Audience Analysis involves the processes of gathering and interpreting information about the recipients of oral, written, or visual communication. Audience awareness involves the conceptions of the writer, speaker, or performer concerning the recipients of his or her communication. Regardless of whether the author is sharing an oral history, debating an issue, or writing an editorial, the writer or speaker must be aware of the needs, interests, and expectations of his or her audience.

Audience Analysis, Information Inquiry, and Curriculum Standards

The ability to analyze an audience’s information needs, potential for understanding and accepting new information, and assimilating that information are skills recognized by the National Council of Teachers of English for literacy curriculum standards from elementary through secondary schools. In addition, national standards across the curriculum stress the importance of meaningful learning and connections beyond the school. For example, the National Council for the Social Studies stresses critical need for students to participate in authentic activities that call for real-life applications and audiences. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics states that when students are challenged to communicate the results of their thinking to a real-world audience orally or in writing, they must be “clear, convincing, and precise” in their use of mathematical language (NCTM 2000).

Newmann, Marks, and Gamoran (1995) found that authentic achievement consists of student construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond the school. They state that authentic assessment involves students in using audiences outside the school to make real-world connections. They found much higher levels of achievement on complex tasks for students in classrooms where authentic pedagogy focused on active learning, consideration of alternative perspectives, extended writing, and a real audience for student work.

Audience Analysis in Teaching and Learning

Both educators and their students address many audiences during a school day. A teacher’s audience includes students, parents, community members, and colleagues. The audience of a child might include his or her teacher, parents, peers, and those outside the realm of education. Audience analysis is critical in meeting the unique needs of each of these audiences.

The closer the teacher can come to understanding the learner’s abilities, experiences, and expectations, the more likely communication will be effective from the beginning of a lesson or task. Learner analysis has many parallel elements to audience analysis, and purposes may be similar. In addition, both involve motivation, persuasion, and informative communication. Teachers must be aware of the intellectual skills, subject matter knowledge, learning style, and personal characteristics of each student.

In their Instructional Design model, Dick and Carey (1990) stressed the importance of identifying characteristics of learners and the implications for each characteristic. What intellectual skills, abilities, and personality traits does each student bring to the learning environment? According to Lamb (2002), these characteristics have tremendous implications for a teacher. For example, what if there is a mixture of readers and nonreaders in a second grade classroom? How does this information impact the teacher’s way of presenting learning materials?

The challenges related to information inquiry are twofold. The first obstacle is establishing the most effective communication channels between the teacher and each learner. The second challenge involves helping the learner understand how to identify his or her audience and select the best way to convey new knowledge to this audience. In school environments that apply authentic learning practices, the learner will face different audiences both inside and outside the school. Adjusting the message to increase the chances of communication and persuasion becomes an important skill in the information literacy curriculum.

Students develop skills in audience analysis over their academic career. Third graders may be faced with creating a picture book for their kindergarten pals, middle schoolers may develop a report for the city council on land use issues, and high school students may be writing nutritional
guides for the elderly. In each case, the student author must analyze the audience carefully.

Kroll (1984) found that the letters written by nine-year-old students often lacked essential information for their readers, but they still expressed audience awareness. Strange (1986) found that young students altered their writing style for different audiences. For example, they used more slang and fewer words with their friends versus an adult audience. As students mature, they are better able to adjust their writing to meet the needs of their audience (Fontaine 1984).

**Importance of Authentic Audience**

From John Dewey (1916) to Howard Gardner (1991), well-known educators have emphasized the importance of authentic learning. According to Newmann (2000), "the evidence indicates that assignments calling for more authentic intellectual work actually improve student scores on conventional tests."

Teachers who strive to instill the skills of inquiry create ways that students can write for and speak to more audiences than just the classroom teacher. The most effective teachers also share the opportunity for critical review and feedback with others so that the student can learn from a spectrum of perspectives. Learners should find the entire experience, including their final project, relevant to the real world. The most powerful aspect of authentic learning is the ability of students to transfer new knowledge and skills beyond the classroom ways to a meaningful audience (Mims 2003).

Learners in an authentic learning environment complete real-world tasks that require sustained exploration, social construction of knowledge, multiple opportunities for reflection, and real audiences. According to Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989), these types of cognitive apprenticeships enable students "to acquire, develop, and use tools in authentic domain activities."

