

Identifying Audience and Purpose

As you move further into your research, it can be helpful to step back and name the purpose and audience you think your writing will serve. The process below will help you sift through all you have been learning and converge on a direction statement to guide you moving forward.

Identify your purpose for writing.

- Topic:
- Essential or Focusing question:
- Purpose:
 - How you will achieve this purpose?
 - What topics you will tell (define/state)
 - What questions you will show (explain/describe)

Identify your audience.

- Who are you writing this for?
 - Why does this audience need to hear what you have to say?
 - What needs or expectations does your audience have?
 - What questions can you imagine your audience asking?

How do you need to sound to that audience?

- What can you do to achieve that tone?
 - What should be the level of language? Is it concrete or abstract or somewhere in between?
 - Should you use street slang or the logical argument of a professor of philosophy?
 - What “person” should you work in? Should you use ‘I’ or ‘we’ or ‘you’ or ‘they’ or all of these?
 - What are the range and the sources of allusions? Do these come from high or low culture, or both? Should you cite a medieval theologian or a professional wrestler?
 - How often should you use metaphors and other figures of speech?
 - Do you want to sound more like the poet, whose work is thick with figurative images, or the journalist, who only uses them for special effect?
 - What should be the length and structure of the typical sentence? Is it short and simple? Long and complex? Or mixed?
 - What should be the distance from neutrality? Should you be objective, partisan, or passionate?

Develop your direction statement/assertion:

Once you have collected an abundance of information, you need to take what you have learned and decide what you want to say about it. Return to the rough thinking you did at the beginning of this process and evaluate it in light of your chosen audience.

- This paper will . . .

A direction statement, as Roy Peter Clark says, gives you “*a view over the horizon before [you begin] drafting the story. It provides the language [you need] to share [your] hopes with other writers, editors, and readers. It can be tested, expanded, revised . . . during the drafting process.*”

Direction statements should be short and precise. Your goal is to say exactly, in as few words as possible, the point or purpose of your writing. Here are a few tools to help you think about and clarify your mission. Find one that works best for you and for each particular writing project.

1. John Steinbeck wrote, “*I have found that sometimes it helps to pick out one person, a real person you know, or an imagined person—and write to that one.*” Answer these three questions as precisely and succinctly as you can.
 - Who, what one person, am I writing this to?
 - What, exactly, do I want to say to this person?
 - Why does this person need to know about what I want to say?
2. Write a three—part mission statement.
 - Define your primary audience.
 - Define your purpose, the gift you want to give your audience, what exactly you want to say.
 - Define how you want to communicate that gift, the strategies, style, structure, voice, tone you will use. You could even imagine how you want to grow as a writer, what you want to learn to do while writing this.
3. Answer these questions to write a mission statement:
 - What is my topic? What idea or event or person or thing do I want to write about?
 - What is my idea? What am I hoping to say about this topic? What is my attitude toward it, my response to it? My thinking about it? Why do I care about it?
 - Who is my audience? If I were to name one person who most needs to hear what I have to say about this topic, who is that one person? Who most needs the gift I want to give?
 - Why is that person my audience? Why exactly does that person need this gift?
4. Answer these six questions in 2 1/2 minutes (an exercise suggested by writing coach Chip Scanlan):
 - A slug is a short (2-word) description of the project, the shorthand you use to describe it to yourself and others. You have 10 seconds to write the Slug for this project.
 - Why does this matter? You have 30 seconds.
 - What is the point? You have 30 seconds.
 - Why is this being written? You have 30 seconds.
 - What does it say about life, about the world, about the times we live in? You have 40 seconds.
 - What is this really about? In one word. You have 10 seconds.
5. Name the question or problem at the heart of your idea. Your answer to that question is your thesis or mission. The question itself is an engine that will engage the reader. Every reader likes a good mystery, and any authentic question is a mystery. Faced with an authentic question, people will keep reading to find out the answer.
6. Imagine you are building an arch. What is the keystone of that arch—what one idea holds everything together? What question or detail springs the piece off the ground? What evidence or information draws you up from the foundation to the keystone?
7. Find someone you trust, your teacher, your editor, a parent, a trusted peer. Take them out for lunch or a coffee. Tell them the story out loud. Telling the story to someone, having a conversation about it, noticing where your friend is engaged or bored, hearing his questions and comments, will help you see its shape a bit more clearly.

References

Clark, R. P. (2008). *Writing tools: 50 essential strategies for every writer*. Little, Brown and Company.

Hart, J. R. (2007). *A writer's coach: The complete guide to writing strategies*. That Work. Anchor.

Scanlan, C. (2002). *Helping writers take charge: Five tools for editors*. Poynter. Retrieved January 7, 2011, from <http://www.poynter.org/how-tos/newsgathering-storytelling/chip-on-your-shoulder/3891/helping-writers-take-charge-five-tools-for-editors-4/>

Zinsser, W. (1993). *Writing to learn*. Harper Paperbacks.