Faux Pas of Misjudging Your Audience

From Twitter, to Facebook, to academic papers, to articles for your summer internship, one of the first rules to successful writing is knowing your audience.

However, it’s easier said than done.

Telling someone to “know their audience” or to “write to their audience” can leave them with only a vague idea that their work may not be doing just that. The question is whether it leaves them with an action step.

So, here are a few pointers I’ve picked up along the way.

1) **Identify your audience.** It seems blatant, but who are you addressing? Are they a professional? What is their level of education? Research a bit before attacking the topic at hand.

2) **Consider their goals.** Why are they reading your work? What will keep them reading? Do they seek information, advice, change? What is their relationship to you? From your investigation, evaluate what they’ve sought previously and how you can provide something new.

3) **Establish your goals.** Why are you communicating with this audience? What should they know, or be able to do, after reading your material? Specifically, articulate how this piece should affect your relationship with them or effect change in some manner.

4) **Write specifically.** Be intentional and direct. Particularly with social media, every word counts. Use specific examples, instructions, statistics, and desired outcomes; you determine what you feed your audience.

5) **Question your work.** Does your piece achieve your intended goals? How can you make it more concise? Do your language and tone reflect your target audience? Do you specifically address both their goals and yours for the conversation?

Certainly there are many other “rules of thumb” floating through cyberspace. But, as intuitive as these may seem, once we start to write—be it a tweet or an article—we forget these principles. Our work results in a nebulous, directionless conglomeration of adjectives. Or, worse yet, we choose a word mismatched for our audience and send the wrong message entirely.

For instance, United-Kingdom-based Text Marketer published an infographic discussing the importance of marketing to women. The problem? The entire infographic referred to women as “girls” (http://www.prdaily.com/Uploads/Public/Images/Girl-marketing-Infographic.jpg).

Not only did this misrepresent their point, it misjudged their audience, coming off as invalid and potentially disrespectful.
Good effort, but better luck next time! Bottom line: consider your audience and consider your words, so as not to make the same mistake!

By: Jordan Blackbird

Jordan is a senior interpersonal communication and English double-major, with a concentration in professional writing and a minor in interactive media. She is interning in the Office of Technology Development at Penn State Hershey Medical Center in Hershey, PA. Contact her with questions, connections, or suggestions at jblack@udel.edu.
Infographic courtesy of Text Marketer, a mobile marketing company in the United Kingdom. The infographic illustrate marketing trends of female consumers, though it misrepresents the population in its label of “girls” rather than “women.”