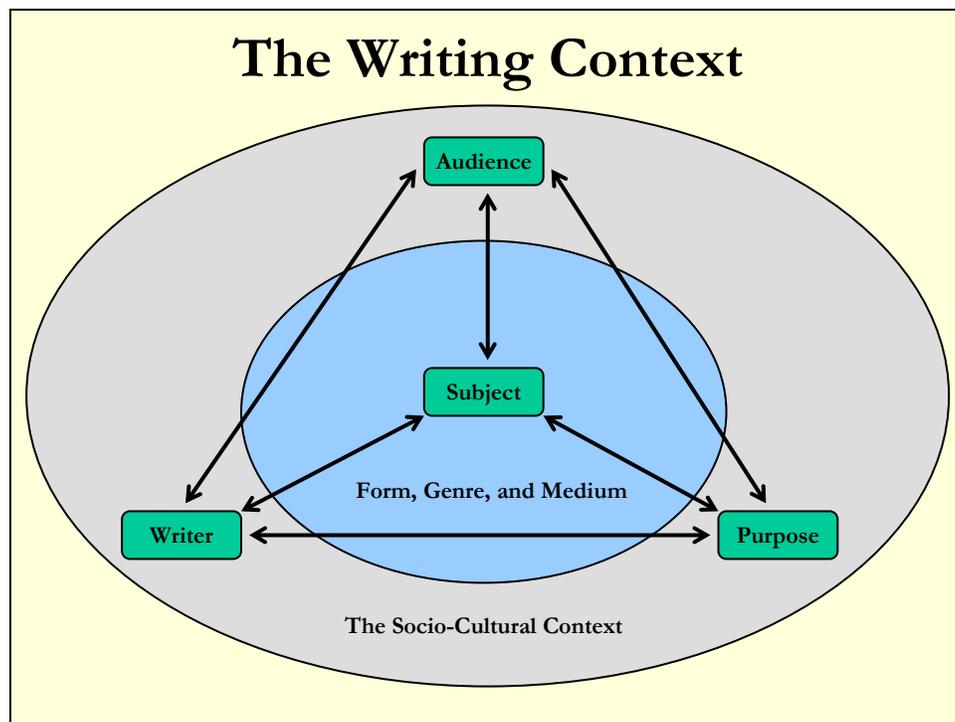


THE WRITING CONTEXT: WRITER, SUBJECT, PURPOSE, AUDIENCE, AND FORM

The Writing Context

Few people enjoy writing so much that they do it just for fun. Sometimes an event or object may inspire us to sit down and write “just for the heck of it,” without any sense of audience or purpose. This kind of writing lets a person explore his experience and capture feelings, keeping them, like snapshots, to look at later and, perhaps, to share with a friend. Yet even such expressive writing grows out of a real life situation that calls forth language: all writing is situation bound. It is a response prompted by various needs, desires, and demands from both inside and outside.

The fact that writing is an individual response to specific circumstances has many implications. The better a writer understands the circumstances that prompt her writing, the more effectively she can respond, refining and adjusting her style to suit these different contexts. The following figure may help to envision the variables of **the writing context**:



When writing, we may first look at the *subject* primarily from our own point of view—“What am I writing about?” But as we size up the situation, we should begin to ask: “Who is my *audience*?” “What *purpose* do I hope to achieve?” “What will I need to say

in order to accomplish this purpose?” “In what form or genre will I be presenting my ideas?”

Each time writers begin to see different and multiple answers to these questions, the writing context changes. For example, a writer would address an audience of her friends very differently than she would an audience of legislators. A writer would approach a piece of writing very differently if his purpose was to entertain rather than to inform.

Within this dynamic, other forces are at work as well. As writers ask such questions, they may realize that the *audience* will be looking at the *subject* from a different perspective. More thoughtful readers are likely to ask questions such as: “What sort of person wrote this piece?” “What purpose does this person hope to accomplish?” “How has the writing’s content been shaped by the writer’s experience and motives?” And again, as each of these answers changes, the writing context changes as well.

Understanding the writing context requires considering multiple viewpoints, but it also requires understanding that these viewpoints intersect and interrelate. As this happens, new questions begin to appear in the mind of the writer: “What sort of person will my reader envision me to be?” “To what extent will my reader understand and sympathize with my purpose in writing?” “What kinds and amounts of information should my reader be given?” “How should I present this information in order to achieve my purpose in writing?”

