



So, you have a writing assignment.

You're ready. You know what to do.

Or do you?

If you find yourself pausing right now, slightly intimidated by the idea of having to write an entire essay on something you haven't really thought about before, you're in the right place!

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Start with something concrete. Right now, there are three things you should consider:

- Purpose
- Context
- Audience

### 3.1 Purpose

Why are you writing this? Well, of course: because it's an assignment and you have to. But beyond that, if you were just writing because you felt compelled to and didn't have to worry about a grade for a class, what would be the goal of your words? Generally, people write to communicate or share some ideas with the reader. Sometimes, there is another goal along with sharing information, for example, to persuade the reader to interpret the information in a specific way or even just to entertain the reader.

There are three general reasons for writing:

- To inform—to tell the reader about a topic
- To persuade—to convince the reader how to think/feel about a topic
- To entertain—to make the reader want to keep reading

Often, these purposes will cross into one another when you are writing—and that's fine! Your writing should be entertaining to read; otherwise, no one will want to read it. Your purpose for academic writing will often depend on the assignment. Always write in the manner suggested by your instructor in this case.

### **3.2 Context**

Context has to do with the assignment itself and refers to the situation surrounding your writing.

- Is this a school assignment?
  - Essays for a class, or academic writing, have certain guidelines regarding everything from page layout to organization.
- What are the assignment guidelines?
  - What is the topic?
  - Is the audience specified in the instructions, or do you need to decide?
  - Is there a word count requirement?
  - When is it due?
- Where will readers encounter your words?
  - Yes, of course, your instructor will read them. But outside the classroom, where else may your words be effective?
  - For instance, if you are arguing to change a local law, you may already know the context: You want to reach elected officials at a city council meeting. How are laws changed in that community?

Context determines not only what you say but also how you say it and to whom. Always consider the context of a writing assignment before you sit down and start writing.

### **3.3 Audience**

Who will read your paper? The default answer is your instructor, but beyond that, who else may be interested in what you have to say? Please don't say "everyone." There are few things in the world that every single person would want to read, and even if "everyone" is interested, you would not teach every reader using the same methods. For example, the way you would write for children may be very different from the way you would write for adults.

When you speak, you usually take a moment to consider who is listening and adjust your comments accordingly:

- If you're talking to your best friend, your speech will likely be casual, and you don't need to explain in great detail about what happened last night. After all, your friend was probably with you and already knows much about what happened last night, anyway. Therefore, your audience (in this case, your best friend) affects not only your tone but the specific details you decide to include in what you're telling him or her.
- If you're speaking to a co-worker, you might not be so casual, and you may have to

explain everything that happened last night because that person wasn't there to witness it.

- If you're talking to your boss, you would definitely watch your tone, and you may not want to mention last night at all.

Considering your audience for an essay is crucial because the same rules apply. What you say and how you say it are determined by who will be reading your words.

For example, what if a student were to compose an essay that presented an argument with one clear goal: to convince her husband to paint their house this weekend? She would probably talk about why it's simply time to just do it, how happy they both will be when it's finished, and how the weather this weekend is perfect for an outside project.

Now, if this student were to use the same topic—"help me paint the house this weekend"—but change her audience from her husband to her brother, she would likely change her tactic a little bit. She would probably keep the perfect weather part, since that always appeals to people working outside, but she would change the other reasons. She may, for example, remind him of the time she helped him put down new floors in his house, and she may promise that pizza and beer would be supplied for the painting party that weekend.

With this new audience, the topic hasn't changed, but the way she approaches the reader has. Her husband lives in the house, so he's likely to respond to the arguments about it being time to paint and feeling better after it's done. Her brother doesn't live in the house, so instead of convincing him that way, she may bring up some leverage ("remember when I helped you?") and offer a bribe (pizza and beer).

When thinking about your potential reader, consider the following questions:

- What person or group do you want to reach? What do you know about your audience?
- What assumptions can you make about your reader? What points will your reader respond to?
- What is your relationship with the audience? What is your attitude toward your reader?
- What does your reader already know? What does your reader need background on?
- What opinions or values does the audience already hold on the topic?
- What tone should you use when addressing this reader you have in mind? Why will that tone be more effective?
- How can your essay help your audience focus on aspects they might not have considered or might have even dismissed?
- What kind of response do you want to invoke in your audience?