

Effective Writing: Understanding Audience, Purpose, Focus, Organization, and Development

Purpose

Often, student writers lack a common vocabulary for talking about their writing. This unit introduces several of the elements of effective writing, to both explain their importance in the writing process and to constitute a common vocabulary. These terms will be used throughout the Composition 1 workbook.

Objectives

You will know:

- how to consider the needs of your audience
- how purpose and focus interrelate to help you develop your thesis
- why college writing has to be organized
- how to determine when you've written "enough"

You will practice:

- writing about the same topic to different audiences

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The five pillars of effective writing

Whether it's a textbook, a magazine article, or your first Baker College essay, all good writing has a few elements in common. Because these elements all contribute to the strength of your essay, we call them "pillars." The five pillars of good writing are: Audience, Purpose, Focus, Organization, and Development. The more aware you are of them, the more effective your writing will be.

Effective writing is aware of its audience

First and foremost, writing is a form of communication, and communication is almost always directed at an audience—even if the audience is hard to define. An awareness of your audience is critical in determining your approach to the other four elements of good writing. When you email someone, you know that you are writing to a specific audience, but what if your boss asks you to write up a Tornado Safety Procedure for your office? You might know some of the audience today, but there is no way to predict who'll be working at your company in five years. You need to think about the information needs of a wide potential audience, not just one or two people.

While your writing reflects your ideas, the best ideas in the world will be ignored if they are not communicated effectively to your audience.

Effective writing has a specific, defined purpose

All writing has a purpose, which is to communicate ideas and facts to an audience. If you leave a note for your sister asking her to pick up milk, your purpose is to inform her of a need. If you write an email to your manager explaining why you deserve a raise, your purpose is to persuade. Most often, in college writing, your purpose is to inform or to persuade.

Effective writing is focused

From where you are now, look up and try to focus on two elements of the scenery at the same time. You can't. At best, your eyes switch back and forth, keeping one thing dominant at a time. The same is true in writing college essays. Good

essays are about one thing—and I don't mean topic. "Focus" refers to what you think about your topic. For instance, your topic might be college athletics, but your focus might be that college athletes should be paid.

A following section of this workbook contains exercises to help you sharpen your focus, which in turn enables you to develop a good thesis.

Effective writing is well organized

Why is good writing well organized? Because your audience expects it to be. And so do you. Here's how I know. Read the following group of words:

Milk the went to Sam buy market to.

It didn't make sense to you until you reorganized the words into:

Sam went to the market to buy milk.

Notice that none of the words change, only their position in the sentence.

Just as your audience expects a certain organization of words in a sentence, they expect a certain order of your ideas. The specific organizational pattern will differ based on your writing purpose. We'll discuss organization in greater detail later in this workbook.

Effective writing is well developed

In academic writing, what you think about a particular topic is never as important as why you think it. For example: Let's say your writing purpose is to persuade an audience that the most recent movie you watched was terrible. How will you do it? That depends on your audience.

If you were simply talking to a group of friends, you could say, "That movie was awful; don't waste you money or your time on it." If your friends (the audience) knew you well enough to trust your taste in movies, your opinion alone might be enough to persuade them.

But in most writing occasions, your audience does not know you. Your name is just a word on the page, and they have no idea if they can trust your opinion. Therefore, in order to achieve your purpose of persuading your audience, you have

to support your opinion with specific examples of what was wrong with the movie.

Think of the last terrible movie you saw, and list the reasons it was terrible in the space below.

Movie title:

Reasons it was terrible:

Would the list reasons (examples) alone be enough to persuade an audience that has not yet seen the movie? Probably not. But if you expanded on them and explained the details of your reasons, you'd probably achieve your purpose. **Remember, in writing, what you think is not as important to your audience as why you think it.**

The development of an essay refers to the examples, illustrations, facts, evidence, and ideas you present to your audience in order to support your thesis. Remember: Your goal as a writer is not to write what you know, it's to tell an audience enough about what you know that they can understand why you think what you think.

Audience Awareness Practice

Write an email to a close friend, explaining what one thing you would change about Baker College (at least 60 words).

Next, convert that paragraph to a different audience: your Baker College campus president. Before you begin, answer a few questions about the new audience.

- What style of language will this audience (the president) expect?
- What information about you will you have to make clear to this audience (the president) before you state your case?
- What types of evidence (facts, descriptions, illustrations) would convince your audience to agree with your point of view?
- How much evidence would your audience need?