In thinking about the elements of the writing context, writers must begin to make decisions about the *content* of their message, *what* they want to say, *how* they want to say it, and in what *form* it should be presented.

Purpose

The first question for any writer should be, “Why am I writing?” “What is my goal or my purpose for writing?” For many writing contexts, a person’s immediate purpose may be to complete an assignment or receive a good grade. But the long-range purpose of writing is to communicate to a particular audience. In order to communicate successfully to an audience, understanding the purpose for writing will make you a better writer.

Purpose is the reason or reasons why a person composes a particular piece of writing. Focusing on purpose as one writes helps a person to know what form of writing to choose, how to focus and organize the writing, what kinds of evidence to cite, how formal or informal the writing style should be, and how much should be written.

The eleven different types of purpose include the following:

1. to express;
2. to describe;
3. to explore/learn;

4. to entertain;
5. to inform;
6. to explain;
7. to argue;
8. to persuade;
9. to evaluate;
10. to problem solve; and
11. to mediate.

However, **it should also be noted that writers often *combine purposes in a single piece of writing***. Thus, we may, in a business report, begin by informing readers of the economic facts before we try to persuade them to take a certain course of action.

Explanations of the eleven types of writing purpose are listed below.

1. Express

In expressive writing, the writer's purpose or goal is to put thoughts and feelings on the page. Expressive writing is personal writing. We are often just writing for ourselves or for close friends. Usually, expressive writing is informal, not intended for outside readers. Journal writing, for example, is usually expressive writing.

However, we may write expressively for other readers when we write poetry (although not all poetry is expressive writing). We may write expressively in a letter, or we may include some expressive sentences in a formal essay intended for other readers.

2. Describe

Descriptive writing portrays people, places, things, moments and theories with enough vivid detail to help the reader create a mental picture of what is being written about. By appealing to the five senses an original, unique, and creative way, the writer does not tell the audience that the flower is beautiful; it shows them the flower is beautiful. Description allows the audience to feel as though they are a part of the writer's experience of the subject.

3. Explore/Learn

In exploratory writing, the writer's purpose is to ask key questions and reflect on topics that defy simple answers. In those topics where intuition and reflection are more important than rational analysis or argumentation, writers focus more on their journey of discovery than on any definite answers. In exploratory writing, your readers are companions, sharing your journey of discovery, listening to your thoughts and reflections.

4. Entertain

As a purpose or goal of writing, entertaining is often used with some other purpose--to explain, argue, or inform in a humorous way. Sometimes, however, entertaining others with humor is our main goal. Entertaining may take the form of a brief joke, a newspaper

column, a television script or an Internet home page tidbit, but its goal is to relax our audience and share some story of human foibles or surprising actions.

5. Inform

Writing to inform is one of the most common purposes for writing. Most journalistic writing fits this purpose. A journalist uncovers the facts about some incident and then reports those facts, as objectively as possible, to his or her readers. Of course, some bias or point-of-view is always present, but the purpose of informational or reportorial writing is to convey information as accurately and objectively as possible. Other examples of writing to inform include laboratory reports, economic reports, and business reports.

6. Explain

Writing to explain, or expository writing, is the most common of the writing purposes. The writer's purpose is to gather facts and information, combine them with his or her own knowledge and experience, and clarify for some audience who or what something is, how it happened or should happen, and/or why something happened.

Explaining the whos, whats, hows, whys, and wherefores requires that the writer analyze the subject (divide it into its important parts) and show the relationship of those parts. Thus, writing to explain relies heavily on *definition*, *process analysis*, *cause/effect*, *analysis*, and *synthesis*.

Explain versus inform.

So, how does explaining differ from informing? Explaining goes one step beyond informing or reporting. A reporter merely reports what his or her sources say or the data indicate. An expository writer adds his or her particular understanding, interpretation, or *thesis* to that information. An expository writer says this is the *best or most accurate* definition of literacy, or the *right* way to make lasagna, or the *most relevant* causes of an accident.

7. Argue

An arguing essay attempts to convince its audience to believe or act in a certain way.

