3

Defining Your Communication's Goals

Your definition of your communication's goals serves as the foundation for all the decisions you will make about what to say and how to say it.

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This is the first of fourteen chapters that support your instructor's aim of helping you develop expertise in the many activities people perform as they write at work. This chapter begins where writing begins—by helping you define what you want your communication to accomplish.

"But wait," you may be thinking. "Why do I need to spend time doing that? Won't my goals for writing at work be obvious? I will write the things my employer asks me to write. Shouldn't I just proceed directly to writing?"

Your goals may be obvious, but *your communication's* goals may not be. And you can't achieve your goals unless your communication achieves its goals.

Your résumé and job application letter offer a perfect example. *Your* goal is to obtain a job interview or offer. But you can achieve your goal only if your résumé and letter achieve *their* goal, which is to persuade the employer that you have exactly the qualifications the employer is looking for. It's your definition of *your résumé and letter's* goals that provides you with the basis for making the many decisions, large and small, that you have to make as you write—decisions ranging from what to include and how to organize, to how to phrase a particular sentence. If your résumé and letter succeed in presenting your qualifications in a way that leads the employer to say, "A perfect match with what I'm looking for!" then they have achieved their goal, and you have achieved yours.

When you start your writing process by defining your communication's goals, you are simply following the example of engineers, computer scientists, architects, and professionals in other fields who design products to serve practical purposes. They begin a project by creating a *design specification,* which details what their yet-to-be-designed product needs to include and how it needs to be put together. This document guides the rest of their work on the project, just as your definition of your communication's goals helps you make every decision, large or small, about your communication. Will your reader find your writing to be more useful and persuasive if you present complex or comprehensive data in the body of your text or in an appendix? If you display your data in a bar graph or table? If you use the abbreviation *ppb* or spell out *parts per billion*? Your definition of your communication's goals will enable you to give good answers to these and the many other questions that arise as you strive to help and influence your reader.

Your Goal: To Envision Your Reader's Response to Each Specific Aspect of Your Communication

How can you convert something as abstract as "a definition of your communication's goals" into a dynamic guide that can help you make good, practical writing decisions? *Answer:* You use the information in your definition to make an interactive mental

portrait of your reader that enables you to "watch" him or her react to each aspect of its structure, appearance, sentences, word choice, and everything else. In your movie, you can see how your reader responds to your choice. If he or she reacts the way you want, go with it. If not, try something else.

Of course, you can never be absolutely sure how someone will react to anything you write or say. A reader's reactions depend on a complex set of factors. To make your predictions as accurate as possible, your instructor and this book will help you achieve the learning objectives listed on the chapter-opening page as you read this chapter, discuss it in class, and apply its advice while working on the writing assignments in your technical communication class.

Figure 3.1 displays a Writer's Guide for Defining Goals that you can use to apply this chapter's advice. If your instructor asks you to read this chapter when you are beginning work on a course project, you may find it helpful to complete each section of the guide as you read the relevant parts of the chapter.

At the end of this chapter you will find a description of the way Stephanie, a college student, used the guide to prepare a successful recommendation to her boss at a summer job. Stephanie's completed Writer's Guide is included.

How to Determine What Your Communication Must Do to Be Useful

As you learned in Chapter 1, people at work read in order to complete tasks that are part of their job responsibilities. To be effective, communications must help them perform those tasks. That is, they must be *useful*—from the *reader's* perspective.

The following guidelines will help you identify your reader's tasks in ways that enable you to determine how to make your communications most useful to your reader.

> Your communication's usefulness is determined by the degree to which its readers can use it to achieve their goals efficiently.

GUIDELINE 1 Describe your reader's goal

Begin creating your mental portrait of your reader by identifying the goal that your communication will help your reader achieve. Stick close to your reader's *immediate* goal—not the overarching goal of creating the best product ever, but the immediate goal of designing one of its parts, deciding which of two companies to buy component parts from, or figuring out how to solve a problem in the manufacturing process for the product.

When naming your reader's goal, use verbs that describe practical actions your reader will perform, such as *choose, decide, design,* and *solve,* not verbs such as *learn,*

Supervisors managing factory production, executives making decisions, and consumers assembling a product need many different things from the communications they read. To write effectively, you must identify and meet the needs of the particular persons to whom you are writing.

FIGURE 3.1

Writer's Guide for Defining Your Communication's Goals

Writer's Guide
DEFINING YOUR COMMUNICATION'S GOALS

YOUR PURPOSE
1. What are you writing?
2. What outcome do you desire?
3. Who is your reader?

CREATING A USEFUL COMMUNICATION   ⟵ **See pages 51–55**
1. What task will your communication help your reader perform?
2. What information does your reader want? (What questions will your reader ask?)
3. How will your reader search for the information? (May use more than one strategy.)
____ Sequential reading from beginning to end
____ Reading for key points
____ Reference reading
____ Other (describe)
4. How will your reader use the information?
____ Compare alternatives (What will be the points of comparison?)
____ Determine how the information will affect him or her (or the organization)
____ Perform a procedure (following instructions step by step)
____ Other (describe)

CREATING A PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION   ⟵ **See page 56**
1. What is your reader's attitude toward your subject? What do you want it to be?
2. What is your reader's attitude toward you? What do you want it to be?
3. What is your reader's attitude toward your organization? What do you want it to be?

READER'S PROFILE   ⟵ **See pages 56–64**
1. Job title
2. Familiarity with your topic
3. Familiarity with your specialty
4. Relationship with you
5. Personal characteristics you should take into account
6. Cultural characteristics you should take into account
7. Relevant features of the context in which your reader will read your communication
8. Who else might read your communication?

