You’ve probably noticed that Hollywood produces different types of movies targeting different types of audiences. An R-rated, gross-out comedy is produced for a different type of audience than is a G-rated, animated feature. A big budget blockbuster such as Spiderman is intended to draw a broader, more “general” audience than would a low budget documentary about spiders.

Similarly, writers also have to write with a particular audience in mind. A private text-message to your best friend has a different audience than a thank you note to your grandmother or a cover letter for a job. The text message might use slang, abbreviations (“u” for “you”) and have plenty of spelling and grammar errors. A thank you note to an older relative probably would be more formal, with less slang, while a cover letter would need a business-like, professional tone and use proper spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Professional and academic writers also have to consider audience. Certain magazines and websites are intended for a general audience, while others, including academic journals, are intended for smaller audiences who are more knowledgeable about a particular subject matter. For example, a general article about architect Frank Lloyd Wright that appears in USA Today (a widely-read newspaper) would be written differently than an article about Wright appearing in The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians (JSAH). The USA Today writer would probably spend some time introducing Wright to readers unfamiliar with his work, while the JSAH writer would assume his readers knew all about Wright and would probably focus on a lesser-known aspect of his work.

As you learn to be an academic writer, you also must write for a very particular audience. This audience can be real or imagined.

**Why bother having an “imagined” audience?**

First, academic writing is meant to be read. As undergraduates, it may be difficult for you to imagine your work being published, but writers who work hard researching, revising, and polishing their work often surprise themselves by turning out a publishable piece. Secondly, writing for even an imagined audience can improve your writing by forcing you to evaluate your work from a different perspective—a reader’s perspective. Finally, your instructor may ask that you and your classmates engage in peer-editing and review, so you actually will have a real audience to read and evaluate your work.

**So, who is this “imagined” audience?**

Sometimes students imagine their instructor as their only audience. This is WRONG and leads to poorly written essays that expect the reader to know what the assignment is and “fill in the blanks.”

Your intended audience should typically include the following:

- Your instructor AND
- Your classmates AND
Other students at your grade level who don’t know what the assignment is AND
Students at a slightly higher grade level (whom you would like to impress) AND
Depending on your purpose, people whom you wish to entertain, persuade, or inform.
If you’re writing a persuasive essay, readers with different points of view and perspectives who may or may not initially agree with your main point (thesis).

In addition, a paper written for a particular discipline, such as architecture or business management, would probably have an audience more knowledgeable about that particular discipline.

Evaluating your audience

Before you sit down to write your first draft, it’s a good idea to evaluate your audience.
- How much might they know about your subject?
- What are their feelings toward this subject?
- What kind of values do they have?
- Are there any terms that they may need defined?
- Do I need to clear up any misunderstanding my audience might have about my subject?

As you begin writing your first draft, you should continually imagine how your audience might respond; you need to imagine/anticipate their concerns, questions, misconceptions, and feelings, and address each of them.

Audience expectations

Depending upon what they are reading, audiences expect different things. Think, for a moment, of the different expectations you would have when reading about legislation related to a controversial political issue.
- A headline news story in the Los Angeles Times.
- The Republican (or Democratic) National Committee official website.
- A Los Angeles Times editorial written by a Republican (or Democrat).
- A Republican-leaning (or Democratic-leaning) radio talk show hosts’ official website.
- An angry Republican’s/Democrat’s blog.

You’d expect the headline news story to present facts without taking sides, but the Republican (or Democratic) National Committee to take a particular stance on the issue. You would also expect both Committees to use more formal language in explaining their point of views than a radio talk show host or an angry blogger. Unlike an emotional blogger or talk show host (who assume their audiences would side with their perspectives), the Committees would probably not use humor, demonstrate anger, or insult those who hold opposing views.

When reading an academic paper, your audience also has certain expectations.
- They expect to be persuaded, entertained, and/or informed through analysis, being shown cause and effect, and/or being shown similarities and differences (compare and contrast).
They expect to understand the main point (or thesis).

They expect a paper to lay down a firm organizational pattern that helps them understand the writer’s thought process.

They expect transitions to help them see how different ideas connect.

They expect certain statements to be backed up by expert opinion, facts and/or statistics (clearly documented by in-text citations and a Works Cited list).

They expect your logic to make sense and to not be misled by fallacies.

They expect your ideas to be supported by concrete examples and supporting details.

They expect a respectful tone that is not angry, combative, or insulting. They expect their feelings about the issues in your paper to be respected.

They expect a formal tone that does not use slang or street talk.

They expect clear, straightforward language that communicates the ideas and argument effectively so that they can understand them.

They expect proper grammar, punctuation, and spelling to enable them to read the paper easily, without stopping to figure out what the writer is trying to say.

EXAMPLES: Don’t just write for your instructor. Your “imagined” audience is larger than that.

**Student essay with no sense of “audience.”** He’s writing for the instructor (and classmates who are doing the same assignment) only.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King and the Art of Persuasion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In his letter, King uses logos, pathos, and ethos to argue his case to the ministers. In the beginning, King uses mostly ethos to show the ministers that he is of equal standing to them and is worth listening to. When King addresses them by saying, “My Dear Fellow Clergymen...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**A reader who is not in this student’s class would be confused; she’d probably be asking herself the following questions [in brackets]:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King and the Art of Persuasion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In his letter [what letter?], King [Who is King? Do you mean Martin Luther King or some other “King”?] uses logos, pathos, and ethos [what do these words mean?] to argue his case to the ministers [what ministers?]. King [who?] uses mostly ethos [what?] to show the ministers [who?] that he is of equal standing to them and is worth listening to. [Why would he need/want to do this?] When King addresses them by saying, “My Dear Fellow Clergymen...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**This student has a better sense of audience**

**Martin Luther King and the Art of Persuasion**

In 1963, African-Americans in the South were subjected to dehumanizing “Jim Crow” laws that kept them from enjoying equal rights with white citizens. In response to these unjust laws, Martin Luther King, Jr. led the African-American community of Birmingham, Alabama in a series of peaceful protest marches. King and many protesters were arrested for marching without a parade permit; afterwards, eight white clergymen wrote an open letter urging the African-American community to end their “unwise and untimely” protests.

It was in response to this letter that Martin Luther King Jr. penned his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

In this letter...