

Chapter 3. Responding to Readers' Needs

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This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify elements of the basic rhetorical situation of a writing task and recognize any “rhetoric problems” that can arise as you write
- Identify aspects of subject-matter knowledge that writers are responsible for and recognize “knowledge problems” as they arise when you write
- Analyze complex rhetorical situations by exploring the exigencies and stances that affect writers’ work, the discourse communities they write for and within, and the genres used by those communities

“Good writing” is not a concrete object, like a chunk of rock sitting on a table or a collection of 500 words in sentences that have no errors: *Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts*. In other words, the work of writers is not to *compose sentences* but to *move readers*: if you have error-free sentences but readers aren’t affected by what you have to say, then your writing doesn’t succeed. Sometimes,

of course, we write to move or please ourselves only, and so we can judge our own success—but in most academic, professional, or community writing, readers’ needs and reactions directly affect the planning and outcomes of a writing project.

Writing scholars refer to this strategic interaction between writers’ goals and readers’ needs as *rhetoric*. Although you are already an experienced rhetorician—someone who successfully persuades others to attend to, assist, or follow you—you can benefit from learning more about how writers affect readers and reflecting on your own rhetorical contexts and strategies.

Writers Move Readers

Writers have to do two contradictory things at once: set forth our own ideas, perspectives, and goals, and attend carefully to our readers’ needs, desires, and abilities. Since none of us can read other people’s minds to know for sure what our readers want, it can seem that good writing happens either by magic or luck: if you’re inspired or you guess right, you move readers, and if not, you try again. But like detectives and scientists, writers can deduce a lot of information about readers without having special psychic powers.

You might find it helpful to compare writing-for-readers to a physics experiment. Isaac Newton’s first law of motion describes *inertia*: a body at rest stays at rest, and a body in motion at a constant velocity continues in a straight line, unless acted on by an outside force. The new course of the object will depend on several variables, including its own mass and the strength of the force(s) acting on it. Likewise, your reader will continue in their current state of mind and understanding unless you act on them with well-directed force that is sufficient to move them to a new state. It’s also useful to imagine that you need to take other forces into account: just as objects around us are affected by the predictable forces of gravity and friction, readers are affected by their context in ways writers can predict and account for. As with any physics experiment, writers need to account for as many variables as possible to identify the resources we need and actions we should take.

Because of this interactive relationship with readers, many of the questions writers have—from “Should I use a semi-colon?” and “Can I write using first-person pronouns?” to “Is this a good source to cite?” and “How much information do I need?”—have the same answer: “It depends.” Rather than feeling discouraged by this situation, however, advanced writers step forward into the task and begin looking for signs or signals that help us choose appropriate strategies. For instance, when you notice that readers are skeptical (high inertia) and you understand that your need to convince them is great (significant course change), you may decide to write with a directive approach and several layers of evidence. When your goal is simple and your audience receptive (as in recommending a popular movie to a friend), you will not need as much support or intensity.



Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.



Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers. In other words, writers consider the whole context of a writing task—the *rhetorical situation*—as we predict, plan, inquire, and compose.



Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.



Good writers frequently struggle and revise

Since writing is difficult for many writers, and the expectations for success depend on the exact audience or context, a writer's main job is to persist through difficulty.

Similarly, rather than guessing and hoping for the best, writers select strategies and approaches that best match the situation, seek feedback, and revise with our goals and our readers' needs in mind.

The rest of this section explores the variables that writers learn to consider as we seek more effective ways to move our readers.

3.1 Rhetorical Relations: Writers, Readers, and Messages

For well over two thousand years, experts have been using the term *rhetoric* to describe the dynamic structure of communication. (In daily talk, we may use “rhetoric” or “rhetorical” to describe insincere or ineffective communication, but scholars and advanced writers understand that rhetoric—or strategic communication—can also succeed very strongly.) You are already a rhetoric expert: you know that you should adapt your message to your audience and situation, and you already have strategies for doing so. Writers face a particular set of challenges in this area, though. Since we are writing to diverse and sometimes unknown audiences, we have to adapt by *anticipating* rather than *responding* to feedback from our readers. Writers thus need both reflective practice and advanced strategies for adapting our goals and our information to meet those readers' needs.