CONTRAINTS ON THE WAY YOU CAN WRITE   ⟵ **See page 64**
1. What expectations, regulations, or other factors constrain the way you can write?

ETHICAL TREATMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS   ⟵ **See pages 64–65**
1. Who, besides your reader, are stakeholders in your communication?
2. How will they view its impact on them?

know, or *understand* that concern mental states. Readers at work read for practical purposes. While they must sometimes learn something in order to achieve their purposes, you should first identify what those purposes are.

By looking at your communication from the perspective of your reader's goals rather than your own, you are acting on the most important fact (already stated) about workplace writing: In order to achieve your goal, you must help your readers achieve theirs.

GUIDELINE 2 Describe the tasks your reader will perform *while reading* your communication

The next step in creating your mental portrait of your reader is to describe the tasks the reader will perform while reading your communication. When writing, your mission is to create a communication that helps your reader perform these tasks quickly and easily. Think of yourself as an assistant to a carpenter or a chef. To know which tool to hand this person—whether a hammer or drill, a knife or whisk—you need to know what your reader is trying to do.

When describing your reader's tasks, be specific. To illustrate the practical value of being specific, notice how the following three reader's tasks can each guide your writing decisions. Notice that the reader's tasks may be physical, mental, or a combination.

Three Reader Tasks

- **To choose.** Usually, readers make choices by comparing the alternatives in terms of specific criteria. Knowing what the criteria are will help you decide what to include in your communication. Knowing that your readers will most likely compare the alternatives criterion by criterion suggests that you organize your information around those criteria.
- **To perform a procedure.** Typically, readers read a step, perform the step, than look back at your instructions to read about the next step. Understanding this process suggests that you present your instructions in lists rather than paragraphs so that each step stands alone, making it easy for the reader to find the next one.
- **To determine how certain changes in policy or procedures will affect them and their unit in the organization.** Usually, readers want to imagine what their work will be like after the change. You can help your readers by including a section that addresses each of your readers' concerns, whether they involve budget, efficiency, prestige, or parking spaces.

GUIDELINE 3 Identify the information and ideas your reader will want your communication to provide

If readers didn't want or need information and ideas from you to perform their tasks, there usually would be little reason for you to write. But you are writing, which means they are counting on you to provide what they desire. A description of what your reader will be looking for is an essential part of the mental portrait of your reader that you are creating.

A particularly powerful way to identify this information is to imagine the questions your reader would ask your communication to answer. For some communications, your reader may have only a few questions—or only one—that are obvious to you. Often, though, you will need to use your creativity and research skills to predict *all* the questions your communication needs to answer. This search may continue throughout your work on your message. When defining your communication's

objectives, your goal is to identify the general nature of the reader's questions so that you know where to focus your energies as you proceed.

As a start, you will often find it helpful to decide whether your reader will be reading in the role of a decision maker, adviser, or implementer. Each role leads to a different set of questions.

Decision Makers

The decision maker's role is to say how the organization will act when it is confronted with a particular choice or problem. Decision makers determine what the company should do in the future—next week, next month, next year. They usually want your communication to provide information that helps them choose between alternative courses of action.

Typical Questions Asked by Decision Makers

- **What are your conclusions?** Decision makers want your conclusions, not the raw data you gathered or the details about your procedures. Conclusions can serve as the basis for decisions. Details cannot.
- **What do you recommend?** Decision makers usually ask you about a topic because you have special knowledge of it. This knowledge makes your recommendation especially valuable to them.
- **What will happen?** Decision makers want to know what will occur if they follow your recommendations—and what will happen if they don't. How much money will be saved? How much will production increase? How will customers react?

Advisers

Advisers provide information and advice for decision makers to consider when deciding what the organization should do. Unlike decision makers, advisers are very interested in details. They need to analyze and evaluate the evidence supporting your general conclusions, recommendations, and projections.

Consequently, advisers ask questions that touch on the thoroughness, reliability, and impact of your work.

Typical Questions Asked by Advisers

- Did you use a reasonable method to obtain your results?
- Do your data really support your conclusions?
- Have you overlooked anything important?
- If your recommendation is followed, what will be the effect on other departments?
- What kinds of problems are likely to arise?

Implementers

Decisions, once made, must be carried out by someone. Implementers are these individuals. Their most important questions are the following.

Typical Questions Asked by Implementers

- **What do you want me to do?** Whether you are writing step-by-step instructions, requests for information, or policies that others must follow, implementers want you to provide clear, exact, easy-to-follow directions.

- **Why do you want me to do it?** To produce satisfactory results, implementers often must know the reason for the policy or directive they are reading. Imagine, for instance, the situation of the managers of a factory who have been directed to cut by 15 percent the amount of energy used in production. They need to know whether they are to make long-term energy savings or compensate for short-term shortage. If the latter, they might take temporary actions, such as altering work hours and curtailing certain operations. However, if the reduction is to be long term, they might purchase new equipment and modify the factory building.

- **How much freedom do I have in deciding how to do this?** People often devise shortcuts or alternative ways of doing things. They need to know whether they have this freedom or whether they must do things exactly as stated.

- **What's the deadline?** To be able to adjust their schedules to include a new task along with their other responsibilities, implementers need to know when the new task must be completed.

Is it always fruitful to determine which of these three roles your reader will play—decision maker, adviser, or implementer? Certainly not. You may have other ways of identifying your reader's questions. The key point is to identify the information you need to include in your communication, by determining what your reader wants to know.

GUIDELINE 4 Describe the way your reader will look for the information

To be able to use the information they want from your communication, readers must first be able to find it. Steve Krug has memorably captured readers' desire to spot the information quickly and easily—in his book on website design, *Don't Make Me Think* (2014). Krug emphasizes that readers of a website—or any other communication—want to think about its content. They don't want to take time figuring out where that content is.

