2.2: Audience analysis

It’s important to determine which of the four categories just discussed represent your potential audience(s), but that’s not the end of it. Audiences, regardless of category, must also be analyzed in terms of characteristics such as the following:

- **Background—knowledge, experience, training:** One of your most important concerns is just how much knowledge, experience, or training you can expect in your readers. If you expect some of your readers to lack certain background, do you automatically supply it in your document? Consider an example: imagine you are writing a guide to using a software product that runs under Microsoft Windows. How much can you expect your readers to know about Windows? If some are likely to know little about Windows, should you provide that information? If you say no, then you run the risk of customers getting frustrated with your product. If you say yes to adding background information on Windows, you increase your work effort and add to the page count of the document (and thus to the cost). Obviously, there’s no easy answer to this question—part of the answer may involve just how small a segment of the audience needs that background information.

- **Needs and interests:** To plan your document, you need to know what your audience is going to expect from that document. Imagine how readers will want to use your document; what they will demand from it. For example, imagine you are writing a manual on how to use a new smartphone—what are your readers going to expect to find in it? Imagine you are under contract to write a background report on global warming for a national real estate association—what do readers want to read about; and, equally important, what do they not want to read about?

- **Other demographic characteristics:** And of course there are many other characteristics about your readers that might have an influence on how you should design and write your document—for example, age groups, type of residence, area of residence, gender, political preferences, and so on.

Audience analysis can get complicated by at least two other factors: mixed audience types for one document, wide variability within audience, and unknown audiences.

- **More than one audience:** You are likely to find that your report is for more than one audience. For example, it may be seen by technical people (experts and technicians) and administrative people (executives). What should you do in this case? You can either write all the sections so that all the audiences of your document can understand them. Or you can write each section strictly for the audience that would be interested in it, then use headings and section
introductions to alert your audience about where to find relevant information in your report.

- **Wide variability in an audience**: You may realize that, although you have an audience that fits into only one category, its background varies widely. This is a tough one—if you write to the lowest common denominator of reader, you are likely to end up with a cumbersome, tedious book-like report that will turn off the majority of readers. However, if you don’t write to that lowest level, you lose that segment of your readers. What should you do? Most writers go for the majority of readers and sacrifice that minority that needs more help. Others put the supplemental information in appendixes or insert cross-references to beginners’ books.

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