Identify and adapt to rhetorical situations

You already understand that it's often easier to communicate when you know who you're writing for—and that when your audience changes, your message has to change, sometimes drastically—because you have been making such adaptations all your life.

For instance, imagine that you did something impulsive yesterday with your computer and your credit card, and your monthly budget has gone from “workable” to “disaster zone”: now you must seek help from someone else. If you describe this writing task vaguely as “Try to get some more money,” you might find it hard to decide what to write first. It may feel like you have “writer’s block.” But if you analyze the rhetorical situation—the permutations of your goals and your audience members’ needs—you can make some quick progress forward.

Consider what happens when you clearly identify your goal and your audience, such as “Write a message to ask my best friend if I can borrow some money for dinner.” With this rhetorical situation in mind, you should have a very clear idea of what you can say, and what you should *not* say, to persuade your best friend to part with a little cash. What would you promise? What sad story would you tell? The words should come more easily now.

If your friend turned out to have no money to spare, and so you had to ask a relative, a family friend, or a bank loan officer for money, your message would change—but you could make quick adaptations. To some audiences you would tell long, involved stories about what really happened, to some you would emphasize the emotional distress of your current condition, and to some you would simply provide evidence of gainful employment or financial collateral. Knowing your goal can help you decide which audience you address and how; knowing your audience can help you adjust your goals and message.

Explore 3.1

Write two sentences in which you invite a friend to dinner, two sentences in which you invite your boss or a teacher to dinner, and two sentences in which you invite a movie star to dinner. Then comment on your rhetorical thinking: What changed from invitation to invitation? Did your thinking change, as you imagined a different kind of dinner—different goals—for each one? What words and phrases changed, and why? Which rhetorical situation would be easiest for you to adapt to, and which one would be harder?



Practice

- To practice more in-depth **analysis of your audience**, see [Audience/Stakeholder Mapping](#).



- To practice **adapting to your audience's knowledge**, see [Expert/Novice Exploration](#).

NOTE: These Practice features provide links to exercises in Chapters 23 through 29. If you are reading this book in print, you can find an alphabetical list of exercises at the end of the book. The list includes the section in which each exercise can be found.

Adjust to secondary audiences and goals

Many writing tasks have an extra layer: they involve multiple goals and audiences. For instance, if you write a thank-you note to your grandmother, then your *primary audience* is your grandmother. But she may show or describe your note to someone else—her neighbors, her yoga group, your mother—and all those people become *secondary audiences*. If you know your note will be displayed on your grandmother's refrigerator or forwarded to your aunts, then you probably shouldn't use it as a place to add snarky remarks about your younger brother: you write for a primary audience, but you also need to think for a minute to be sure your message is adjusted for the needs of your secondary audiences. (If you haven't written a thank-you note recently, try to remember the last time someone shared your text message with someone else, without asking you first: that was a surprise secondary audience.)

You may also have multiple goals: in addition to expressing gratitude, your *primary goal*, you may also use your thank-you letter for a *secondary goal*: to maintain a supportive relationship, make your parents happy, or encourage future similar gifts. Sometimes these multiple goals are distinct from one another; sometimes, a map of your multiple goals or audiences will look more like a Venn diagram, with areas of overlapping interests, concerns, and resistances.

In a classroom situation your primary audience is often the teacher. Although your classmates may be a secondary audience, they won't be giving you a grade, and so on one level it makes sense to play it safe and write only "what the teacher wants" to achieve your goal of succeeding in class. Moreover, instead of having a personal goal you may be given a topic and told to write about it. However, even in this situation you would benefit from identifying a complex rhetorical situation that includes specific goals and audiences.

First, when you imagine how to connect with a *very specific* primary audience (a person or small group or publication) you can take more straightforward steps toward solving a writing problem. Even if your imagined audience or *target audience* isn't really going to read your writing and help you achieve your imagined goal, you may find writing tasks easier when you set out deliberately

to identify and solve a rhetoric problem. You can likewise benefit from choosing a topic or angling your response in ways that connect to your specific goals.

Second, you won't be practicing on school writing forever. In order to prepare for solving dynamic writing problems, it helps to gain experience reflecting on your rhetorical situation and tailoring your performance to a "real" audience, and it helps to consider some exact secondary audiences or goals so that you can include ideas that will appeal to those readers as well.

