

chapter 1 |

# Who Am I Writing for, and Incidentally, Who Am I?



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## Get to Know the Audience of One

The very concept of an audience is stained with the word's original meaning—a large group of people *listening* to a speaker. The traditional audience was a mass. Before the Web, we tended to think of our audience as a rather vaguely defined crowd or, perhaps, as a collection of several groups, each of which had a different interest in our subject matter. A single speech, book, or document would address all these groups, we hoped.

On the Web, though, the mass audience is crumbling. In its place, small groups are emerging, forming around common interests, aims, jobs, politics, hobbies, or obsessions. And within these groups, we see individuals arising, demanding that we deliver information specifically tailored to their personal taste. We are moving from a writing situation in which one author addressed a single vast audience to a process in which many individuals exchange information with each other, aided by some people who do more writing than others.

The mass audience was always just a convenient fantasy, allowing us to ignore the complexity of groups with competing aims, and within those groups, individuals, each with a unique perspective. We had no way of knowing each person we were writing to back then, and we had little useful information about the groups they might be segmented into by marketers intent on persuading them to buy. We were forced to guess what people needed, and we often imagined that the audience was a lot like us and our teammates. As a result, we often failed to connect with people in a meaningful way.

You can't hold a conversation with a faceless cloud of people, a generalized audience such as "beginners" or "experts." You won't get your point across. You will lose them one by one.

*Your audience is one single reader. 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.*

—John Steinbeck

*I know I am solid and sound,  
To me the converging objects of the  
universe perpetually flow,  
All are written to me, and I must  
get what the writing means.*

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

## The more you know about your visitors, the better you can write for them

When you actually know a lot about the people you are writing for, you can tailor your site to their needs. For example, you can:

- Come up with more of the topics they want.
- Organize those topics the way these people think.
- Use words that they use.
- Adopt a tone they find congenial.
- Tailor your words to the relationship you have developed with them.

In these ways, you allow your visitors to influence the way you write. In a real conversation, you are always aware of the way the other person is reacting—where they nod, when they lunge forward hoping to interrupt, and so on. You adapt your words and tone to indicate how you regard the other person, what you want, where you are going. But when you do not have the full bandwidth of direct human contact, you have to guess what the other people think of you, how you are going to relate to them, what they want to hear, and what you want to say to them.

The more sensitive you are to online conversation and its nuances, the more you can eliminate the odd quirks, biases, and focal points in your prose, so it begins to seem transparent to the readers, that is, you do not rub them the wrong way with your own personal agenda. In part, you are erasing your own originality, but you're doing this for a reason: to make contact, to make sense, to convince, to reach out to this other person. How sociable!

Do you really know your audience? We write for ourselves, for our boss, for our team. Oh, and incidentally, we may draw on the little we know about our audience, too, but that doesn't take us very far. So we soon forget it.

In hundreds of meetings, we have heard clients, bosses, and peers announce that the target audience is, well, beginners, oh, and some experts, too. Enough said. On to the next agenda item.

In situations like that, writers tend to write for each other or the team, rather than the actual consumers of the information. Result: consumers find the prose impenetrable, and gripe about the frightening amount of jargon, the unfriendly tone, and the confusing

way the material is organized.

Info consumers are not you. To psyche out what topics really matter to your many different audiences and to develop a tone that works for individual members of that crowd, you need to learn more about them as members of particular niche groups, and, more important, as unique individuals.

*Armed with information, access, and power, today's customers can dictate new practices and policies faster than your firm is likely to be able to implement them.*

—Patricia Seybold, Ronni Marshak, and Jeffrey Lewis, *The Customer Revolution*

## Information consumers are pushy

On the Web, most consumers of information demand content fast. They may be surfing to amuse themselves, to learn something, to buy, or to participate in some community; but no matter what their aim, they have seen that some sites care who they are, allowing them access to all the information the organization has, while also personalizing the topics, tone, format, and transactions. These uppity consumers are impatient, self-absorbed, and a bit confused, but if you give them the content and service they want, they will return over and over, becoming loyal fans and customers. Here are a few of the things these consumers demand of your text:

### “Don’t waste my time.”

No more lengthy explanations. Clear away those introductions, transitions, summaries. Get to the point.

