

Adapting Writing for Different Purposes and Audiences

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(adapted from “In Our Own Words” by R. Mlynarczyk)

Purpose and audience, two factors that often are not mentioned when you are asked to write something, can greatly influence what you say and how you say it.

Purpose refers to the reason for writing—what you want the readers to do or think after they have finished reading. For example, the purpose of a letter of complaint to a department store might be to *convince* the store that they made a mistake on your bill. The purpose of a personal essay describing an important experience in your life might be to *describe* the experience clearly and *entertain* the reader. The purpose of a lab report on your dissection of a rat might be to *inform* the reader of the procedures you used and the findings you made. The purpose of an essay for a literature class might be to *analyze* the psychological motivation of one of the characters in a short story.

Audience means the intended readers for a piece of writing. In the first example in the preceding paragraph, the audience would be the person who handles complaints for the department store. For the other examples, the audience would most likely be the instructor and interested classmates.

Activity

This activity will give you an idea of how audience and purpose influence what you write. You will be asked to do three short pieces of writing. The *subject* of each of them is the same—yourself. But the different audiences and purposes will influence what you say and how you say it. Spend 15 minutes writing each of the following:

1. Write a letter to a girlfriend or boyfriend (real or imagined) explaining what kind of person you are. (You will not be asked to show this letter to anyone else.)
2. Write a short description of yourself to share with your class.
3. Write a one-page description of your personal background as part of a job application for a position that you want. (It can be any job. Name the job you’re applying for and include information about yourself that you think will help you get the job.)
4. Take these pieces home and read them over and think about them before the next class. How did “audience” and “purpose” influence you in each case? What do you want the reader to get from each piece? **Write your intended purpose at the bottom of each page.** Choose the one you like the best to read to the class.