Understanding Readers

Overview

Your understanding of how people will read your documents affects the way you write. From many years of schooling you know that teachers require formal essays with introductory paragraphs that state the topic and why you are writing; you know that they are hopeful that your writing is thoughtful; you know that one person at least—your teacher—will read each essay and try to understand it, no matter how clumsily you have worded it; you know that teachers are specialists who usually know much more about the topic than you do. But what about the readers who will read and respond to your writing on the job? What will they need and expect from technical documents and other writing you produce? When will they not read your writing? How can you shape your texts to spur reader action?

This section addresses these questions by discussing

- What Readers Read
- How Readers Read
- Classifying Readers
- Understanding an Audience

**Understanding Readers**

**What Readers Read**

In the early sixties James Souther asked Westinghouse decision-makers what they expected of the reports engineers submitted to them. Their answers have shaped nearly 40 years of thinking about how readers read. Particularly important were their responses about how frequently they read the following parts: summary, introduction, body, conclusion, and appendices. The decision-makers’ answers are charted below.

Can you match the report parts with how often they are read?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*How often Westinghouse decision-makers read various report parts*
The Westinghouse decision-makers reported that they read summaries 100% of the time; introductions, 60%; conclusions, 50%; bodies, 15%; appendices, 10%. These decision-makers also said that they had advisors read the entire reports and offer opinions. These findings suggested that decision-makers always read the summary; if they had questions, they went on (or later came back) to the introduction and/or conclusion; and seldom did they read the sticky details. Thus, engineers who were expecting the information to speak for itself effectively had little voice at Westinghouse unless they were befriended by one of the advisors.

Out of these findings, writers of technical documents developed the notion of multiple audiences and multiple paths—that a variety of people will read a report for a variety of reasons (sometimes coming back to it for different reasons), and that these readers won’t read the entire report. As a result, formal reports have many information redundancies built into their structure and they also present information in prose and visual form.

Out of later findings, writers developed the notion of the “two-minute read”—related perhaps to the Two-Minute Manager. This widely held belief claims that a manager never spends more than two minutes on any one thing. Hence, only summaries of reports get read. If they believed that readers never read more than the summary, all writing teachers would be cynical by now. But in fact, many professionals spend hours reading and synthesizing the reports they receive. They keep on reading in the hope that their various questions will be answered. If they are not specialists in the subject matter of the report, they call in specialists to answer their technical questions—they don’t just gloss over the details. And the more difficult it is for them to digest the material so they can make decisions about a project, the more they curse the writers and technical personnel who failed to anticipate the readers’ needs and who did communicate clearly.

Understanding Readers
How Readers Read

Some reading patterns have been proposed by those who study report reading. For example, writing teachers are thought to read reports as they would a novel—starting with the first sentence and reading straight through until the last. By contrast, the typical users of documentation for a product have been found to read as a way to find an answer to problems with that product—searching through the manual for a place that looks promising and then reading until they have some information that appears useful for solving the problem at hand.
Sometimes a reader’s impatience is extreme. Researchers who studied users of an online card catalog who went to the documentation for help found that none of the users ever read below the first inch of any page (topics were organized to be handled on one page). Such impatience may imply that they way beginnings are structured is critical for readers.

Among traditional audiences for technical reports, reading patterns are thought to vary according to the type of reader (and that reader’s reasons for reading). Nonspecialist readers often read the summary material first, then the introduction (or orientation component), and the conclusion in that order. Technical specialists skim the summary, skip the introduction, and focus on the discussion and appendices (including the visuals and data). Thus, when handed a report, specialists and nonspecialists take different paths through the document and focus their attention on different sections.

Understanding Readers

Classifying Readers

Souther’s work readers of technical documents have been categorized on the basis of their knowledge of the problem or subject matter. Those who know the subject well we call specialists. Those who do not we term nonspecialists. Most technical documents intend to address the needs of both types of readers. This means you must learn to write for a complex audience, some members of which will read only the sections of your document that they believe they need.
Nonspecialist Readers

Nonspecialists need background information and a clear definition of the problem the document addresses. Nonspecialists are also often decision-makers: they are your bosses, the people who have the authority to allocate resources like time, money, and personnel. Think of the desk of a typical decision-maker at a company you’ve worked for. What does it look like? Chances are that on any given day that person will be working with many tasks and projects. Your document may be only one of dozens a nonspecialist decision-maker will be asked to read that day, and you can’t assume that this decision-maker will remember the details of your project (even if he or she is generally familiar with it). The pressure of dealing with so many projects means that the person continually needs reorientation.

These types of readers don’t have time to read everything from beginning to end (remember that your college instructors read so carefully because your writing helps them know you learned the material). Readers on the job are not patient. They need to understand the problem, what you have done about it, and the reason why you are writing by the time they have finished the first section of the document. The opening section of a technical report addresses these needs with a statement of the organizational problem, the tasks reported on in the document, and the purpose of the rest of the document. Nonspecialists may not take the time to read the supporting details of your conclusions.

Other nonspecialist readers include those who are learning to perform a task, people who carry out your decisions or follow your instructions. These users form a difficult audience all their own. Their inexperience, the possibility of their harming themselves or the device they’re using, and their impatience combine to make writing good instructions a difficult task.