Of course, like any prediction, your initial assessment of a rhetorical situation may be incomplete, misdirected, or skewed. As a result, you may find yourself feeling stuck while you're composing a document because your goals aren't as clear as you first thought, or you discover you have not fully mapped out what your readers know or need. Rather than deciding you have general "writer's block," you might instead consider if you are facing a *rhetoric problem* specifically; if so, you can step back, reassess your purposes and your readers' expectations, and try a new approach.

Writers can frequently get unstuck, gain energy, and find direction when we take the time to reflect on multiple aspects of a rhetorical situation and focus on larger communication goals.

3.2 Reflect on the Writer's Context: Exigency, Resources, and Stance

Writers don't just respond to readers' needs: we have our own goals, needs, and preferred approaches. For instance, we don't usually sit down at a computer and randomly begin typing: we write due to a need to complete some task (or avoid some consequence), and we operate in a context of constraints and resources. Who we are, what we want, and how much time and knowledge we have access to will all affect the relationship we build with our audience.

Reflect to predict your needs, constraints and resources

A key part of the writer's context is the need or *exigency*: what will you gain or avoid by writing? Exigency may be internally motivated or externally generated. You may not be personally excited about writing a proposal to buy updated software programs, but you recognize that your corporation needs to document this decision-making process. On the other hand, updating your resume to apply for your dream job may provide you with a very strong internal sense of exigence: you can vividly imagine how this writing task is necessary and beneficial.

It's also important to acknowledge that writers don't have unlimited powers to fulfill every need that readers have. As a writer, you can't provide information you don't have access to: if your supervisor hasn't told you what the budget is for new software, then you can't yet make a firm recommendation about which system to buy. Likewise, if you don't find out about your dream job until 24 hours before the application is due, then you might not have time to completely reorganize your resume so that the experiences most relevant to the new position are featured at the top of the first page. If, upon reflection, you decide that your motivation or exigency is intense, you might take extraordinary steps to complete your project, by texting your boss over the weekend or skipping rehearsal so you have more time to work on your application. In a more relaxed context, though, you might simply decide that your document will respond to some—even many—of readers' needs, but not all of them.

Reflect to adopt an appropriate stance

Your relationship to your readers—your *stance*—is also part of your context. Your overall stance depends on the knowledge, power, and urgency that both you and your readers bring to a rhetorical situation. For instance, as you reflect on your relationship to your readers, you might find yourself to be

- an expert conveying information to a novice
- a petitioner asking someone in power for a favor
- a co-worker recommending a new approach for a colleague to try
- an advocate demanding a policy change from a resistant organization, or
- a friend telling a story to elicit laughter from peers.

In each situation, you can identify where you stand in the relationship, and you can better predict where you want your readers to move or how you hope they will act. You can judge whether you or the reader has more power or knowledge and anticipate which of you feels the situation is urgent or not. If you imagine a dance company on a stage, you might have a vivid image of someone leading or following, of partners moving in sync, or of patterns that involve dancers moving away from and back toward one another. Writers who know their stance toward readers are like dancers who know their role on stage: they are able to decide more easily on their next move.

School assignments sometimes place writers in a relationship that doesn't make rhetorical sense: you are often a novice trying to explain something to an expert. The expert (your instructor) doesn't really need your explanation (even though he or she requested it), so there's no immediate exigency for communicating your knowledge, and you may feel uncomfortable pretending that you know more than your reader, so your stance is uncertain.

What your instructor may be hoping for, though, is that you can benefit from the situation by practicing advanced writing and thinking skills. In order to be

ready to transfer what you learn to your community or workplace writing, you can “try on” an exigency and stance the way you might try on an expensive suit or a costume for a play. If you take time to consider what *might* motivate someone to compose this document, who could benefit from its completion, and what the relationship between the writer and readers could be, you can adopt an exigency and a stance, and thus gain more insight into the rhetorical situation.

Explore 3.2



Consider a topic that you know a lot about. This might be from your field or job, from a hobby or activity, or from a familiar place, food, or person. Imagine that you are writing about that to a child, to a friend, to a work colleague, or to a state official. Write a sentence or two about your context: what could be the exigency that makes it necessary or beneficial for you to write to this person? What is your relationship to or stance with that person as you start to write? Now write another sentence or two: if you changed your sense of exigency, your resources, or your stance, how would that change affect your writing?

