

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Write more focused, concise, and effective correspondence, proposals and reports by concentrating on your specific audience.

by Dianna Booher

You have done the necessary research, formulated a sensible proposal, and even rewritten the final draft for your presentation at tomorrow's staff meeting. The only factor you failed to consider is one of the most important components of the communication process: knowing "to whom it may concern."

How many countless documents have crossed your desk that left you scratching your head with their redundant remarks, incomplete ideas, or unclear instructions?

I call these "so-what" messages because your likely response to them is, "So what?" Are you to write a report, hold a meeting, propose a solution, or file the information for later use?

Whether it is a presentation to your peers, a memo to your staff, or an email to an associate, it's not always what you say or how you say it but how you connect to your audience that will determine the success of your messages.

Rank your readers

Who is your audience? Are you communicating to an entire client organization, an average-sized department, or a few colleagues? Are they decision makers, managers, or those with only veto power? Is their relationship to you that of a supervisor, a peer, or a subordinate?

More often than not, your reports, letters, and memos will go through several people--either for approval or general information. When writing to a mixed audience, first rank readers in importance. After you have pinpointed and ranked each reader or group of readers, give the most important readers their information first.

Knowing your audience will help you streamline your research, shape your key message, select the most appropriate details, and adapt your words more appropriately.

What are their interests? Part of knowing "to whom it may concern" is knowing their concerns, biases, and backgrounds.

Vocabularies, areas of expertise, even mindsets differ as you move across company hierarchies, as well as up and down them. What is of little concern to a CEO may hold greater interest to a sales manager and be of extreme importance to a marketing director.

Management will most likely be concerned with issues regarding profit projections, a project's overall significance to the company, corporate image concerns, and necessary next steps in planning.

General professionals will be more concerned with the day-to-day issues--why a project is undertaken, how the research is carried out, how the policy will be reevaluated, and what specific part they play.

Specialists will be more interested in information required to do a specific job such as statistics, forms, flow charts, maps, formulas, and other things generally included in the "fine print."

Make your readers' interests a priority, and you'll grab and keep their attention.

What do they already know?

How much do they already know about the subject? Instead of reiterating the obvious, be sure you don't overload others with meaningless or repetitive detail. But be sure you give enough background on the problem so they fully understand the situation.

While your primary audience may understand all the concepts and terms, your secondary readers may need more detail because of their uninvolvedness. And avoid using jargon for those readers outside your narrow field. You're only courting misunderstanding.

How much your readers know dictates how much detail and what detail to include in which sections of your document.

So what's the answer to the dilemma when communicating with multiple readers who have varied interests, backgrounds, and technical expertise?

Structure. Put your most important information to your most important reader up front. Lesser-ranking readers will need to read further to get the details they want.

How will they use your information? Delivering a specific point in your document is your responsibility. Do you expect your readers to consider, discuss, act on, research, or instruct others? The answer to this question will help you decide whether to write, phone, or meet face to face.

If your oral presentation or document is meant to keep them informed on new advances in their field, give a broad scope of the discovery and zero in on its significance for other projects and decisions. If you want them to duplicate or build on your work, give them direction--all the if's, and's, what's, and how's. If they are to use your info as the basis for a decision, present your case persuasively to win their cooperation.

Identify the "to whom it may concern" of your documents and oral presentations and customize your intentions and details accordingly. Clear intentions result in effective results.