### “Remember me.”

Like Hamlet’s father, I want to be remembered when I arrive at your site. But recognition goes beyond greeting me by name. I want to see topics I care about, like on my personal version of the *Wall Street Journal, Interactive Edition*. I want to have my pages look and sound like the design I chose for My Page. I want your text to sound as if you share my concerns, goals, and obsessions.

### “Let me answer my own question.”

Embed answers right in the forms I have to fill out. If I have to go to the Help or FAQ, organize it the way I think. Provide all the answers, not just the part that marketing folks feel comfortable with. Give me a way to run a diagnostic on my own problem, so I can troubleshoot it myself. Admit all problems, and send me to a discussion board where other consumers have come up with solutions.

*A good designer and a good writer have to share certain characteristics, among the most important being empathy.*

—Donald Norman, *Turn Signals are the Facial Expressions of Automobiles*

*Purpose seizes us, binds us rather than being deliberately crafted by us.*

—Robert Weber, *The Created Self*

**“Exceed my expectations.”**

The road to delight leads past satisfactory performance. When you give me more than I expect, I’m pleased. If you go beyond the standard a few more times, I am yours.

**“Talk to me in real time.”**

If I’ve just put a product in the shopping cart, don’t act like you don’t know. Drop the pitch for that product. Add stuff about add-ons. Just as I expect used links to change color, I expect your system to know where I have been and what pages I have looked at, adjusting the text to reflect that.

**“Let me customize the content.”**

I like some content, and I want to see that first. Let me choose what shows up at the top of my own page. Let me opt in for e-mail about topics, products, services, and controversies I am interested in right now, and when I change my mind, let me unsubscribe from e-mail hell.

**“I want to feel special.”**

I’ve been to your site so often I feel like I know you. I’ve read much of your material and I have debated with you, either in my head, or in e-mail. I expect you to recognize that I am a repeat reader.

With all these impulses, each consumer envisions a different text. At the least, each small group of consumers demands that you pay attention to them, reflecting their interests in your organization, attitude, and style.

## Figure out who you are really talking to

When you ask your boss or client who actually consumes your text, you often get a lot of waving of hands without much detail. Maybe you hear a few numbers that research developed six months ago, some shorthand guidelines issued by a committee reviewing the latest design, and some slogans from the latest marketing campaign. But you rarely hear much about individuals, and because your job is to develop and carry on a conversation with these people, your prose can easily take on the all-purpose smarmy charm of an airline clerk announcing another delay. The more you know individuals in your audience, the better you can write for them.

To find out about real individuals, you may be able to examine a consumer's profile, which may be a dossier that the site should build as the consumer navigates, ponders, buys, sends e-mail, phones in, faxes a question, visits a kiosk, clicks in from a handheld. Ideally, your organization should have a single collection point for all information about each consumer.

Unfortunately, many organizations have no idea who consumes their text. Manufacturers of packaged goods, for instance, haven't a clue who most of their customers are because they tend to act as if the big buyers at the department stores and grocery chains are their "real customers." The only real consumers they are aware of are the ones who complained or sued. Companies that sell big-ticket items gather a lot of financial information about each customer, but sometimes that gets spread across several departments, so there is no one file you can open, to review the facts about a particular individual.

If your site has any profiles for consumers, absorb them. But if those profiles are skimpy, or so mired in transactional information that you cannot envision the person behind the sales, you may need to do your own research to find out who is really consuming your text.

### First, volunteer:

- Answer the phone in technical and customer support.
- Respond to e-mails sent to technical and customer support.
- Schmooze with consumers at trade shows, conventions, user group meetings.

*Develop a deep understanding of how your customers do their jobs.*

—Patricia Seybold and Ronni Marshak, *Customer.com*

**Then watch:**

- Watch through the one-way mirror as the facilitators lead demographically representative consumers through questions created by the marketing group. (See if you can add a few questions of your own).
- Hover around the usability lab. Watch how people get in trouble using your site. (Caution: this experience can be embarrassing if your text happens to be on-screen).