To accelerate your reader's search, identify the ways your reader will look for information and design your communication to match his or her search strategy. Here are four search strategies often used on the job, together with writing strategies that aid readers using them.

Four Ways Readers Search for Information

- **Thorough, sequential reading.** When writing for readers who will read each sentence and paragraph in turn, you can systematically build ideas from one sentence, paragraph, and section to the next. To help your readers understand the larger structure of your topic, you can organize hierarchically and tell readers what the hierarchical structure is before discussing details.

- **Reading instructions.** You can number the steps rather than putting them in bullet lists to help readers quickly find their place as they look back at your communication after completing a step.

- **Reading for key points only.** You can use lists, tables, boldface, headings, and other page-design features to make the key points stand out.

- **Reference reading.** When you write to readers who will seek only specific pieces of information, you can use headings, tables of contents, and indexes to guide your readers rapidly to the information they seek.

LEARN MORE For more information on graphics and page design, see Chapters 12, 13, and 14.

How to Determine What Your Communication Must Do to Be Persuasive

The second essential quality of on-the-job-writing is *persuasiveness*. Your communication's impact on your reader's attitudes is important in *any* on-the-job communication, not just recommendations, proposals, and similar documents people usually think of as persuasive. *Any* communication you write has the potential to affect your reader's attitudes toward you and your employer's organization. Does it lead your reader to view you positively as a competent professional? Does it lead your reader to believe that your employer's organization is capable of addressing his or her needs? Also, persuasion isn't always about changing minds. It can involve reinforcing or shaping as well as reversing your reader's attitudes.

GUIDELINE 1 Describe your reader's current attitudes and what you want them to be after reading your communication

When defining your communication's persuasive objectives, you will often know what attitudes you want your reader to have after reading. In this situation, it may seem that you don't need to do anything other than specify what that end point is. However, the writing strategies that are most likely to achieve the outcome you desire depend also on the starting point—that is, on what the reader's attitude is right now, before reading. For example, if the reader's initial attitude toward your topic is positive, your communication's persuasive purpose will be to reinforce that attitude, making it even stronger than before. Because you can build on the reader's existing attitude, you can probably succeed by presenting only positive points about your position. In contrast, if your goal is to reverse the reader's initial attitude, you can expect resistance, and you would need to use very different writing strategies, such as expressing—and then addressing—the negative points your readers would raise.

GUIDELINE 2 Find out why your reader holds his or her current attitudes

When your communication's goal is to reverse your reader's attitudes, it is important to understand why he or she currently holds them. Those reasons tell you the kinds of rationales the reader will find persuasive, and they indicate the specific assumptions, beliefs, and other evidence you need to counter in order to change the reader's attitudes.

How to Identify Factors that May Influence Your Reader's Responses to Your Communication

As we know from life experience, different people respond differently to the same event or situation. The same goes for writing at work. What one person finds to be highly useful and persuasive, another may not. You can greatly increase your ability to write a useful, persuasive communication if your imaginary portrait of your reader includes the professional, personal, and situational factors that can affect his or her responses to your communication.

GUIDELINE 1 Describe your reader's professional role and characteristics

Start by describing your reader's professional roles and characteristics.

- **Job Title.** People with different titles ask different questions and use the answers differently. When reading a report on the industrial emissions from a factory, an environmental engineer working for the factory might ask, "How are these emissions produced, and what can be done to reduce them?" while the corporate attorney might ask, "Do the emissions exceed Environmental Protection Agency limits; if so, how can we limit our fines for these violations?"

- **Familiarity with Your Topic.** Your readers' familiarity with your topic—company inventory levels, employee morale on the second shift, problems with new software—will determine how much background information you must provide to make your communication understandable and useful to them.

- **Knowledge of Your Specialty.** Readers can use the information you provide only if they understand the terms and concepts you employ. A person unfamiliar with your specialty would want you to explain what *zeroing* and the *Z-axis* are. On the other hand, if you provided those explanations for readers who are familiar with this specialty, they would ask, "Why is this writer making me read about things I already know?" Your goal is to learn enough about your reader to be able to strike the right balance between too little and too much explanation.

- **Relationship with You.** When you are having a conversation, you adjust your speech according to your relationship with the other person. You talk with a friend more informally than you do with a college instructor you don't know well—and both your friend and your instructor might be startled if you didn't make such adjustments. Similarly, at work you should write in a way that reflects the relationships you have with your reader.

TRY THIS Think of a recent letter, email, or instant message you wrote to a friend or family member. How did you adjust your content and style to your purpose, reader, and context? How would you have changed your message if you'd written on the same topic to a different reader? What if your purpose or the context had been different?

GUIDELINE 2 Describe your reader's relevant personal characteristics

A variety of personal characteristics can also influence a reader's responses to your writing. You may be addressing an individual with an especially high or low reading level, weak eyesight, or color blindness. Or your reader may detest the use of certain words, insist on particular ways of phrasing certain statements, or want more details about your topic than most readers would. Your success as a writer can depend on identifying and accommodating these characteristics.

GUIDELINE 3 Describe the context in which your reader will read

At work, people interpret what they read as a chapter in an ongoing story. Consequently, they respond to each message in light of prior events as well as their understanding of the people and groups involved. Fill out your mental portrait of your reader by imagining how the following circumstances might influence his or her response to your communication.

- **Recent events related to your topic.** Maybe you are going to announce the reorganization of a department that has just adjusted to another major

organizational change. You'll need to make a special effort to present the newest change in a positive light.

- **Interpersonal, interdepartmental, and intraorganizational relationships.** Conflicts between individuals and groups in an organization can also create delicate writing situations in which certain ways of expressing your message can appear to support one faction and weaken another, even if you have no intention of doing so.