Learn



- To learn more about **choosing a topic** rhetorically, see [Chapter 5, Planning a Writing Project](#).
- To learn more about reflecting to engage with **dynamic writing problems**, see [Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Process](#).

3.3 Reflect on the Reader’s Context: Discourse Communities, Genres, and Scenes

For simple writing tasks like a thank-you note or a youth-group meeting announcement, it may be enough to imagine the needs of a single reader or a small group of readers whom you know personally. However, when you write to people you don’t know, including your instructors in school, you will need to understand more about the community and context that influence those readers’ expectations.

Reflect to predict community expectations

You are probably already well aware of how the expectations of a community or a context can influence your behavior: you wouldn’t usually wear stained blue jeans to a wedding, yell “Woo-hoo!” in the middle of a ballet performance, or try to sell a Mercedes SUV at a garage sale alongside used children’s clothing. These are not individual decisions on your part, but decisions you make to comply with the expectations of a community that you wish to be accepted by.

Communities influence how we write, as well. Consider the communities you belong to, and how they already influence your language use. In which ones do you use slang or mix in some Spanish or Mandarin phrases? In which groups do you use specialized language, such as music terminology or online gaming abbreviations? In which groups do you trade friendly insults, share personal stories, or sit silent? Writers refer to these as *discourse communities*: communities that are defined in part by how their members communicate with one another.

A discourse community may have expectations concerning:

- The typical structures or **genres** that writers should use
- The typical conversations or **contexts** that writers should engage with
- The typical information or **evidence** that writers should include
- The typical language or **terminology** that writers should choose

Each of us belongs to multiple discourse communities, as do each of our readers: we are always adapting our words and concepts to try to find the best links for communication across these boundaries. Within a college or university, these communities are often called major fields or *disciplines*. Outside academia, we may write for civic communities, workplace communities or professional communities. From a writer's point of view, they are all discourse communities: they are defined in part by how their members communicate with one another.

Community contexts are challenging to determine in part because people inside a community are so used to thinking and writing in their own way that they don't always remember to tell newcomers what the expectations are. In order to reflect accurately on a rhetorical situation, advanced writers may need to do additional detective work to predict all the community expectations that will influence our writing.

Reflect to predict key elements of genres and scenes

Writers don't just beam information into readers' minds; writers structure information into accessible shapes and patterns that match the ways that readers are likely to encounter that information in a particular time and space. We can think of those shapes and patterns as *genres*, and the situations of readers as *scenes*.

You probably already think about genres as you encounter popular media: movies can be in horror or romance story structures, music can follow salsa patterns or sonata patterns, and teens might post videos that follow typical frameworks for unboxing or demonstrating a dance move. A genre is not a formula or a set of rules; it's more useful to think of it as a cluster of reader expectations that recurs so frequently—such as the thousands of videos produced each year where someone unboxes a product—that writers can start to predict most of the features, even as there is room for individual variations.

Genres—*what* readers review—come into being in part because of *how* readers read, based on their context. A reader’s *scene* can include how much time they have for reading, how reading a document fits into their current priorities, and whether and how they plan to act on what they read. We have memos because busy office managers need a quick way to learn key information in the middle of a working day; we have poems because some readers like to puzzle over and savor how selected words and images convey new ideas; we have academic journal articles because researchers need careful documentation of how new knowledge is created. You wouldn’t use a poem to inform your manager of what your team decided at their noon meeting, or send a 30-page journal article to explain how beautiful someone looks tonight: your genre choice should match the scene.

Consider the whole rhetorical context

When we put all of these pieces together, writers can see a multidimensional picture of “what readers want” and take action to respond to those expectations. For example, suppose that a psychologist, a historian, a biologist, and an engineer walk into a bar on a Wednesday afternoon, each with a similar basic writing problem to solve: “Write up a report.”

The discourse communities they and their readers belong to will strongly influence the contexts of readers’ expectations, as will the writers’ goals and the readers’ scenes. The full rhetorical context includes what questions the writers focus on, what evidence they collect as investigators, and what their final report genre looks like and emphasizes, even if nobody tells them those expectations specifically on that Wednesday.