**Next, read:**

- Competitive analysis to see what the competition is creating for whom, and why.
- Marketing and sales numbers to see what the trends are.
- Marketing materials and plans to see how the organization is positioning itself, and for whom.
- Product documentation to see what tasks the writers imagine people are doing, what concepts need explaining, and what context people are assumed to be using the product in.
- Annual reports—the biggest marketing documents of all—to see how upper management is trying to position the company in front of shareholders and analysts.
- Every news story about your organization to figure out who the reporter thinks your audience is.

**Then schmooze:** Talk with anyone who has met, corresponded with, sold to, mollified, or hung up on a consumer, including:

- Sales reps and sales engineers
- Marketing people
- Researchers
- Trainers
- Technical writers
- Phone support and field-support personnel
- Consultants
- People in your partner organizations
- Anyone who hires or manages the actual consumers

Finally, when you have a good mental picture of whoever is visiting the site, go out and meet the consumers to see what they are really like. Pick a dozen consumers who matter—ones whose good

*In between setting out and coming back, they continually shifted their goals, their preferences, and even their rules without hesitation. Shopping was in many ways a process of discovering or creating underlying preferences rather than acting in accordance with them.*

—John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information*

will and loyalty guarantee the site's survival. Not partners. Not influential stakeholders, like investors, ad guys, designers, engineers. Real consumers of your text. Try to get to talk to them at length, in person, so you can watch their reactions. But as Hackos and Redish (1998) suggest, you must ask a lot of questions.

**Ask about work:**

- What's your official job title?
- What kind of content do you really use on the job?
- What tasks do you have to accomplish using that content?
- Where did you learn to do your job? (School, training, on the job training, stand-up classes, Web courses, gossip, whatever).
- Where does work come from, when it arrives on your desk, and where does it go after you get through with it? (Workflow)
- What is an average day like? A crunch day?
- How much leeway do you have to decide what you do when?
- Where do you turn for general news relating to your work, organization, or industry?
- What kind of Internet connection do you have at work?

**Probe motivation and free will:**

- What are your main goals at work? How do particular tasks relate to those goals?
- Is it your idea to come to our site, or are you required to do so?
- Do you feel you have the power to affect the culture of your workplace?
- Are you regularly involved in decisions that revolve around our kind of content?
- What do you most like to do when exploring our site?
- Do you feel eager to learn new information that relates to your tasks, your job, your organization, or your industry?
- What are the consequences if you do not find the information you need on our site?

**Focus on tasks at work:**

- What are the main tasks you do on the job?
- What are the little tasks within the big ones? (Hierarchy.)

*Is there agreement throughout the organization about who your end customers are and what matters to them?*

— Patricia Seybold, Ronni Marshak, and Jeffrey Lewis, *The Customer Revolution*

- In what sequence do you usually do all these tasks?
- Which ones do you do by yourself? With other people?
- How long have you done each of these tasks?
- How did you learn to do each task?
- How have the tasks changed over the years?
- Which tasks currently involve using our site?
- What tools do you use to perform those tasks?
- How comfortable are you with those tools?
- Which of your tools do you like most, dislike, and why?
- What problems come up when you are working on a task?
- How do you generally solve the problems?
- How do you describe the process of analyzing and solving one of these problems?
- How well does our content match what you need to complete the task?
- What is missing?
- What other sites do you use in performing your tasks?

**Ask about home, if appropriate:**

- What are your aims in life?
- What do you do for fun?
- How much time do you spend on the Internet at home? TV? Radio?
- What kind of hobbies do you have?
- What kind of neighborhood do you live in?
- What kind of Internet connection do you have at home?
- How close are you with your family? Friends?
- What languages do you speak at home? Read? How familiar are you with languages other than the one you consider your primary language?
- What is your highest level of education, and how do you think that affects what you do now?