There are many opportunities for students to apply the results of information inquiry activities to real-world audiences. Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and service groups always are interested in participating in projects. Student audiences might include developing a promotion for the local Chamber of Commerce, collecting oral histories for a local historical society, building a website for a local nonprofit organization, or communicating the results of a science experiment with a scholar, scientist, or government agency.

**Audience Needs Assessment**

Audience analysis is an important part of the communication process in any field. Not only does correct audience analysis increase the chances of being heard, but more important, increases the chances of being understood.

Needs assessment is an essential element of audience analysis. Examining what is known about the audience helps writers focus on the needs of the reader or participants. The writer or speaker must determine what the audience already knows about the topic and what they need to know. He or she also must find out about the perceptions, attitudes, values, and dispositions of the audience in order to make decisions about the best way to approach communicating information. For example, is the audience receptive or resistant, old or young, novice or expert, friendly or hostile, flexible or rigid?

Answers to the following questions can help in collecting important audience information and lead to more effective communication:

- What is the relationship of the author to the audience and how will this impact the formality of the communication or other considerations?
- What does your audience know about the topic?
- What positive or negative experiences might they have about the topic?
- What attitudes, biases, or strong feelings might your audience have toward the topic?
- What misconceptions might the audience have about your topic?
- What is the level of expertise on this topic for most of your audience members?
- What background information does your audience have about the topic?
- To what extent do you want to change the opinions held by your audience?
• To what extent do you want to inform or educate your audience?
• To what degree do you want to entertain your audience, or how will a more entertaining manner of delivery help to engage your audience and keep their interest?
• What are the expressed and perceived information needs of the audience?
• What are the important basic terms, assumptions, events, and names that your audience should know in order to gain the most meaning from your message?
• What might be confusing jargon, or overly technical terms and meaningless acronyms, that should be avoided?
• What format of communication would be most effective for this audience (i.e., report, action plan, story, persuasive essay, presentation, debate)?
• Is there a need to provide information in a visual form to help your audience understand aspects of your message that otherwise may be too complicated, too abstract, or not relevant?
• What is the most important message for this specific audience so these key ideas are emphasized in the introduction and reinforced in the conclusion?

Rather than simply a tally of the answers to these questions, an effective analyst examines the significance of this information. Hart (2001) states that writers often focus on simple, obvious issues such as gender differences. Instead, analysts must ask themselves how this information is useful in forming a communication that will be effective for this audience.

In situations that might involve debate or demand a persuasive role on the part of the speaker or writer, more advanced analysis may need to be conducted to answer these questions:
• How does the speaker or writer relate to the audience in terms of ideology, values, beliefs, and attitudes?
• Is this a potentially friendly and accepting audience or an audience that is likely to be hostile and confrontational?
• Is your audience likely to be more receptive to analogies, testimonials, logic, minor general statistics, or complex and in-depth data?
• How does your audience feel about its past, present, and future relative to your controversial topic?
• Have members of your audience had personal experiences that may influence how they will receive your message?
• Will your audience be allowed or even encouraged to respond to your presentation?

As information about the audience is collected, generalizations begin to emerge. Some writers create an image in their mind about their "typical" audience member as they develop a communication. However, others have found it more effective to concentrate on the problem the audience is solving and the roles they play as audience members rather than the characteristics of the audience (Hart 2004).

The challenge of gathering information on audiences can be nearly as demanding as the inquiry process for gathering information on a topic. Locating and selecting information that meets a personal information need may prove to be much less demanding than gathering additional information to help one prepare to address many different situations and different audiences that may or may not be receptive to hearing or reading about the topic. Such challenges, however, are true to life and, therefore, authentic problems to address.

Obstacles to effective communication with nearly any audience have been summarized by William Pfeiffer (2002) of Southern Polytechnic State University:
• Listeners are very vulnerable to being distracted.
• Listeners can become impatient quickly.
• Listeners often lack the technical knowledge of the speaker.
• An audience will contain listeners of diverse backgrounds and different audiences will pose the challenge of different mixtures of these diverse experiences.
• Audiences will contain different levels of decision-makers and non-decision-makers.

Signs from members of the audience that communication is successful and the message being conveyed is welcome include:
• Listeners become more relaxed.
• Listeners may move closer to the presenter by leaning forward or stepping forward.
• Listeners offer greater eye contact, and often
more smiles and approving head nods.

Audience Analysis Techniques

Many of the exercises that help analyze the audience are identical to exercises that also help us think through an inquiry project. Working with a team of peers along with review and feedback from a teacher of information inquiry will make these exercises more useful than considerations made alone.