GUIDELINE 4 Global Guideline: Describe your reader's cultural characteristics

One of the great pleasures for many college graduates is the opportunity to work with persons who live in or have been raised in cultures different from their own. The global reach of business puts many employees at even small companies in touch with employees, suppliers, and customers in many other nations. In many parts of the world, employees in the same building come from many countries and cultural backgrounds. No matter what country you live in, this diversity will enable you to learn about other ways of life and other ways of knowing and being in the world.

Cultural Differences that Affect Communication

Among the many possible differences among people from different cultures are differences in what they expect in writing communications and how they respond to what they read. When writing to someone from a cultural background different from yours, you may need to use writing strategies different from those that would succeed with persons from your own culture. Consequently, you may need to add cultural information to the profile you use to make your mental movie of your reader in the act of reading your communication.

There's no single set of cultural characteristics that applies in every case. To achieve the necessary understanding of your reader, you may need to conduct some research; a later section in this chapter suggests ways to do that. When conducting research, it can be helpful to know some of the kinds of differences you may find. The following sections discuss six. As you read about these differences, remember that each contains a range of possibilities. Between the poles are many gradations.

- **Amount of detail expected.** Cultures differ in the amount of detail that people expect in written and oral communication (Meyer, 2014). In countries such as Japan, communications provide a small amount of detail because writers and readers both assume that readers can fill in specifics by drawing on their existing knowledge. These are labeled "high-context" cultures because successful communication depends on the large amount of contextual information the readers bring to the message.

  In contrast, in "low-context" cultures, such as the United States and much of Northern Europe, writers and readers both assume that readers are responsible for bringing very little contextual knowledge to a communication. Consequently, writers typically provide extensive detail, trying to cover every aspect of their topic thoroughly.

  Knowledge of these differences and the ability to tailor communications appropriately is important to you if you are writing from a high- or low-context culture to readers in the other kind of culture. Readers in a high-context culture can be offended if a writer includes more detail than they expect and need. The extra detail would seem to imply that they do not know the things they should know. Similarly, a low-context reader could

feel that the writer who has provided a high-context amount of detail was not considering their needs because much of the expected information (even if not truly needed) wasn't provided.

- **Distance between the top and bottom of organizational hierarchies.** Through research that included the study of managers at IBM facilities in forty countries, Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov (2010) distinguished cultures according to the distance they maintain between people at the bottom and the top of an organization's hierarchy. In the United States and in some European cultures, the distance is very small. In other cultures, such as Japanese culture, the distance is much greater. This information is helpful to writers because Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov also found that, in general, where the distance is greatest, communication styles are most formal whether the communications are written by people in lower ranks to people above them or vice versa.

- **Individual versus group orientation.** Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov also distinguished cultures that focus on the individual from those that focus on the group. Individualistic cultures honor personal achievement and expect individuals to take care of themselves. The dominant cultures in the United States and Northern Europe provide examples. In group-oriented cultures, success belongs to the group, and people pursue group goals rather than individual ones. Many Asian cultures are group-oriented.

  Writers can often increase their effectiveness by adjusting to the individualistic or group orientation of their readers' culture. For example, in persuasive communications in the United States it can be helpful to highlight benefits to the individual, whereas an emphasis on benefits to the readers' organization can be more persuasive to readers in group-oriented cultures.

- **Preference for direct or indirect statements.** Cultures also vary in the directness with which people typically make requests, decline requests, and express their opinions, particularly negative ones. For example, in the United States and Northern European cultures, writers typically decline a request directly. They may apologize and offer an explanation for their decision, but they will state the denial explicitly. In contrast, Japanese and Korean cultures prefer an indirect style (Meyer, 2014). Instead of declining a request explicitly, they might say that fulfilling it would be difficult or that they need time to think about how to reply. In this way, they save the requester the humiliation of being explicitly denied, while readers in those cultures understand that the request will not be fulfilled.

  Using one culture's style when writing to people in another culture can create troublesome misunderstandings. To many U.S. readers, an indirect refusal might be misinterpreted. Because they didn't hear a direct denial, these U.S. readers could believe that the request might be fulfilled later, so they may persist in asking. On the other hand, readers in Japanese and Korean cultures may interpret the direct U.S. style as rude and inconsiderate.

- **Basis of business decisions.** There are also cultural differences in the ways that business decisions are made. In the United States and many European cultures, organizations typically choose among alternatives on the basis of impersonal evaluations and data analyses. In Arab and other cultures, these same decisions are often made on the basis of relationships. For instance, whereas a U.S. company might choose a company to build a new plant or supply parts for its products by carefully studying detailed proposals from the competitors, an Arab company might select the company

represented by a person with whom it would like to do business. These are differences that writers in either kind of culture would need to keep in mind when trying to win business, maintain business relationships, and even respond to complaints from organizations in the other kind of culture.

■ **Interpretation of images, gestures, and words**. An image, gesture, or word can elicit markedly different responses in different cultures. Even the same words have different meanings in different countries and cultures. Photographs, drawings, and other pictures sometimes depict relationships among people that seem ordinary in one culture but violate the cultural customs of another. Gestures likewise have different meanings in different cultures. When people in the United States signal "Okay" by joining a thumb and forefinger to form a circle, they are making a gesture that is offensive in Germany and obscene in Brazil (Axtel, 2007; Cotton, 2013). To avoid the risk of unintentionally offending others, some experts advise technical communicators to avoid showing hands in graphics that will be viewed by people in other cultures.