**Ask about mental models:**

- How would you describe the content we provide?
- How should it be organized?
- What terms do you use for the key concepts?
- Which pieces of content are the most important for you?
- What other content do you need, for your job?

- Is that something we can help you with?
- What topics are associated with other topics?
- Do you learn better from a diagram or from text?
- If you want to learn, do you turn to another person, TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, or books?

#### Explore personal differences:

- How do you prefer to learn new material? (For instance, trial and error, asking others, formal training, reading ahead of time, self-paced interactive training, online courses).
- What special needs do you have?
- Are you color blind?
- Do you have difficulty reading small type, or making small movements with your hands?
- How do you feel when you have to change the way you do your job?
- When do you prefer working together with a team, or by yourself?
- How do you describe your gender? Your age?

#### Explore group identities and affiliations:

- How would you describe your organization's culture to an outsider?
- What are the aspects you like most or least?
- What groups do you belong to, formally or informally?
- What volunteer organizations do you occasionally work for?
- What ethnic and racial cultures do you identify with, and how do you describe those? How would you describe my own ethnic and racial background?
- Do you have a preference for a certain way of organizing information, or carrying out tasks, based on the way you were raised in another country?
- How would you describe your socio-economic status? Mine?
- Do you belong to any trade association, professional group, or union?

Obviously, you can't impose on someone for a whole day asking a thousand questions like these. But some responses are more important for you than others. Concentrate on those issues.

Pay people for their time; give them cups, t-shirts, products,

*Segments are the passive targets of marketing initiatives. They don't try things out, ask questions, negotiate price and terms, make adjustments, substitute spending for one item by sacrificing another, or complain and seek refunds.*

—Don Peppers and Martha Rogers,  
*Enterprise One to One*

*Do you have a customer-focused culture?*

— Patricia Seybold, Ronni Marshak, and Jeffrey Lewis, *The Customer Revolution*

attention, and, yes, money. For you, their answers are gold.

Online, people resent having to fill out a lengthy registration form just to visit a site or look at a particular page. If you are going to invite people to give you information to create an electronic profile, add to it incrementally.

1. At first ask only for the bare minimum needed for a transaction. Make sure that the visitor can see a single substantial benefit from giving the information and then make sure that you deliver. They are investing their time. You must give them an immediate return on that investment. Feedback delayed fails to ingrain any habit.
2. **Log each visit** by IP address, browser, date, and time, in the profile.
3. Record any **downloads** along with the e-mail address needed for that.
4. Keep asking for **feedback**, and each time they offer some, ask a few more questions.

Encourage people to look at their profiles on your site. Let them see their entire transaction history, and all the information they have provided you over all their visits. Let them modify their profiles. You'll be surprised how many more fields they fill in once they get started. As soon as a consumer enters updates, display those right away—not the next day. Convince your consumers you are listening:

- Never ask for the information the consumer has already given you.
- Supply names, addresses, preferences, without being asked.

You can see that you need a lot of time to explore all these questions with an individual. But once you have met with a dozen consumers, and read a hundred profiles, you'll begin to have a very deep sense of the different kinds of people you may be writing for. How do you articulate this “sense” in practical terms?

**See:** Beyer and Holtzblatt (1997), Hackos (1995), Hackos and Redish (1998), Jonassen and Hagen (1999), Peppers and Rogers (1993, 1997), Price and Korman (1993), Schriver (1997), Seybold and Marshak (1998), Seybold, Marshak, and Lewis (2001).

## Make Sense Out of What You Learn about Your Audiences

### **Psychology at your service: How many ways can you slice a personality?**

You'd think that by now humans could have come up with a single theory of personality. But no. Just in the realm of therapy there are dozens of theories taking off from Freud and Jung, and spreading like jungle grass. If one of these therapeutic approaches makes sense to you, go ahead and use it to interpret the information you have just gleaned from the actual consumer.