The psychologist’s context emphasizes people: He sees a group that may contain depressives and alcoholics. He asks fifty people the same two questions and records their answers precisely in order. Since he anticipates a medium-depth reading scene, because his colleagues hope to catch nuances and complications but not spend all day searching for them, his report has four distinct sections: introduction, methods, results, and discussion. The results section uses a chart to identify the responses of the interviewees as part of his evidence. He cites twelve other studies using APA format; he concludes that at this site there is a link between mental illness and isolationist behavior, and he recommends that further studies need to be done.

The historian’s context emphasizes people-and-events: She sees a long trail of incidents, centered on the fourth-generation business owner. She spends an hour talking with one person and collects an old photo album; she also chats informally with three of the

bar's regulars, and their stories also become evidence. Her report is designed for a lengthy reading scene for scholars who need to see the whole picture. She begins with a story about World War II and includes photos and extended quotations from the bar owner. She concludes that family businesses are more linked to their communities than people often realize.

The biologist's context focuses on data about cellular organisms: She sees a possible disease source. She swabs the surfaces of glasses, plates, and counters, and records the temperature of the dishwasher and the refrigerator. She takes samples of beer, pretzels, and raw hamburger meat as evidence. Her report, designed for both a quick-read scene and a follow-up analysis scene, has six graphs with a few short paragraphs that she writes only after the lab tests are complete. She concludes that the pretzel bowls have contaminant levels (she identifies bacteria by their Latin names) that exceed safety standards, and recommends that a negative rating be filed with the city commission.

The engineer's context focuses on structure design: They see frameworks and materials. They visit the attic and basement to analyze joists and beams. Their report, which uses a format and similar language to ones they have written before, has several short sections that include diagrams and blueprint sections. For evidence, they include nearly as many numbers and charts as words. This approach matches a professional scene in which readers must review complex information quickly. They recommend that the owner not take out the east wall, but instead expand to the south through a non-load-bearing section of that wall.

All of these writers have written a "good report" based on the rhetorical contexts they inhabited. They all took the proper steps in their work and relied on persuasive evidence, though the historian (and her community) would have seen no value in bacteria counts and the biologist (and her community) would have seen no value in old photographs. The psychologist's community would be appalled if he recommended specific action based on a quick sample of only ten people, while the engineer's community might be surprised if they couldn't decide on a simple recommendation after one thorough visit.

Of course, generalizations about readers won't hold true for *all* readers in a community or scene, and even writers who carefully identify exigency and predict a typical set of reader expectations may not see the whole picture at first. As a result, you may still find yourself stuck while you are composing: misreading your readers' scenes can cause particular difficulty in completing introductory or concluding sections,

and feeling uncertain about your own exigency or stance can leave you stranded in the middle wondering what else you should write. These challenges can be trickier to name, but they are just more advanced *rhetoric problems*: if you can pause, ask yourself some clarifying questions about contexts, and try an alternate stance or approach, you should be able to put yourself back on track.

Writers succeed by attending carefully to the contexts that we and our readers belong to. Since discourse communities' expectations and scenes can be predicted or uncovered, we can choose the best strategies for meeting our readers' expectations.

Explore 3.3

List five or six personal, academic, and/or professional discourse communities you belong to. Choose one: describe three or four *communication expectations* that it has for members. (Note that speaking a whole other language, like Tagalog or Korean, doesn't usually define a discourse community—but you might speak one kind of Korean with friends and another with your grandparents.) Finally, imagine that *you* were asked to go to a bar (or restaurant, or shopping mall) as a member of this community, for a reason other than your own personal entertainment. What would you pay attention to, what information or ideas would you gather, and what kind of writing might you do afterward for another member of your discourse community?



Practice

- To practice adapting your writing **to new communities**, see [Stance Switch](#).
- To practice adapting your writing **to new genres**, see [Genre Switch](#).



Learn

- Learn more about **genres and disciplines** in [Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres](#).
- Learn more about **editing sentences rhetorically** in [Chapter 11, Editing in Context](#).



3.4 Focus on Equity: Critique Community Expectations

In general, the advice to “adapt your writing in ways that balance your own goals with the needs of the readers whom you want to move” is beneficial for writers. Moreover, when you understand that individual readers' expectations are in turn influenced by the larger communities to which they belong, you will be able to better predict and monitor your adaptations.

