audience) about a new service (topic), how would we do that (which medium)? The informing is the primary consideration. Sometimes medium might come first, like if we want to print a business card or create a website. Although both purpose and medium can be tightly linked. For instance, we might create a business card to get portable contact information to the client or to look more professional (purpose), or because we found a deal on bulk printed business cards (or have a sponsor), and so the medium is available before the purpose.



Conclusion

Effective writing is about considering your purpose, audience, medium, and topic. It's important to consider all of these before even writing your first word of copy.

Nonetheless, writing need not be constrained by these considerations. Awesome pieces of work and art can be created through intuition or pure insight alone. A good story can move the spirit and incite the imagination. However, even for amazing movies like *The Matrix* (1999)—my favourite movie of all time—the story idea was produced long before the actual movie was produced. The writers and producers of the movie, the Wachowskis, produced another movie before producing *The Matrix*, even though it was written first. One problem was that the story could not be translated from story through the medium of big screen and big budget movie to the audience at first. Even though the stakeholders (those with the funding and movie production studies) thought the story was very good, the stakeholders were not convinced that a movie was the best medium for the story of the Matrix. They couldn't envision how the audience would receive it. This is the professional aspect of writing.

Writers like J.R.R. Tolkien or J.K. Rowling probably thought a lot about these aspects. Their books and movies are successful because they thought a lot about the human mind and what sorts of desires readers (audience) of their work (mainly high fantasy fiction) would enjoy. Even though they probably had a grand vision for some fantasy world, for it to be successful, they would have to navigate the medium, audience, and purpose. Signing onto a book contract with a publisher also has stakeholders that influence the purpose (we want to make money!), and thus, will change how the writer approaches an idea.





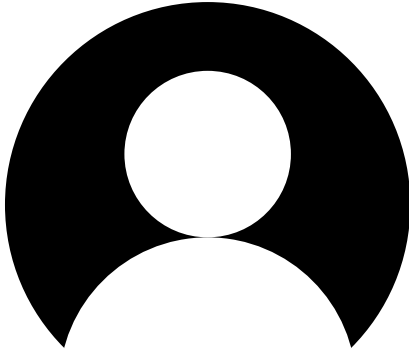
Figure 2: Movie Posters for *The Matrix* (1999) and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001)

The movies of Harry Potter and *The Lord of the Rings* differ from the books because the medium is different, and thus the audience is different. The purpose of the movie was to entertain (and make some income); however, since the audience differs, so will what is included in the work and how it is presented. A movie script will be much different than a novel.

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Appendix 1: Audience Profile Template

	
Name:	Race:
Gender:	Age:
Work: • Profession: • Income:	Religion:
Location:	Education:
Marital Status:	Family: • Spouse: • Child: • Child: • Pet:
Activities: • Activity 1 • Activity 2 • Activity 3	Interests: • Interest 1 • Interest 2 • Interest 3
Challenges: • Challenge 1 • Challenge 2	Values: • Value 1 • Value 2 • Value 3