WRITING FOR ACADEMIC AUDIENCES

Frequently in higher education, students are told to write for an "educated audience," or for a reader with an educational background and intellectual curiosity to approach a myriad of topics. However, writing for the academy is far more complex than writing for an intelligent reader; in fact, it influences how you approach your subject while also including multiple features and nuances inherent in academic writing. In all, "writing for an academic audience" requires an understanding of the style, conventions and expectations of your reader.

Educational researchers, journalists, and others have long investigated ways of determining "readability" – the extent that a text's meaning can be easily and quickly comprehended for an intended purpose by an intended reader. A writer has multiple ways to control the speed of a reader's understanding and access to a text. Below are a few ways to accomplish "Readability":

Conform to the Format and Expectations of Academic Writing

Use a generally accepted font style (Times New Roman) and font size (no larger than 12 point or smaller than 10) to ease the reading of the text. Finally, most academic papers should be double-spaced with 1-inch margins.

One way to ensure consistency with the format is to set your defaults. In Microsoft Word, simply go to the "Format" menu and create your defaults by scrolling and selecting font or document. Deviating from these expectations can frustrate your reader.

Also, be sure to use the **style manual** relevant to your audience. Ask your instructor if you're unsure. Below are the professional websites for the major style guides:

APA: http://www.apastyle.org/learn/quick-guide-on-references.aspx

MLA:http://www.mlahandbook.org/fragment/public_index;jsessionid=A1D84C511504343A010DA36FB502F574

Chicago Style: http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html

Graphics and Bullets

Bulleted lists and the use of diagrams aid *readability* by offering information in a quickly reviewable way, especially if the information is lengthy and can be presented separately from the text. Alternatively, if the information is somewhat tangential to the discussion, consider putting the information in an appendix.

♦ Depending on the sophistication of your "paper," you'll have to conform to your style guide's requirements with subheadings and lists. For example, subheadings are an expectation in writing for psychology; therefore, be attentive to the APA style guidelines.

Language

Clear verbiage is essential to readability, and most research indicates that clarity of language impacts the accessibility of the text. Don't fall for the notion that to write in the academy means using heavy phrases, esoteric language and lengthy sentences. Verbosity, using "obtuse" terms or specialized language, affects readability, so writers need to be aware of the choices they make around word usage. Generally, most writers subscribe to Hemingway's caveat to use plain, simple language. Remember, the success of your text depends on the reader's comprehension.

- Before writing, create a list of synonyms of the major topics that you'll be discussing. Rather than using the same words repeatedly, use this list to develop a robust language for your paper.

- Another way to ensure readability especially with sophisticated topics is to define "operative" words for your reader. You might do this in the body of the paper as definitions are relevant, or use footnotes to add further explanation of concepts or terms.

Organization

Readers can read your text faster when it meets their expectations of organization. You can enhance readers' preparedness by following the logical order of the genre you are writing in, or even announcing in the introduction the order you will follow. Typically, writers who "rush" in their writing don't spend the time polishing two crucial "sections" of academic writing: the introduction and conclusion, and yet these two sections are fundamental in establishing purpose (thesis) for your audience. Academic readers want **unity** in what they read; take the time to ensure that the paper's focus is consistent from beginning to end.

- One easy way to double check a smooth progression of ideas is to make a hard copy of the paper and while scanning the paragraphs write down the topic in the margin. After scanning the full paper, review the list to ensure that topic development is done in a logical progression of ideas.

Style

Readers appreciate a style allows a discussion that moves smoothly from one topic to the next. One way to accomplish this is by using expressions and phrases to indicate a transition in thought.

- First, read your paper before handing it in. Check for choppy moments when jumping to new topics and add transitional sentences to prepare and connect ideas and thoughts.

- Use transitional expressions to help the reader move from one sentence (or topic) to the next. Remember, you're the guide. Help your reader.

These transitional markers support the relationship between ideas or the movement to new ideas. Here are a few:

- To Summarize or Restate: In fact, therefore

- Time Markers: After, many years ago, then

- To Relate Cause & effect: Therefore, thus, as a result, because

- To Add or Amplify: Also, too, moreover, furthermore

- To Compare: Similarly, likewise

- To Contrast: However, nevertheless, conversely

- To Express Conditional Thought: Although, though

- To Give Examples: For example, for instance, in particular

Syntax

English sentences organize their information from known to new. Readers expect that the end of a sentence will carry the important (new) information. For example, if a sentence informs the reader that, "Sandy gave Mary a gift," the logical order for the following sentence is to comment on the gift -- i.e., "it was a lovely notebook." If the first sentence is "Sandy gave a gift to Mary," the reader expects the following sentence to say something about Mary -- i.e., "It was her birthday" or "She has been

such a supportive friend." Following this known/new pattern can provide the text much-needed cohesion.

It is easier for a reader to grasp the meaning of a sentence that presents the meaning divided into clauses rather than one long complicated sentence. A quick look at some of the academic texts students are required to read easily demonstrates this.

♦ Use punctuation in ways that support the reader's comprehension and ease with the text. Be cautious with commas.

Wordiness and Clarity of Style: Active vs Passive Voice

Often, educators will ask that student writers avoid the "passive voice" for a number of reasons. Active Voice is easier to understand than the Passive Voice, primarily because it's more direct with the actual subject doing the action.

Example: *Everyone made an effort.* vs *The effort was made by everyone.*

Notice that in the Passive Voice, the actual subject becomes an object. And what is really the object becomes the subject. Writing clean sentences with the subject as the *doer* of the verb helps ensure clarity.

There are many times in writing for an educated audience that a sentence requires passive voice, especially when the subject is relatively unimportant compared to who/what is receiving the action. This situation occurs frequently in psychology papers where the subject is implied and/or you want to maintain anonymity. This approach is useful in psychological discourse that wouldn't want to "expose" the subject, when the subject is understood by the reader, or when you'd like to hide the subject's agency. In the examples below, the subjects are implied in the passive constructions.

Active: *We require twenty participants to demonstrate the effect of sleep deprivation on writing in this study.*

Passive: *Twenty participants are required by us to demonstrate the effect of sleep deprivation on writing in this study.*

"Better" Passive: *Twenty participants are required to demonstrate the effect of sleep deprivation on writing.* (actor deleted)

- ♦ Use passive voice when the "subject" is unknown or indefinite. You may delete that subject completely as well when it can be inferred by the reader:

Active: *People mastered the use of fire some 400,000 years ago.*

Passive: *The use of fire was mastered by people some 400,000 years ago.*

"Better" Passive: *The use of fire was mastered some 400,000 years ago.* (actor deleted)

Active: *The client revealed ADD tendencies in the results of the diagnostic measurement.*

Active: *The psychologist administered the ADD psych assessment to the client.*

Passive: *The psych assessment was administered by the psychologist to the client experiencing ADD.*

Passive: *The ADD diagnostic was taken by the client to identify ADD tendencies.*

Active: *The researcher made an error in estimating the length of time it takes an average 4th grader to finish the survey.*

Passive: *The length of time it takes an average 4th grader to finish the survey was underestimated.*

   Remember, it's all about what is being emphasized. Passive voice is highly marked, which means readers take notice when the subject of the sentence is absent. Unless you have a good reason to hide the subject, don't risk raising your readers' suspicion. Additionally, the passive voice adds extra words and thus is frequently considered "wordy" by one's reader (notice the passive voice present here!).

By Anne Maxham, Ph.D.
Director of Writing, Antioch University