

Score a Bullseye – Know Your Audience

“Know your audience” ... this is the cardinal rule in writing. Failing to do so, you risk missing the mark before even picking up the bow. Provided here are six tips to tailor your product, specifically targeting the audience’s needs.



1. Understand your audience. What is the familiarity of audience members or readers with the subject you will present? Are they experts, novices, or somewhere in between? What are their goals and objectives? What are their business needs? Under what timelines are they working? Who are their customers? What questions might the audience ask if making a decision based on your product?

2. “You’re speaking my language!” Strive to elicit this reaction beginning with the all-important opening paragraph ... and then throughout the communication. How? Empathy. Demonstrate your keen insight into the audience gained by researching the questions posed above. Convey your message succinctly and in terms and context tailored to them. Walk in their shoes when composing your message.

3. “Knock, Knock” ... “Who’s there?” – Wrong Response! With each communication ... letter, memo, email, or presentation ... you knock at someone’s door. The challenge, as you well know, is that people are busy. The actual response to “Knock, knock” is often, “What do you want!?!” Be prepared to make your case ... succinctly.

Cut to the chase in the opening paragraph. You have about 30 seconds to hook the fish (aka, the audience). That’s the easy part! You must then reel it in ... (aka, retain the audience’s attention) ... and that segues to my next tip.

4. Place the Horse before the Cart. Begin each subsequent paragraph with the key point (academically referred to as the topic sentence), then amplify with substantiating data. Remember the “Shaggy Dog” jokes? The audience is led on ... and on ... and on ... with seemingly interminable detail, seconds ticking, before finally reaching the punchline. Actually, this last sentence is purposefully and similarly constructed to exemplify placing the cart before the horse. Don’t do this in business writing.

5. Construct the Story – Information as Building Blocks. Envision your correspondence as a pyramid. Each word, each sentence, each paragraph constitutes a building block supporting the main thesis or point of your communication. As an author ... or that architect ... ensure each item bears weight ... supports the message. Strongly consider deleting any building block that fails to help convey the message.

6. Stand Out from the Crowd. Whether contending for a grant, submitting a proposal for a contract, defending against budget cuts, or any other number of circumstances ... strive to stand out from the competition. Describe what you deliver that others can't. What makes you unique? Identify, elaborate on, and emphasize these areas. How will it benefit the decision-maker to select you? Of course, convey this from the decision-maker's perspective.

In composing such justifications, don't waste valuable time and space stating facts that apply to everyone. This strategy pertains to resumes, as well. What's wrong with the following bullets extracted from actual resumes? Answer – Each is as common and expected as breathing air.

- Does what is right and takes personal responsibility
- Treats everyone with kindness and respect
- Ensures requests are answered and provide additional information as required
- A model for honest, trustworthy, and ethical behavior

In conclusion, practice the Golden Rule. Compose the type of correspondence you are pleased to receive: focused, succinct, to the point. Samuel Clements (yes, Mark Twain) famously told a friend, "I didn't have time to write you a short letter, so I wrote a long one." Do yourself and your readers a favor ... write a "short letter" specifically targeting their needs.

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