Ditto for religion. If a particular religion gives the world meaning for you, then by all means use its theory of personality to interpret the consumer and your relationship to that person. If you follow a spiritual practice, observing the movement of your inner life, use your guru's ideas to understand yourself in relation to the other. If you're a novelist, write a narrative. Stories are an excellent way to envision a character in action, or create a drama, a video, or a song.

Whatever profession you come from or live among, it probably offers you its own dominant psychology, its own way of interpreting human behavior, refined and disputed by various splinter groups, crusading sects, and reformers. For instance, economists, who for years believed that all economic behavior was reasonable, are now beginning to recognize a new type of person: the irrational consumer. Similarly, cognitive science which has focused for years on thought problems that can be simulated on the computer, has edged into fuzzy logic and a deeper sense of human unpredictability.

Even the discipline that fostered writing, rhetoric, has its war of psychologies between the post modernists, the traditional Aristotelians, the Sophists, the discourse community folks, and worse.

*O I say these are not the parts  
and poems of the body only, but  
of the soul,*

*O I say now these are the soul!*

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Bottom line: There are hundreds of psychologies out there, and you should adopt whichever one you feel familiar with, because the point is for you to make sense out of your users and readers internally. If a particular approach seems cold, unfeeling, or unfamiliar, skip it, because it will not help you to conceive of your audience in realistic human terms.

But adopt some method. You need a theoretical framework in which to organize and preserve what you have observed. If no psychology appeals to you, consider task analysis, use cases, or niche analysis—a set of interlocking tools that come from usability study, object-oriented programming, and, yes, marketing.

## Analyzing the tasks

Somehow, through direct interviews, studying the research, or asking questions on your site, you have gathered a lot of information about exactly what your consumers do and why. If you want to produce text that helps people achieve their goals, try thinking through the tasks each consumer performs over and over.

A task is an action someone performs to reach a goal. The name of the task is whatever the consumer says it is—not what your team likes to call it.

Each person starts with a goal, such as finishing the budget, getting a raise, learning a new skill, getting in touch with other people, or just being amused. Sometimes this goal aligns with what the boss wants, but usually the organization's goals, such as increasing profit margins, reducing time to market, or cutting five people from the support team, just make the person's life difficult. Pretending to do what the boss wants, while getting some personal amusement, can be a challenge.

As a writer you must care more about your consumers than about their corporations, universities, agencies, labs, or non-governmental bodies. Corporations don't read. Try to identify the goals in the way your consumers really talk about them because the terms they use to describe their goals reflect their values, passions, and life experience.

Goals are as multifarious as people. For instance, here are some of the different goals people may come to your site with:

- To have fun—to be entertained, pulled out of one’s self, aroused, fulfilled, stirred up and satisfied, to participate in a game, to play.
- To learn—to pick up facts, to see patterns, to recognize sequences, groups, hierarchies, and themes, to learn to solve problems, to talk in a new language.
- To act—to make a purchase, to register, to acquire, download, send or receive information, software, music, videos, or whatever.
- To be aware—to sense what is going on internally and in others, to grow, to become, or just to be.
- To get close to people—to share, to show off, to feel intimate with total strangers through virtual conversations, postings, flames, posturing and revealing.

Generally, people formulate a goal rather vaguely and then form a specific intention, which demands a certain course of action. When they carry out that activity, they pause and look around them, to see what has changed. They interpret the state of the world, to evaluate the outcome. Carrying out a task involves the entire cycle, starting with the aim and moving through the activity to a decision about whether or not the actions have led to success.

You may want to analyze important tasks by walking the person through this cycle. Or you might settle just for noting the concrete actions taken to achieve the goal. (These actions may end up as individual steps in your instructions, if you need to tell people how to do the task.)

Start by listing all the tasks that flow from a particular goal in no particular order. Then organize them into chronological order as best you can. (Some tasks always happen at the start, others at the end, and the rest could happen, well, at any time). For the tasks that could happen anytime, try to discern a reasonable grouping by action or object worked on. You want to make some kind of meaningful order out of the collection of tasks because this inventory may form the basis for a menu system and an organization of your instructions, procedures, or FAQs.

