Who am I talking to? Writing research documents that fit your audience

When you launch into writing a research-related document, what is the very first question that you should ask yourself?

Who am I talking to?* or in other words, *Who is my intended audience?

By answering this "who" question before you write, you can more easily define

- the information that your audience needs most ("what")
- the best way to organize that information for your specific readers ("where")
- the writing style that you will use ("how")
- the actions that you want your audience to take after reading your document ("why")

Your audience is probably larger and more diverse than you imagine.

When you think about the audience for your next *grant proposal*, you likely picture your reviewers as experts in your area of research. In fact, reviewers may have expertise in one aspect of your research, or in a similar area of research, but they are rarely experts in exactly what you do. This cartoon from XKCD makes the point nicely – be sure to hover over the panel for the extra punchline.

Readers of your *research articles and abstracts* will have even broader expertise, or even no related expertise at all. A few of your readers will be experts in what you do, but most will be reading to learn more about your area of research. Many will work in adjacent areas or outside your area, and be looking for new ways to link your work to theirs. Make that easier for them!

And by tailoring your research documents, you can grow your audience even further. Would you be happy to have more people reading your research article or checking out your conference presentation after they see your abstract?

Using the "who" question in practice

1. Define the essential information that your audience needs from you

You can expand the "who" question to generate some concrete details about your audience (or audiences – you may have multiple different groups of readers). Those details can then guide you in choosing the essential information that your particular audience(s) will need to see in your document. The expanded "who" question includes

- ***Who will be reading this?*** Be as explicit as possible in defining groups of readers or characteristics of readers. Think broadly.
- ***What do they already know?*** What are their backgrounds? Assume that they **don't** know everything that you know (see XKCD cartoon linked above).
- ***What do they need to know?*** Why are they reading your grant proposal or research article? What new information do they need to extract from it?
- ***What do they need to do with this information?*** What actions do they need to take with information that they extract? What actions do you **want** them to take?

Visiting Scholar Program – Research Writing

You will likely identify different groups of readers who know different things already or who need to know different new things. They may have different goals for using your information. You will need to build your document to meet the needs of your multiple audiences. In some situations, you may need to create multiple versions of your document for your multiple audiences (think *Scientific Summary* versus *Lay Summary* for a grant application).

2. Choose the best document organization and writing style for your audience

Once you have identified your likely audience(s), you can more easily tailor your document to their needs. You can use strategies to minimize their mental burden as they read and understand and use the information that you provide.

Some simple strategies for **organizing** your document were discussed in a recent presentation for the Visiting Scholar Program (see video, slides and related post).

- Use visual maps, such as flow charts, to guide readers through your document.
- Use informative headings for sections, and topic sentences for paragraphs, to keep readers oriented as they work through your information.
- Add visual breaks between sections and paragraphs, to signal new topics and give your readers a rest for their eyes and brains.

Writing style is crucial to making your document informative and useful for all your audience(s).

- Use shorter and less complex sentences, so that both experts and less expert readers can easily follow your logic and grasp each point that you make. For a glimpse of what **not** to do with your sentences, see 9 easy steps to longer sentences.
- Adjust the technical terminology in your document, so that audiences beyond a few experts can understand your meaning. **Do not "dumb down"** your writing for less expert audiences. **Do give added context** for readers working outside your area of research, such as one-sentence descriptions of specialized theories or methods and definitions for technical terms.
- Avoid acronyms and abbreviations unless they are part of everyday language (like DNA or COVID).

When you know and understand your audience(s), their needs can guide you in creating research documents that are more useful, attractive and interesting to more people.