Applying Cultural Knowledge when You Write

As the preceding discussion indicates, gaining knowledge of your reader's culture can greatly increase your success in creating a communication that your reader will find useful and persuasive. The discussion is not, however, intended to suggest that gaining general knowledge about a culture can provide you with a recipe for adapting your communication strategies to the needs and expectations of your specific reader. When writing to people in other cultures, your reader-centered goal is the same as when addressing people in your own culture: to understand as fully as possible the relevant facts about the specific reader you are addressing.

How to Gain Knowledge about Your Intercultural Readers

A variety of resources can help you learn about your reader's cultural characteristics. The most helpful are people—including your co-workers—who are familiar with your reader's regional and organizational culture.

You can also consult many helpful print and online sources that present broad descriptions of cultures around the world. Here are some of the most helpful.

■ Cyborlink website: www.cyborlink.com
■ GlobalEDGE website: www.globaledge.msu.edu
■ U.S. Department of State Bilateral Fact Sheets: www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/

GUIDELINE 5 Learn who all your readers will be

So far, this chapter has assumed that you will know, from the start, just who your readers will be. That may not always be the case. Communications you prepare on the job may find their way to many people in many parts of your organization. Numerous memos and reports prepared at work are routed to one or two dozen people—and sometimes many more. Even a brief communication you write to one person may be copied or shown to others. To write effectively, you must learn who *all* your readers will be so you can keep them all in mind when you write. The following discussion will help you identify readers you might otherwise overlook.

Phantom Readers

The most important readers of a communication may be hidden from you. That's because at work, written communications addressed to one person are often used by others. Those real but unnamed readers are called *phantom readers.*

Phantom readers are likely to be present behind the scenes when you write communications that require some sort of decision. One clue to their presence is that the person you are addressing is not high enough in the organizational hierarchy to make the decision your communication requires. Perhaps the decision will affect more parts of the organization than are managed by the person addressed, or perhaps it involves more money than the person addressed is likely to control.

Much of what you write to your own boss may actually be used by phantom readers. Many managers accomplish their work by assigning it to assistants. Thus, your boss may sometimes check over your communications, then pass them along to his or her superiors.

After working at a job for a while, employees usually learn which communications will be passed up the organizational hierarchy. However, a new employee may be chagrined to discover that a hastily written memo has been read by executives at very high levels. To avoid such embarrassment, identify your phantom readers, then write in a way that meets their needs as well as the needs of the less influential person you are addressing. Because communications are so frequently forwarded to other readers, never put on paper or screen comments that you wouldn't want disseminated, such as private criticisms of person or policy.

Future Readers

Your communications may be put to use weeks, months, or even years after you imagined their useful life was over. Lawyers say that the memos, reports, and other documents that employees write today are evidence for court cases tomorrow. Most company documents can be subpoenaed for lawsuits concerning product liability, patent violation, breach of contract, and other issues. If you are writing a communication that could have such use, remember that lawyers and judges may be your future readers.

Your future readers also may be employees of your company who may retrieve your old communications for information or ideas. By thinking of their needs, you may be able to save them considerable labor. Even if you are asked to write something "just for the record," remember that the only reason to have a record is to provide some future readers with information they will need to use in some practical way that you should understand and support.

Complex Audiences

Writers sometimes overlook important members of their audience because they assume that all their readers have identical needs and concerns. At work, audiences often consist of diverse groups with widely varying backgrounds and responsibilities.

That's partly because decisions and actions at work often impact many people and departments throughout the organization. For instance, a proposal to change a company's computer system will affect persons throughout the organization, and people in different areas will have different concerns: some with recordkeeping, some with data communication, some with security, and so on. People in each area will examine the proposal.

Even when only a few people are affected by a decision, many employers expect widespread consultation and advice on it. Each person consulted will have his or her own professional role and area of expertise, and each will play that role and apply that expertise when studying your communication.

When you address a group of people who will be reading from many perspectives, you are addressing a *complex audience*. To do that effectively, you need to write in a way that will meet each person's needs without reducing the effectiveness of your communication for the others. Sometimes you may have to make a trade-off by focusing on the needs and concerns of the most influential members of your audience. In any case, the first step in writing effectively to a complex audience is to identify each of its members or groups.

Identifying Readers: An Example

To see one way that a writer might identify the members of a complex audience and adjust his or her communication accordingly, consider Thomas McKay's situation. McKay was writing on behalf of his employer, Midlands Research Incorporated, to request compensation from another company, Aerotest Corporation, which had sold Midlands faulty equipment for testing smokestack emissions. McKay addressed his letter to Robert Fulton, Aerotest's Vice President for Sales, but realized that Fulton would distribute copies to many others at Aerotest. To identify these other readers, McKay asked himself who at his own employer's company, Midlands, would be asked to read such a letter if it received one. In this way, McKay identified the following phantom readers.

- Engineers in the department that designed and manufactured the faulty equipment, who would be asked to determine whether Aerotest's difficulties really resulted from flaws in the design
- Aerotest's lawyers, who would be asked to determine the company's legal liability
- Personnel in Aerotest's repair shop, who would be asked to examine the costs Midlands said it had incurred in repairing the equipment

To meet the needs of the diverse readers in his complex audience, McKay created a letter with a modular design, a commonly used workplace strategy in which different, readily distinguishable parts of a communication each address a distinct group of readers. Modular designs are very common at websites, where home pages often have links for different kinds of users. For example, your college's home page may have separate links for current students, prospective students, faculty, and graduates. Figure 3.2 shows the modular design of the home page of a company that

FIGURE 3.2

Modular Design of a Website

The National Institute on Drug Abuse designed its website to help each of its major groups of visitors quickly find the information they are seeking.

National Institutes on Health/National Institute on Drug Abuse

Scrolling down this page in the section for patients and families, visitors can find links to information on many topics, including prevention, research on treatment, and clinical trials (not shown in this figure).