However, writers do not always have equal status with the readers we seek to move, and uneven power distribution may limit our ability to find a productive balance. Some power imbalances may be temporary: you will not always be a student who is hoping for a high grade or a new employee trying to make a good first impression. When you are facing a single or temporary rhetorical situation, you may decide that it will be pragmatic to concede to readers' demands or perhaps to explore some ways to bend the rules.

In other cases, the power imbalance may result from and reproduce systemic discrimination that individual writers cannot soon overcome or outlast. One of the advantages of becoming a more reflective writer is that you can better identify situations where readers' expectations are rooted in a narrow view of "good writing" that is based on cultural bias or "how things have always been done," rather than rooted in a reasonable demand based on the context or field. That is, some of a community's expectations may allow most insiders to succeed but make success unnecessarily difficult for others, which is particularly damaging if the expectations create barriers for writers who are not part of the dominant race, gender, or nationality.

Specifically, you should stay aware that discourse communities are not neutral or all-knowing. For instance, in the US, a community of predominantly White, middle-class, male academics have often defined "good writing" as:

- Using objective facts while eliminating any evidence of the writer's experience or perspective
- Following a thesis-based or closed-paragraph structure that states the writer's position unequivocally at the start
- Relying on argument strategies that "consider both sides" equally
- Producing sentences in Standard Edited American English that are error-free and use idioms and technical terms flawlessly

It's not difficult to see how writers from other communities, ones that value personal insight or use a different form of English, would be repeatedly at a disadvantage trying to meet these expectations. Yet you know that *there is no single definition of a "good writer,"* and that you can communicate successfully, even in professional or high-stakes situations, using writing that is personal or exploratory, that passionately represents a single perspective, or that uses an alternate variety or dialect of English, even writing that relies on slang, has errors, or deliberately misuses language.

Defining "good writing" narrowly in ways that exclude writers based on their identities or backgrounds hurts everyone. When you are repeatedly told as a writer that you always need to be the one to adapt—to compromise on your goals, voice, or message—you are likely to feel discouraged, produce less honest or powerful writing, and perhaps even stop trying to communicate. As a result, the community will also suffer: a discourse community that holds rigidly to an

unnecessary and exclusionary rule will miss out on the insights that new members can bring, on writing strategies that could help them reach a broader audience, and on updated approaches for solving complex problems.

Communities rarely describe their expectations or “rules” as unfair, unnecessary, or intolerant; instead, they emphasize how the rules are necessary for clear and effective communication. Certainly, all writers can agree that having some shared expectations with our readers is beneficial (after all, if every person invented their own spelling system, it would seriously slow down readers’ comprehension!). Yet as an advanced writer, you can also take steps to examine and critique expectations when you suspect they are causing harm. You can start by asking questions like these:

Who is usually communicating? If the discourse community itself is homogeneous, then members may not be able to see past their own assumptions, biases, and historical practices, even if they don’t intend to exclude other perspectives. College instructors in the US who have always read “thesis-first” essays may not know that equally educated faculty in Germany, Brazil, or Japan find equal or even more value in less directly argumentative, more exploratory structures for documenting scholarship. These oversights are most harmful if the community is powerful and their expectations about communication are excluding people from groups that already have less social status or power.

How does the rule or expectation improve communication, limit harm, and/or support the work of community members? A rule of “zero tolerance for errors” in a busy hospital setting is crucial when multiple nurses and doctors rely on a single chart, when similar-looking terms such as *intrathecal* and *intratracheal* indicate significantly different procedures, and when patients’ health and even lives are at stake. A similar rule for a progress report shared with an internal management working group—where members know one another and the harm from some language variation will likely be small—may not bring as much communication benefit.

How does the rule or expectation limit participation? An expectation to “provide *only* objective numerical evidence” may be fair in a setting like an advanced college biochemistry lab, when all participants have equal access to sources of evidence, when that evidence is plentiful, and when there is acknowledgment that there are multiple definitions of and complications in identifying “objective evidence.” The same expectation made by a journal editor considering a story about industrial pollution in central Louisiana may exclude the perspectives of the residents who are most affected but who do not have equal resources or access to data compared to corporate scientists.