Specialist Readers

Specialists generally are already familiar with the technical problem when they receive your document. They are often your co-workers, people who act as advisors rather than decision-makers. Because they are familiar with the problem and its background, they may merely skim your opening section and may begin reading some portion of your detailed discussion that interests them. Headings and subheadings allow specialists to find the place in a technical report where the information they want is located. Because visuals often condense a great deal of information in a small space, specialists may even “read” your document by studying the graphics first.

To write effective technical documents from the perspective of subject expertise, therefore, you must meet the needs of both specialist and nonspecialist readers, often in the same report. Nonspecialists need a statement of the organizational problem, the tasks you’ve completed, and the purpose of the rest of the report right up front. Specialists need well-marked divisions and graphics within a report, so they can begin reading where they want. Nonspecialist users of written instructions need to be able to quickly and safely learn a procedure with which they are unfamiliar.

“In-Between” Readers

Often you are dealing with specialists from other areas (or from other companies) who are participating in a project with you. In these situations, the knowledge-based classification “leaks.” In the case of people from other companies, it leaks because you may (intentionally or unintentionally) be writing in an insider code that excludes them on the basis of a lack of insider information (not a lack of subject-matter knowledge). In the case of people inside the
company with other specialties, the classification leaks because they have differing functions, allegiances, and corporate roles (as lawyers or accountants or programmers or engineers or public relations specialists). When they read your report, they may read it as specialists but they apply the lenses of their own roles and values (as non-specialists do). This situation is common, and it causes problems for a subject-knowledge-only scheme of understanding readers.

Understanding an Audience

Evaluating Writing

“Writing” is a common—and ostensibly—simple term. But the simplicity is deceptive. The term has multiple meanings, even though we don’t often think about those multiple and shifting meanings when we use it. Here’s one example: We can use the term “writing” to refer to handwriting, to the physical action of inscription (e.g., using a pen to jot a note). But two minutes later we can use the same term “writing” to refer to the note itself, the document we have written (as in the phrase “a piece of writing”). Writing refers to both a process and a product.

Writing can be viewed simultaneously as

- An action—a purposeful action. Because writing is supposed to accomplish something for someone, it has an aim and it attempts to effect change (in other words, writing has/is a purpose)
- A product—a written artifact, a text to be read.
- A process—a means by which the artifact is produced.

From this multiple view of writing, we draw our three primary criteria for evaluating writing activities:

- Purpose (goal, intention, action): Does the writing as action accomplish its goals?
- Product: Is the writing as text effectively constructed?
- Process (or production): Was the writing process effective?

Traditionally, composition courses have focused on product, the perspective you might be most familiar with from high school English classes: Was the text well constructed, well organized? Did it have appropriate information? Did it provide details and evidence in support of its arguments? Were the sentences and paragraphs carefully ordered and phrased? Was the writing correct in terms of spelling, grammar, and punctuation? Writing courses which emphasize a rhetorical view, however, stress purpose: Is the writing likely to achieve its intended effect with its audience? Were the evidence and details collected appropriate to the audience? Since the 1980s, English composition courses have focused increasingly on process, especially for collaborative work: Did the team members work productively together? Was the project thoroughly researched? Were the planning and revision processes effectively performed?

We feel that professional writing should be graded from all three perspectives. Our recommended grading schema (below) deploys all three.
## Criteria for Professional Writing Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Question</th>
<th>Subquestions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Purpose</strong> (goal, intention, action)</td>
<td>- Does the project have a clearly identified goal or purpose? Is that goal/purpose met?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the writing as action accomplish its goals?</td>
<td>- Are the context and background for the project clearly established? Is there an overview or introductory section that provides an effective orientation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Does the project serve an organizational need or address an organizational problem?</td>
<td>- Does the document show awareness of audience?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Does the project or document benefit the organization? Its audience? Does the project help people outside, as well as inside, the organization?</td>
<td>- Is the document persuasive? Is it informative? Are the claims adequately supported? Is there sufficient evidence/detail?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product</strong></td>
<td>- Is the information provided accurate and complete?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the writing as text effectively constructed? Consider:</td>
<td>- Is the document organized and formatted effectively? Does it use/apply the appropriate genre?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Research/information (a.k.a. “content”)</td>
<td>- Does the document look professional? Does it use appropriate document referencing (pagination, labeling, bibliography, formats)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Organization/formatting/document design</td>
<td>- Are visual styles, fonts, headings, designs, etc. consistent? Are headings effectively used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Visual presentation</td>
<td>- Are visuals deployed effectively? Are document design and visual presentation of information effective? Are visuals designed appropriately and labeled clearly?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Style/correctness</td>
<td>- Is the style clear and concise? Fluent and readable? Specific, concrete, and precise? Professional in tone?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Is the document correct in terms of grammar,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Was the research process conducted effectively? Were authoritative sources consulted?  
- Was the methodology appropriate to the questions asked and the purpose of the project? Were a variety of sources consulted and a variety of appropriate methods employed?  
- Were sources of information credited appropriately?  
- Were the people used as sources treated respectfully?  
- Were others’ contributions to the project appropriately identified and acknowledged?  
- Was teamwork effectively planned, coordinated, and shared? Was teamwork fairly and equitably distributed?  
- Were team members professional with each other? With clients and customers? Did they treat their research sources and/or subjects fairly and respectfully? |

### Types of Professional Writing Documents

- Memos and E-Mail
- Letters
- Reports
- Policy, Manuals, and Handbooks
- Employment Documents
- Promotional Materials
- Instructional Documents
- Oral Presentations
- Proposals

*I will provide a detailed handout with examples of each type.*