The site provides a link to a Spanish version for visitors who can read that language more easily than English.

The site has separate areas for five major groups of visitors: researchers, medical and health professionals, patients and their families, parents and teachers, and students and young adults.

The site also provides links for persons who are seeking certain kinds of information, such as details about specific drugs, funding, and news and events.

For persons seeking treatment for themselves or others, the site provides a prominent link to a resource that will help them find a local substance-abuse treatment service.

MIDLANDS RESEARCH INCORPORATED
2796 Buchanan Boulevard   Cincinnati, Ohio 45202

October 17, 2016

Mr. Robert Fulton
Vice President for Sales
Aerotest Corporation
485 Connie Avenue
Sea View, California 94024

Dear Mr. Fulton:

In August, Midlands Research Incorporated purchased a Model Bass 0070 sampling system from Aerotest. Our Environmental Monitoring Group has been using—or trying to use—that sampler to fulfill the conditions of a contract that MRI has with the Environmental Protection Agency to test for toxic substances in the effluent gases from thirteen industrial smokestacks in the Cincinnati area. However, the manager of our Environmental Monitoring Group reports that her employees have had considerable trouble with the sampler.

These difficulties have prevented MRI from fulfilling some of its contractual obligations on time. Thus, besides frustrating our Environmental Monitoring Group, particularly the field technicians, these problems have also troubled Mr. Bernard Gordon, who is our EPA contracting officer, and the EPA enforcement officials who have been awaiting data from us.

I am enclosing two detailed accounts of the problems we have had with the sampler. As you can see, these problems arise from serious design and construction flaws in the sampler itself. Because of the strict schedule contained in our contract with the EPA, we have not had time to return our sampler to you for repair. Therefore, we have had to correct the flaws ourselves, using our Equipment Support Shop, at a cost of approximately $15,000. Because we are incurring the additional expense only because of problems with the engineering and construction of your sampler, we hope that you will be willing to reimburse us, at least in part, by supplying without charge the replacement parts listed on the enclosed page. We will be able to use those parts in future work.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Thomas McKay
Thomas McKay
Vice President
Environmental Division

Enclosures: 2 Accounts of Problems
1 Statement of Repair Expenses
1 List of Replacement Parts

In his letter requesting compensation for expenses caused by faulty equipment, McKay addresses one person (Robert Fulton) but designed his message for the complex audience he knows will read his letter.

In the first two paragraphs, McKay provides background information of interest to all members of his complex audience at Aerotest.

In the third paragraph, McKay discusses his three major points: The equipment failure resulted from faulty design and construction, repairs were costly for his company, and his company wants compensation.

McKay created a modular design by enclosing several items, each useful primarily to one part of his complex audience at Aerotest.

• For Aerotest's engineers and lawyers, two accounts of the problems are intended to persuade that the difficulties really did arise from Aerotest's faulty equipment.

• For Aerotest's repair shop, a statement of the repair expenses intended to persuade that the costs he said his company incurred were reasonable.

• For Aerotest's shipping department, a list of replacement parts to use when sending the parts to McKay's company.

makes surgical equipment. To create a modular design for his letter to Aerotest, McKay wrote a one-page letter that provided background information for all his readers (Figure 3.3). He also attached enclosures addressed to specific groups in his complex audience. Two enclosures contained detailed accounts of the problems Midlands encountered with the emissions testing equipment. With these enclosures, McKay provided evidence that the problems encountered by Midlands were, in fact, caused by poor work on Aerotest's part. McKay's third enclosure was a detailed statement of the repair expenses, thereby enabling Aerotest's repair technicians to see that the reimbursement Midlands requested was fully justified. Of course,

This chapter's main point: When defining your communication's goals, focus on your reader, not yourself.

neither McKay nor the website designers could have developed a modular design if they had been unaware of the complexity of their audiences. When defining your communication's goals, take similar care to identify all of your readers.

Identify Any Constraints on the Way You Write

So far, this chapter has focused on developing a full understanding of your reader as you define your communication's goals. As you gather the information that will form the basis for the way you craft your communication, you should also learn about any expectations, regulations, or other factors that may constrain what you can say and how you can say it. In the working world, expectations and regulations can affect any aspect of a communication—even tone, use of abbreviations, layout of tables, size of margins, and length (usually specifying a maximum length, not a minimum).

Some constraints come directly from your employer, reflecting such motives as the company's desire to cultivate a particular corporate image, protect its legal interests (because any written document can be subpoenaed in a lawsuit), and preserve its competitive edge (for example, by preventing employees from accidentally tipping off competitors about technological breakthroughs). In addition, most organizations develop their own writing customs or conventions—"the way we write things here." Writing constraints can also originate from outside the company—for instance, from government regulations that specify how patent applications, environmental impact reports, and many other types of documents are to be prepared. Similarly, scientific, technical, or other professional journals have strict rules about many aspects of the articles they publish.

Some companies publish style guides that describe their regulations about writing. Find out if your employer has one. You can also learn about these constraints by asking co-workers and reading communications similar to yours that your co-workers have written in the past.

How to Treat Your Communication's Stakeholders Ethically

There are many strategies for assuring that on-the-job writing is ethical. Some writers use an *alarm bell strategy*. They trust that if an ethical problem arises in their writing, an alarm bell will go off in their heads. Unless they hear that bell, however, they don't think about ethics. Other writers use a *checkpoint strategy*. At a single, predetermined point in the writing process, they review their work from an ethical perspective.