Written arguments have several key features:

- *A debatable claim or thesis.* The issue must have some reasonable arguments on both (or several) sides.
- *A focus on one or more of the four types of claims:* Claim of fact, claim of cause and effect, claim of value, and/or claim of policy (problem solving).
- *A fair representation of opposing arguments* combined with arguments against the opposition and for the overall claim.
- *An argument based on evidence presented in a reasonable tone.* Although appeals to character and to emotion may be used, the primary appeal should be to the reader's logic and reason.

8. Persuade

Although the terms *argument* and *persuasion* are often used interchangeably, the terms do have slightly different meanings. *Argument* is a specific type of persuasion that

follows certain ground rules. Those rules are that opposing positions will be presented accurately and fairly, and that appeals to logic and reason will be the primary means of persuasion. *Persuasive writing* may, if it wishes, ignore those rules and try any strategy that might work. Advertisements are a good example of persuasive writing. They usually do not fairly represent the competing product, and they often appeal to image, to emotion, to character, or to anything except logic and the facts—unless those facts are in the product's favor.

9. Evaluate

Writing to evaluate a person, product, thing, or policy is a frequent purpose for writing. An evaluation is really a specific kind of argument: it argues for the merits of the subject and presents evidence to support the claim. A **claim of value**—the thesis in an evaluation—must be supported by criteria (the appropriate standards of judgment) and supporting evidence (the facts, statistics, examples, or testimonials).

Writers often use a three-column log to set up criteria for their subject, collect relevant evidence, and reach judgments that support an overall claim of value. Writing a three-column log is an excellent way to organize an evaluative essay. First, think about the possible criteria, the standards of judgment (the ideal case) against which you will measure your particular subject. Writers should choose criteria which their audience will find valid, fair, and appropriate. Then, collect evidence for each of the selected criteria.

Consider the following example of a restaurant evaluation:

Overall claim of value: This restaurant provides a high quality dining experience.		
<u>Criteria</u>	<u>Evidence</u>	<u>Judgment</u>
1. Attractive setting	White table cloths, Soft lighting Subtle glass etchings	Graceful setting
2. Good service	Waiter's service prompt Some glitches—a forgotten appetizer	Often expert
3. [Additional criteria, etc.]	[Additional evidence, etc.]	[Additional judgment, etc.]

10. Problem Solve

Problem solving is another specific type of argument: the writer's purpose is to persuade his audience to adopt a solution to a particular problem. Often called "policy" essays because they recommend the readers adopt a policy to resolve a problem, problem-solving essays have two main components: *a description of a serious problem* and an argument for *specific recommendations that will solve the problem*.

The thesis of a problem-solving essay becomes a **claim of policy**: If the audience follows the suggested recommendations, the problem will be reduced or eliminated. The essay must support the policy claim by persuading readers that the recommendations are feasible, cost-effective, efficient, relevant to the situation, and better than other possible alternative solutions.

11. Mediate

Traditional argument, like a debate, is confrontational. The argument often becomes a kind of “war” in which the writer attempts to “defeat” the arguments of the opposition. Non-traditional kinds of argument use a variety of strategies to reduce the confrontation and threat in order to open up the debate.

- *Mediated argument* follows a plan used successfully in labor negotiations to bring opposing parties to agreement. The writer of a mediated argument provides a middle position that helps negotiate the differences of the opposing positions.
- *Rogsonian argument* also wishes to reduce confrontation by encouraging mutual understanding and working toward common ground and a compromise solution.
- *Feminist argument* tries to avoid the patriarchal conventions in traditional argument by emphasizing personal communication, exploration, and true understanding.

Once writers have determined what type of purpose best conveys their motivations, they then need to examine how this will affect readers. Writers and readers may approach a topic with conflicting purposes. It is the job of the writer to make sure both are being met.

Audience

An **audience** is a group of readers who reads a particular piece of writing. Our audience might be teachers, classmates, the president of an organization, the staff of a management company, or any other number of possibilities. Audiences come in all shapes and sizes. They may be a group of similar people or combinations of different groups of people. Writers need to determine who they are in order to analyze the audience and write effectively.

When we speak to someone face-to-face, we always know with whom we are talking. We automatically adjust our speech to be sure we communicate our message. For instance, when we talk to three-year olds, we shorten sentences and use simpler words. When we talk to college professors, we use longer sentences and more formal language. In short, we change what we say because we know our *audience*.