**Brainstorming or Freewriting:** In a quick outline, identify your main message. Then predict what you believe your audience is likely to know and not know. List what must be written or said to help them understand or accept your message.

**Agreement Mapping:** Under four headings, "Complete Agreement," "Some Agreement," "Some Disagreement," and "Complete Disagreement," list the positions that members of an audience are likely to hold on the issues you intend to present.

**Devil's Advocate:** Go through your script and mark terms and phrases that can be misunderstood easily or lead to argument. What are the points and counterpoints that are likely to be raised from different audiences? Put yourself in the place of your audience. What should they most likely not believe, doubt, and not accept?

**Information Organization:** To meet different audience needs and expertise, the presenter may want to consider a different order in which information might be presented. Should the "thesis," or main argument, be presented first or last—inductive or deductive? Consider headings, key terms, and catch phrases that will help to frame the message for the given audience. These may change with perceived differences in the ability level and background of different audiences.

**Information Visualization:** What portions of the speech or written document are in most need of illustration? Photographs, charts, tables, and diagrams all can add to the communication impact. For some audiences, it may work best to completely "storyboard" the message by drawing visuals on a series of pages as a set of cartoons or a picture book. From these sketches, select the few best that convey the most meaning for the intended audience.

**Survey and Compare:** Depending on the topic and the different audiences eventually to be addressed, it is not unrealistic to attempt to gain some demographic and opinion data from that audience before it is addressed. Gathering such information from classroom members or parent groups can be an extremely valuable learning exercise and raise the level of inquiry compared to situations in which very little is known about the audience. Pre-presentation data, gathered and analyzed several days prior to a speech, can lead to a much more constructive engagement for both the presenter and the audience.

Adjusting Style to Audience

Once the interests and needs of the audience have been examined, the writer or speaker must consider how this information impacts the design of the message and its dissemination as a plan, report, presentation, or other type of communication. How will you adjust your writing style and shape your message to meet the needs of this audience? For example, will charts be used to help the audience visualize data? Will well-known research studies be cited to increase credibility? Will complex terminology be defined? Other considerations include the level of formality needed to suit the audience and message, the type of motivation needed to gain and maintain the interest of the audience, and the degree of personalization that will make the audience feel most comfortable.

Some audiences are familiar to the students, while others are not. Known audiences include self, friends, family, peers, teachers, and members of the local community. People from outside the experiences of the student may be extended or unknown audiences. Jan Youga (1998) of Gordon College, has placed adjustments for communication with different audiences on a continuum (see Figure 1).

Youga suggests that “as our relationship to the audience becomes more distant, we begin to change the tone of voice we use, the amount and kind of information we provide, and the mechanical features of style such as punctuation and spelling” (19).

At each point along Youga’s continuum, the speaker or writer must deal with communication and reflection in the information inquiry process. Although the communication may be more private and less informal at the personal or self end of the continuum, elements of persuasion, informative communication, and logic are present.

Much of what we do in order to seek and gain meaning is for ourselves and the elements of information inquiry apply to personal information problem-solving as much as to formal information problem-solving in an academic or workplace environment.

![Figure 1: Communication with Different Audiences Continuum](image-url)
setting. Many inquirers who gain the most from their information exploration learn from personal journals they keep in order to document their investigation and questions.

Authentic Assignments and Audiences

Authentic audiences are important, but the logistics of implementing a project that uses a real-world audience can be time-consuming. When developing assignments, teachers must consider carefully the role that audience will play in the activity. In many cases, a virtual audience is an effective way to make a project more authentic. For example, the class might participate in an online forum with students from different cultures. Or, students might communicate through e-mail with a representative from a government agency such as Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Harris (1999) states that curriculum-based telecollaboration involves students in communicating with a real audience by using written language. Projects such as Global SchoolNet (http://www.gsn.org), ePALS (http://www.epals.com), KIDPROJ (http://www.kidlink.org/KIDPROJ), and 1*EARN (http://www.1earn.org/) are a few examples.

Consider ways that technology can be used to reach outside the classroom. For example, students might write an e-mail communication rather than a "mock-letter" that might never be sent. According to Lafer (1997), e-mail communication provides students with the opportunity for authentic communication. It helps learners focus on real issues and address an audience of peers outside their local area who might have different perspectives.

For younger children, develop a guided audience analysis experience. For example, contact the recipients of the e-mail communication prior to implementing the lesson. Collect audience information that can be shared with the students to help prepare them in writing for their audience.