In contrast, this book teaches a more active and thorough *process strategy* for ethical writing. In it, you integrate an ethical perspective into *every* stage of your work on a communication. It's important to follow a process strategy because at every step of writing you make decisions that shape the way your communication will affect other people. Accordingly, at every step you should consider your decisions from the viewpoint of your personal ethical beliefs about the ways you should treat others.

GUIDELINE 1 **Ethics Guideline: Identify your communication's stakeholders**

In a process approach to ethical writing, no step is more important than identifying the people you will keep in mind throughout the rest of your writing effort. When

you follow the reader-centered approach to writing as explained in this book, you begin by identifying your readers.

To write ethically, you must also identify another group of people: the individuals who will gain or lose because of your message. Collectively, these people are called *stakeholders* because they have a stake in what you are writing. Only by learning who these stakeholders are can you assure that you are treating them in accordance with your own ethical values.

How to Identify Stakeholders

Because communications written at work often have far-reaching effects, it's easy to overlook some stakeholders. If that happens, a writer risks causing accidental harm that could have been avoided if only the writer had thought through all the implications of his or her communications.

To identify the stakeholders in your communications, begin by listing the people or groups who will be directly affected by what you say and how you say it. These individuals may include many other people in addition to your readers. For instance, when Craig was preparing a report for his managers on the development of a new fertilizer, he realized that his stakeholders included not only the managers but also the farmers who would purchase the fertilizer and the factory workers who would handle the chemicals used to manufacture it.

Next, list people who will be affected indirectly. For example, because fertilizers run off the land into lakes and rivers, Craig realized that the stakeholders of his report included people who use these lakes and rivers for drinking water or recreation. Indeed, as is the case with many communications, the list of indirect stakeholders could be extended to include other species (in this case, the aquatic life in the rivers and lakes) and the environment itself.

Finally, think of the people who may be remotely affected. These people may include individuals not yet born. For example, if Craig's fertilizer does not break down into harmless elements, the residue in the soil and water may affect future generations.

GUIDELINE 2 Determine how your communication's stakeholders will view its impact on them

A crucial test of the ethical impact of any action is to consider it from the perspective of the persons affected. Sometimes you can do this imaginatively: How would I feel if I were affected this way? But our ability to imagine others' feelings diminishes as we attempt to put ourselves in the position of persons increasingly distant from us in age, experience, and culture. Sometimes, we just need to ask.

To learn how other people will feel about an action or outcome doesn't mean we have to act or write in a way they would prefer. The ethical question for each of us is whether we are treating them fairly and respectfully. What we need to do is be sure that we have settled on proceeding in ways that meet the ethical standards by which we guide our lives.

Putting Your Definition into Action: An Example

To see how defining the goals of your communications provides specific, detailed insights that you can use to write successfully on the job, consider how it helped Stephanie at a summer job with a nonprofit organization that provides Braille translations for books and other reading material requested by people who are blind.

Silatul Rahim Dahman, who is 100 percent blind, writes and reads at his computer at work. He is Information Communication and Technology Manager at the Malaysian Association for the Blind.

All the Braille translations were prepared by volunteers who worked at home. Stephanie noted that some urgently needed translations, such as those of textbooks that students required for their courses, weren't completed on time because translations were assigned to volunteers on a rotating basis rather than on their ability to complete a translation rapidly. She decided to write a memo recommending to her boss, Ms. Land, that urgently needed translations be assigned to the fastest volunteers instead of to the next volunteer on the list.

Stephanie began by filling out the Writer's Guide shown on page 52. Her completed worksheet is shown in Figure 3.4.

By completing the worksheet, Stephanie gained many useful insights about the most effective way to write her memo. For example, when responding to the questions about her reader's attitudes, Stephanie realized that Ms. Land would probably react defensively to any recommendation about the current system. Ms. Land had created the system and believed that it worked very well. Furthermore, she was the type of person who resists change. By focusing on her reader's characteristics, Stephanie concluded that Ms. Land might even resist the suggestion that a problem existed. To write effectively, Stephanie would have to demonstrate that the current system could be improved—without seeming to criticize Ms. Land.

The worksheet also reminded Stephanie of Ms. Land's belief that student employees like Stephanie didn't understand the complexity of running a nonprofit organization. Therefore, Stephanie predicted, Ms. Land would immediately hunt for holes in Stephanie's knowledge. Consequently, she decided to demonstrate her grasp of the situation by addressing many issues she hadn't previously thought to include: Who would determine which translations were urgent? What criteria would be used? How would the most productive translators be identified? How would the work of the office staff be altered?

Similarly, when filling out the Writer's Guide section on context, Stephanie remembered that recently Ms. Land had successfully resisted pressure from some members of the agency's board of directors to force her to retire so a younger person might take over. Stephanie realized that although a reference to the board members' desire to streamline operations might be persuasive for some readers, it would likely arouse hostility from Ms. Land.

Finally, while completing the section concerning stakeholders, Stephanie realized that, so far, she had thought about her plan only from the perspective of persons requesting rapid Braille translations. She had neglected to consider her plan's impact on the volunteer translators. By talking with a few, she learned that those who might be judged less reliable and less speedy would be deeply offended. To avoid causing them to lose self-esteem, she modified her proposal: The agency would ask all translators how many pages they could translate in a week. Urgent translations would go to those who made the largest commitments. Translators who failed to meet their original commitment would be invited to specify a lower commitment that would better suit their personal schedules.

Because of her expertise at defining objectives, Stephanie was able to write a detailed, diplomatic, four-page memo. After several months of deliberation, Ms. Land accepted Stephanie's proposal. Stephanie's example illustrates the many *immediate* insights you can gain by taking this reader-centered approach. But the benefits will continue. The rest of this book's chapters tell how you can use your reader-centered understanding of a communication's objectives throughout all your work on it.