How could a more inclusive approach meet or expand communication standards? Discourse communities can change their expectations without “lowering their standards”—if the standards are truly about ensuring effective communication. When all members of a management team present their perspectives, even those who sometimes make unexpected subject-verb combinations because US English is their second or third language, then communication is improved over a situation where some members are afraid to chime in or are dismissed when they do. An “exploration-first” rather than thesis-first organizational structure may help first-generation college students articulate their questions more clearly, improving communication and learning. And an article featuring the personal experiences of several Black, working-class residents may help scientists design better research studies that could improve communication—and living conditions—in several small Oregon towns.

All advanced writers—those of us who are comfortably inside a powerful discourse community as well as those who are on the outside—are responsible for questioning whether a reader’s or community’s expectation is valid for improving communication, or if it may be flawed or biased. Like any unjust expectation, an exclusionary expectation may not be something we can immediately fix, or even one we feel we can safely protest. But as much as writers benefit from finding a productive balance between our goals and our readers’ needs, we also benefit from striving to create more connection, and fewer barriers between writers and readers overall.

Learn

- To learn more about the **societal biases that limit equity** in communication, see [Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers’ Habits](#).
- To learn more about how **genres are socially constructed**, see [Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres](#).
- To learn more about **options for organizing paragraphs**, see [Chapter 7, Generating and Organizing an Early Draft](#).
- To learn more about the **limits of Standard Edited American English**, see [Chapter 11, Editing in Context](#).



3.5 Messages in Context: Breadth, Depth, and Complexity

In working on a school assignment, it can be easy to think of knowledge and research as separate from your writing task. If that were the case, then it would make sense to learn all you can about alpine ecosystems before you start to write a report about how to preserve them. But knowledge is also rhetorical: what you

know about marmots and Steller’s Jays doesn’t change as you move from a room full of second-grade students to a room full of climate scientists, but the relevance, value, and effectiveness of what you know does change.

Reflect to identify what knowledge you should acquire and present

Communicating your knowledge in order to move a reader is a more complicated event than just listing a predictable number of relevant facts. The context of your writing task can determine what knowledge and comprehension you need, and in the act of writing you often create new knowledge as you go—so knowledge is rhetorical, and you should try to assess the knowledge elements of a writing task just as you assess the rhetorical elements. That is, questions about “how much” knowledge to present, and how to frame that information, need to be addressed *as part of your writing work*, not separately from it. Likewise, questions about how much research is needed and what kinds of sources will be useful are rooted in the rhetorical situation: some readers will be satisfied to have you present information you already know or mention an online article you recently read, while others will expect you to have detailed examples from credible advanced sources within a particular field of study.

Very often, the first questions students ask about a school writing project are knowledge questions: “What is it about?” and “How long does it have to be?” Although teachers can give exact answers for a school assignment, these are better understood as dynamic questions about how your readers’ knowledge and their needs can intersect with your own knowledge and what you hope to communicate. So for advanced writing tasks, the answer again is “It depends.” What does your audience want or need to know? How much do they need to know about it, and how much patience or time do they have to understand it? What will you need to learn to meet your readers’ needs? In writing tasks both inside and outside school, writers must determine which facts to share with readers, in how much detail, based on what kind of research, and with what kind of approach.

Reflect to predict breadth and depth

It helps to begin thinking of a writing task not in terms of length (“how many words/pages/sources?”) but in terms of the *breadth* and *depth* of the information you will provide. A global studies instructor who assigns a two-page essay about non-governmental organizations and a political science instructor who asks for a twenty-page essay on the same topic are giving you clues about the *breadth and depth* of knowledge that you are expected to communicate. However, you still have to decide exactly where to give broad coverage of multiple factors or in-depth detail about a few angles—and you will need to find the right balances, since providing more specific information about NGOs is likely to result in addressing fewer organizations overall.

Similarly, a supervisor who asks you for a report on your competitors' public-relations strategies may not specify a document length, so you will need to inquire further to determine the breadth or depth of information that will be of most use in this situation. If you don't already know what the other companies do, making some preliminary predictions about the breadth and depth of information your readers are expecting will be crucial in helping you estimate the amount and type of *research* you need to do, so that you don't invest more time than needed, or go off on a tangent tracking information that's not relevant.

Reflect to consider analysis needs

Having sufficient knowledge for a writing task often goes beyond knowing facts into analyzing how those facts come together. You should investigate whether readers mostly expect you to *summarize known facts* or whether you should also *give your own analysis or judgment*. When you give your own analysis, you explain causes and effects, draw connections and conclusions, and often identify priorities or make recommendations, adding your own informed interpretation to the existing facts.