Interestingly, many writers do not make the same adjustments when they write to different audiences, usually because they do not take the time to think about who will be reading what they write. But to be sure that we communicate clearly in writing, we need to adjust our message—how we say it and what information we include—by recognizing that different readers can best understand different messages.

As a concept, this rule sounds so simple: *Think about who will read your paper before and while you write and adjust your writing to help your reader understand it.*

Writers determine their audience types by considering:

- **who** the readers are (age, sex, education, occupation, economic status, area of residence, ethnic ties, political/social/religious beliefs, etc.);
- **what level of information** these readers have about the subject (novice, general reader, specialist, or expert); and
- **what opinions, values, prejudices, and biases** these readers already possess about the subject.

Writers need to know their audience before they start writing because all readers have expectations and all readers assume what they read will meet their expectations. As writers, we should anticipate the needs or expectations of our audience in order to convey information or argue for a particular claim. A writer's job is to make sure those expectations are met, while at the same time, fulfilling the purpose of the writing.

The Crossroads of Purpose and Audience

Often a writer's audience will help her determine her purpose. The beliefs the audience holds will tell the writer whether or not they agree with what the writer has to say. Suppose, for example, a writer is persuading readers against Internet censorship. The purpose will differ depending on the audience who will read the writing. For example, if the audience is computer users who surf the net daily, the writer could appear foolish trying to persuade them to react against Internet censorship. It is likely they already are against such a movement. Instead, such an audience might expect more information on the topic. On the other hand, if the audience is parents who do not want their small children surfing the net, the writer will need to convince them that censorship is not the solution to their concerns. The writer might persuade this audience to consider other options.

Writers need to consider both *audience* and *purpose* in their writing because the two elements affect the paper so significantly and decisions about one will ultimately affect the other.

Form, Genre, and Medium

Another consideration writers must weigh both before and while they write is the form, genre, and medium in which the audience will encounter their ideas. The reception any piece of writing receives from an audience is based, in part, on the manner and format in which that writing is presented. Just as issues of legibility, standard usage, correct

spelling, etc. can interfere with a reader's ability to process information, proper presentation and awareness of the advantages and limitations of certain forms, genres, and mediums can also affect the attention readers give to a writer's ideas.

Form and/or genre refer to the category into which a particular piece of writing might be placed (e.g. biography, personal narrative, technical report, newspaper article, poster, blog, sonnet, editorial, essay of argumentation, research paper, etc.). Depending upon the purpose and audience a writer has in mind, certain forms and/or genres might or might not be appropriate in satisfying those needs. Certainly, if a writer is conveying a body of very detailed and technical information to an audience of experts, a children's book would not be an effective genre. Likewise, **medium** refers to the manner in which writing is disseminated (a newspaper, textbook, popular magazine, specialized journal, on the Internet, and so forth). Here too, the needs of audience and purpose can often be met to a greater or lesser degree dependent upon the medium. For example, a feature article published on the Internet may reach a greater number of people than the same article published in small town newspaper.

However, there may be times when writers have a choice in genre, form, and/or medium and must weigh which would be most effective in meeting the needs of both the writer and audience. If a writer's purpose is to open the lines of dialogue within society about a particular issue, an editorial posted to an online chat board might be much more effective than a position paper published in a specialized journal. Writers must keep in mind that the audience engages each new reading experience not only with some degree of background knowledge of the subject matter but also with some degree of background knowledge and experience with the selected form/genre and medium. Navigating the strengths and weaknesses of these features of the writing is as important as considering audience and purpose.

In short, form, genre, and medium all exert a powerful and systematic influence that helps to shape the ways new texts are written and read and the degree to which a piece of writing satisfies its purpose. Together with audience and purpose, these elements form the writing context that writers must acknowledge and bear in mind throughout the writing process. In this way, writers become strategic in the service of their craft and the writing they produce grows closer and closer to the highest degrees of success.

For more information, please contact:

Matt Copeland, KSDE Writing Consultant
Kansas State Department of Education
120 SE 10th Ave
Topeka KS 66612-1182
phone 785.296.5060
fax 785.296.3523
mcopeland@ksde.org

KSDE Writing Homepage: <http://www.ksde.org/Default.aspx?tabid=1726>