Consider contests and competitions such as media fairs, science fairs, and writing contests. Many online projects such as ThinkQuest (http://thinkquest.org) involve sharing projects with a global audience.

Conclusion

Audience analysis can reduce the mystery between audience and presenter and move both to more important content exchanging levels. Addressing specific audience needs also can require the student to think more creatively in message presentation and more critically in selection of information to share. Interactions that come from audience feedback and exchanges also can lead to more originality on the part of the presenter. There are no formulas or specific steps to audience engagement, and spirited interactions can lead to truly testing the student's knowledge of and passion for what he or she has written or spoken.

For Further Reading

Audience Analysis. Integrated Technologies of Indiana University. Purdue University at Indianapolis, 1993. Video program: 48 min.


SCHOOL LIBRARY MEDIA ACTIVITIES MONTHLY

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.


Strange, Rebecca L. "An Investigation of the Ability of Sixth Graders to Write with Sense of Audience." Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1986.


Includes excellent resources on issues such as Advocacy, CIPA and School Libraries, Information Literacy, Intellectual Freedom, Student Achievement, and Technology. The AASL Professional Tools section links to materials produced by AASL, including *Information Power*. The website of the Association for Library Services to Children (ALSC), another division of ALA, is worth checking out for its resources for children, especially the Great Web Sites for Kids (http://wwwala.org/ALSTemplate.cfm?Section=alsc).

**Awesome Library**

http://www.awesomelibrary.org/

Awesome Library "organizes the Web with 24,000 carefully reviewed resources, including the top five percent in education." A good place to start to find some of the best websites on a given topic. Materials are provided for six levels of users: Teachers, Kids, Teens, Parents, Librarians, or College Students. Enter the door for Kids to retrieve carefully selected and age-appropriate websites on many different topics for children. Sites then are arranged as either School Subjects or Fun and More.

**Internet Public Library**

http://www.ipl.org

Make sure that your teachers know about this one, but use the Ready Reference section to find websites that can be used to answer all sorts of reference questions. Both the Kidspace and Teenspace sections include links to a wide variety of carefully selected websites.

**Librarian’s Index to the Internet**

http://iii.org

Administered by the California State Library, this is a very comprehensive, but professionally selected index to good websites arranged in broad subject areas. Librarians should check out Librarianship under Education and Libraries. The site is updated weekly and a free weekly newsletter lists the new websites added.

**School Libraries.Net**

http://www.schoollibraries.net/

Originally created by Peter Milbury as *The Network of School Librarian Web Pages*, this site is sponsored and maintained by the School of Library and Information Science at San Jose State University. It provides links to hundreds of websites created or maintained by school library media specialists. Some are for entire schools, while others are for individual school library media centers. A good source to find other media center websites in your state or around the world.

**School Library Journal (SLJ)**

http://sljreviewsnews.com/

School Library Journal serves librarians who work with students in school and public libraries. A subscription is necessary to receive access to all of the materials on this website, but a variety of resources are available without a subscription. Sections include News, Features (stories from the magazine), Book of the Week, Sites of the Week, Video of the Week, and Audio of the Week.

---

The following "nifty" sites need to be shared with teachers! No annotations are required; the titles tell you exactly what they do.

**Bingo Card Maker**

http://www.teachers.tecknology.com/web_tools/materials/bingo/

**Brain Teasers**

http://www.brainconnection.com/teasers/

**Discovery School's Worksheet Generator**

http://www.discoveryschool.com/teachingtools/worksheetgenerator/index.html

**Flashcard Exchange**

http://www.flashcardexchange.com/index.php

**Fun Brain**

http://www.funbrain.com/

**MathStories.com**

http://www.mathstories.com/

**Puzzlemaker**

http://www.puzzlemaker.com/

**Shapebooks**

http://www.abcteach.com/directory/shape_books/

---

**Key Words, Concepts and Methods for Information Age Instruction: A Guide to Teaching Information Inquiry**

by Daniel Callison, Professor and Executive Associate Dean, School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University

Based on columns from *School Library Media Activities Monthly*, Dr. Callison presents the key terms in a working theoretical model that may be used in developing and understanding the power of information inquiry in instruction. Basic for all library and information literacy programs K-12 and for instructional programs. (Sample term at: http://www.schoollibrarymedia.com)

ISBN 0-9742537-0-7  •  381 pages  •  $35 + s&h

Ordering information on page 2

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.