If your project requires analysis or argumentation, that can also influence your research goals. You might need to review sources that describe other professional or expert recommendations, delve into details that address your local situation or an extended history of a problem, or inquire about the reasons readers might resist or oppose your arguments. The more accurately you can judge your own knowledge and goals, as well as your readers' needs or expectations, the stronger your analyses will be.

Reflect to identify and challenge assumptions

In presenting new knowledge, writers also need to establish credibility and viability—which requires writers to investigate our own and our readers' assumptions. For writers' ideas to be believable, we often say writers need to be “objective,” but usually what we mean is that we expect that writers will be *fair*. Human beings are biased—we prefer some ideas or actions above others—but we can strive to limit how our beliefs affect our actions. Likewise, writers who are striving to be fair will reveal our own motivations and try not to let those motivations compromise our knowledge or unduly influence our analysis. For example, you might assume that your favorite baseball team is the best in the league, but you can still write fairly about how your team surpasses an opposing team if you stay aware of your assumptions and try to use similar criteria and reliable facts as you write about both teams. When you acknowledge and adapt to your assumptions, you can present your argument without readers thinking you are unfairly biased.

Similarly, for writers' ideas to be viable—so that readers will accept new ideas and be willing to change—writers may have to compensate for readers' assumptions.

For instance, if you work in a physical therapy clinic and you advise your surgical rehabilitation clients to perform exercises twice a day, your recommendation may not be viable unless you identify and respond to their assumptions that they have more important things to do than spend time on boring exercises. Anticipating and responding to readers' biases or resistance points is even more challenging for writers than checking our own assumptions, but it is as important as getting our facts straight. Sometimes writers even need to go beyond doing research to find information on a topic and begin inquiring about readers themselves so that we present knowledge productively.

Prepare to create new knowledge

Writers who are moving into analysis and challenging assumptions are actually creating new knowledge, aiming to arrange facts and ideas in such a way as to enlighten, persuade, or move a reader to a new way of thinking or action. Sometimes writers provide newly discovered evidence (data gathered from measurement or experiment), but more often we create new ideas by providing alternate views of current evidence:

- we *interpret* information by judging what terms or actions mean in a particular situation;
- we *analyze* information by identifying how parts of a situation interact, through causes or effects;
- we *synthesize* information by explaining how concepts from different situations connect to one another and reveal new opportunities; and
- we make **recommendations** by indicating a valuable or productive approach to a situation.

Of course, your early assessment of the depth of subject-matter knowledge you will need to share with readers or the responsibility you have to analyze or create knowledge may be inexact or mistaken; you may over- or underestimate what you know, what readers know, and how difficult it is to move readers to greater comprehension. As a result, you may find yourself feeling stuck while researching, composing, or revising a document: perhaps it takes you four pages to explain what you thought was a simple concept you could cover in a paragraph, or you are certain you explained a process thoroughly but your peer readers remain confused. In such a case, it helps to recognize that you're facing a *knowledge problem* that isn't (just) about whether you are smart enough to understand a concept, but instead is related to the complex task of using words to move readers who inhabit a different context. Look for ways to connect your subject-matter knowledge to the rhetorical context of your writing task, and identify productive revisions or alternate pathways you can adopt.

Making accurate predictions about the knowledge-work that a writing task involves requires writers to carefully assess the rhetorical situation. We must understand our own goals and knowledge, identify how much information readers have and need, make plans for inquiry about factors we're not familiar with, and use critical thinking to provide reasonable new alternatives for readers to consider.

Explore 3.4



Imagine that you are going to ask a student government committee to provide you with \$1000 to improve the experiences of new students—either school-wide or within your program or dormitory. Write 4-5 sentences predicting how your knowledge of the issue will interact with the rest of the rhetorical situation. For instance, what project will you most want to propose, what key information will your readers need to know about that project, and how long a document do you believe will be necessary to provide that information? What information do you already know, and what questions will you address through inquiry or research, especially to support your goal of making new recommendations? What assumptions do you have about this project that you should be aware of so that you are better able to present your ideas in a clear, fair way, and what assumptions or resistances might your audience have that you will need to address?