Chapter 2: Purpose and Audience

Chapter Overview

This chapter explains that determining the purpose and audience of a text is important to reading it analytically and to communicating effectively in writing. The purpose of academic writing is to share knowledge as part of an exchange with other experts. This purpose shapes the techniques and conventions of how academics write. Learning these conventions enables the writer to add their own voice to an ongoing conversation and to share their thinking with the reader. Textbooks are an example of a form of writing that is shaped by the needs of its audience, in that definitions and explanations are provided for students who are reading to learn new content. The chapter concludes with further strategies for thinking about purpose, audience, and convention that are tailored to reading in a post-secondary context.

Key Concepts

audience	The readership the author envisioned while writing (the intended audience), though texts can have readers beyond those the writer had in mind.
conventions	The patterns, structures, and practices that people use to communicate effectively with one another. Conventions embody the expectations the writer and reader have about a text.
genre	In writing, the kind of text a piece of writing is, relating to its purposes, conventions, and form.
length	In post-secondary education, writing length varies depending on the conventions of the subject or the assignment (which usually has "word counts" set by instructors).
style	The way a writer writes; the nature of writing that is appropriate to the conventions, purposes, and audience in a writing situation.
voice	The writer's mode of expression, which should fit the expectations of the writing situation, including word choice, conventions, and so on.
tone	What the reader perceives about the writer's attitude towards a subject through their writing.
sources	Material supplying evidence or information in research.
evidence	The material derived from primary and secondary sources necessary for creating new

	ideas, solving problems, or proving new claims through academic writing.
citation	The quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing of another writer's work, as well as the information necessary to acknowledge the original writer and to show readers where to find that writer's work; a key convention of academic writing.
language	The choice of words appropriate to the writer's purpose, audience, and writing situation.
original research	Scholarly material created or collected by the author of the text, appearing as a primary source.
thesis	The writer's assertion about a topic that appears in the thesis statement and is supported through the text with evidence; sometimes called a claim.
textbook	A comprehensive assembly of information on a subject, with the purpose of teaching that subject to a specific intended audience. Other kinds of books may be used as textbooks in classes, but may not have been written with the same purpose or audience in mind.
definition	A rhetorical pattern that defines terms that are unfamiliar to the reader to clarify the scope of an argument or analysis.
key terms	Words necessary to learning a subject, often given special emphasis in textbooks by being printed in bold or included in a glossary.
tables	A concise visual means for presenting data arranged in columns and rows.

Discussion Topics

1. How many different audiences—in other words, types of people—do you interact with on a regular basis? How does your language and the topics you discuss vary for each of these audiences?

2. Who do you think is the audience of the writing that you do at college or university? Certainly, the person marking the assignment is a very important reader, but could it be useful to imagine a broader audience beyond the context of assessment? How might that shape your writing?

Assignments or Activities

1. *Instructor:* On the whiteboard, make a table with these headings: friends/peers; parents; strangers; professors; employers (and other categories suggested by students). Under each heading, ask students to record the tone and content they use when addressing each group.

2. Imagine that you are running late and you need to notify the person who is expecting you. Write out that message three different ways for three different audiences, specifying which mode of communication or platform you would use to send the message (e.g. text message, email, etc.).

3. Read "Managing the Modern Infodemic," by Nancy Tomes, in the Readings section at the end of the book. Using Table 2.1 (Strategies for Thinking about Purpose, Audience, and Conventions), write one paragraph of 250 words explaining the purpose of the article, its intended audience, and which conventions it adopts to reach that audience.

Further Resources

"How to Use Formal and Informal English – English Speaking and Writing Fluency." *YouTube*, posted by Oxford Online English, 4 Aug. 2017.

This lesson for English language learners outlines degrees of formality in spoken English, and distinguishes between formal, neutral, and informal diction.

Rothman, Joshua. "Why Is Academic Writing So Academic?" *The New Yorker,* 20 Feb. 2014.

Rothman claims that academic writing can be hard to read precisely because it is written for a small audience of experts.