FIGURE 3.4

Stephanie's Completed Writer's Guide for Defining Your Communication's Goals

<div>

Writer's Guide
DEFINING YOUR COMMUNICATION'S GOALS

YOUR PURPOSE

1. What are you writing?

   A proposal for completing more urgent translations on time.

2. What outcome do you desire?

   Adoption of a system that assigns urgent translations to the quickest volunteers.

3. Who is your reader?

   Ms. Land.

CREATING A USEFUL COMMUNICATION

1. What task will your communication help your reader perform?

   Deciding which system for assigning translations is best.

2. What information does your reader want? (What questions will your reader ask?)

   What evidence do you have that there is a problem?

   Who would determine which translations are urgent?

   How would we decide which translators are assigned urgent translations?

   Will your system really work? Are other agencies using it successfully?

3. How will your reader search for the information? (May use more than one strategy)

   ___X___ Sequential reading from beginning to end

   _____ Reading for key points

   ___X___ Reference reading

   _____ Other (describe)

4. How will your reader use the information?

   ___X___ Compare alternatives (what will be the points of comparison?)

   Cost, efficiency, and impact of the change on office staff and volunteers.

   _____ Determine how the information will affect him or her (or the organization)

   _____ Perform a procedure (following instructions step by step)

   _____ Other (describe)

CREATING A PERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

1. What is your reader's attitude toward your subject? What do you want it to be?

   She believes the current system is the best possible. I want her to see that mine is better.

(*Continued*)

</div>

FIGURE 3.4

(Continued)

2. What is your reader's attitude toward you? What do you want it to be?

Ms. Land thinks I am a good summer employee but that, like all summer employees, I am not knowledgeable enough to make recommendations worth serious consideration.

3. What is your reader's attitude toward your organization? What do you want it to be?

Not relevant since I work in Ms. Land's department.

READER'S PROFILE

1. Job title

Manager of the Translation Department.

2. Familiarity with your topic

Very familiar.

3. Familiarity with your specialty

Very familiar.

4. Relationship to you

Ms. Land is my boss. She likes to maintain a formal superior-subordinate relationship.

5. Personal characteristics you should take into account

She designed the current system and may feel defensive if I suggest it can be improved.

6. Cultural characteristics you should take into account

None.

7. Relevant features of the context in which your reader will read your communication

Ms. Land may have been told that it is time for her to retire.

8. Who else might read your communication?

A few experienced employees. They will have the same perspective as Ms. Land.

CONSTRAINTS ON THE WAY YOU CAN WRITE

1. What expectations, regulations, or other factors constrain the way you can write?

If Ms. Land has been asked to retire, she will be very sensitive to any statement that seems to criticize her. I should avoid statements she might interpret at criticism.

ETHICAL TREATMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS

1. Who, besides your reader, are stakeholders in your communication?

Persons requesting urgent translations. Volunteers.

2. How will they view its impact on them?

Persons making urgent requests will appreciate the better service. Volunteers who aren't selected for the top group may feel that they aren't valued.

Conclusion

This chapter's major lesson is simple: You can greatly increase your ability to write successfully if you define your communication's goals by focusing on your reader, not yourself. Learn enough about your reader and your reader's context to make a mental movie of him or her in the act of reading. Use this movie to predict the way your reader is likely to respond to ways you might write your communication. Using your imagination and creativity in the same ways, ensure that you are writing ethically: Identify your communication's stakeholders and the ways your communication might affect them.

USE WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED

EXERCISE YOUR EXPERTISE

1. Find an example of a communication you might write in your career. Following the guidelines in this chapter, define its objective. Be sure to identify each of the following items.

   - The readers and their characteristics
   - The stakeholders and the ways they might be affected by the communication
   - The final result the writer desires
   - What the communication must do to be useful to its readers
   - What the communication must do to be persuasive to its readers

   Then explain how the communication's features have been tailored to fit its objectives. If you can think of ways the communication might be improved, make recommendations.

2. Using the Writer's Guide shown in Figure 3.1, define the objectives of an assignment you are preparing for your technical communication class.

EXPLORE ONLINE

Find a web page that could be used as a resource for a person in the profession you're preparing to enter. Describe the target readers, what the web page's creators wanted to help these readers do, and the ways they wanted to influence the readers' attitudes and actions. Evaluate their success in achieving these objectives.

COLLABORATE WITH YOUR CLASSMATES

Working with another student, pick a technical or scientific topic that interests you both. Next, one of you should locate an article on the topic in a popular magazine such as *Time* or *Discover*, and the other should locate an article on the topic in a professional or specialized journal. Working individually, you should each study the ways your article has been written so that its target audience will find the article to be useful and persuasive. Consider such things as the way your article opens, the language used, the types of details provided, and the kind of visuals included. Next, meet together to compare the writing strategies used to meet the needs and interests of the two audiences. Present your results in the way your instructor requests.

APPLY YOUR ETHICS

A variety of websites present case studies that describe ethical issues that arise in business, engineering, science, and other fields. Locate, read, and respond to one such case.

REFLECT FOR TRANSFER

1. Write a memo to your instructor describing a communication that you or others received that was either unhelpful or unpersuasive. Identify the ways that the writer could have used the advice in this chapter to improve the communication's effectiveness.
2. Write a memo to your instructor in which you describe a communication you wrote that was useful and persuasive because you had defined its goals along the lines described in this chapter. Explain the features of your communication that were effective because of your thinking about the communication from the perspective of your reader.

   Alternatively, think of a communication you wrote that was not as useful or persuasive as you had hoped because you had not thought about it from your reader's perspective. Tell how you would write it differently now—and why.

Case: In MindTap, the case titled "Announcing the New Insurance Policy" is well suited for use with this chapter.