You may find that some tasks are very large scale, such as shopping or getting a raise. Other tasks are intermediate in scale, such

*There are many selves in a character, and their relation to each other is the matter that is often most obscure. What complicates the search, then, is not the simple fact that identity inheres in action and must be sought there, but rather than the action is not single in its purpose. Once again we are looking for a cast, for a script, and for an explication du texte.*

—Jerome Bruner, “Identity and the Modern Novel,” in *On Knowing*

as finding the section of the site that describes printers or completing the new proposal for the boss. And lots of tasks are small scale, like spell checking the proposal to make sure the company name is spelled right. Beneath the level of a task are individual steps.

Turn your inventory into a task hierarchy, a multilevel taxonomy of all the tasks that your individual consumer performs in pursuit of a particular goal, from large to small. At some point you may want to build a task hierarchy for each goal pursued by each of your consumers and then merge them, to see which tasks are vital to everyone, and which aren't, or where the variations occur. In this way you are creating a menu system for a set of procedures, or FAQs, showing people how the large-scale tasks relate to the others, as they drill down to the specific task they want help on. And you are beginning to see where you may need to offer separate menus for people who have different goals.

Because work often moves from one person to another, you may need to diagram the workflow to show how the same document or transaction moves from desk to desk. In this way you can create accurate scenarios for different consumers, looking at things from one person's desk and then another's.

Insert the problems along the way. You'll probably want to write a way around these or offer a solution.

Extract a vocabulary—the terms that these different consumers use for the goals, the tasks, the objects they operate on, and the outcomes. For definitions, quote your consumers, if you can, rather than acting like Noah Webster.

## **Tie consumer profiles to business rules, events, and objects**

If you work in an object-oriented environment, you may want to adopt a similar approach as a way to make sense out of the raw impressions you have collected from actual interviews. If your organization already has developed electronic profiles of each visitor, you can work with the team to use the profiles to recognize individuals or groups who trigger these events. These events, to which the system reacts by following certain business rules, can invoke particular objects—some of which may include your text.

For example:

- **User profile:** The profile shows this person is a network engineer, who has a dozen of your high-end routers installed, visits the site every few days, joins the troubleshooting discussion list, and is interested in beta-testing new products.
- **Business rule:** If the company has more than \$500,000 worth of our products installed, and if the person is an engineer, and if the person has volunteered to do beta-testing, then we should alert this person by e-mail and in a special notice on his personal Router Page.
- **Event:** The person arrives, and the system checks the profile, then checks whether there are any beta-testing products available for this type of customer, decides there is one, and calls for the content management software to display an object called Notice on this person's personal Router Page.
- **Object:** Along with the other objects that go to make up the personal Router Page, the software displays the Notice object that shows a photo of the new box, and invites the visitor to ask for beta testing, using the dropdown form.

Your informative objects that you care about are extremely simple from a programmer's point of view. They are chunks of text, with associated art, sound, video—a single unit of meaning with all the necessary components. Unlike a programming object, an informative object has a limited function that responds to a question or need of a consumer by providing some kind of information (no calculating the interest on a bank loan, or figuring out the extended price). The main activity informative objects perform is to display themselves when instructed.

To figure out when and where to display an informative object (and for whom), you develop little scenarios called *use cases*. You sketch out little scenes in which one or more actors get involved in tasks, leading up to an event that is handled by one or more objects. For programmers, these tasks, events, and objects can be quite complex. For writers, the picture is crude. Someone comes to the site with a goal in mind, starts acting to attain that goal, and sets off various alarms, signals, and activity in the software, which

is comparing the person's profile with the relevant business rules, and wondering if any of these actions merits calling a new object. You probably don't care about the subtleties of event handling, triggers, or object methods. You just want to know who comes to the site and does something that deserves special content wrapped up in an informative object.

After you have developed a few dozen use cases, you can start shuffling them:

- Which ones are the most important to the consumers?
- Which ones really involve offering substantially different content?
- Which ones cause the most problems, raise the most questions, and require the most support?

For instance, you might find that most shopping carts are abandoned at the page when consumers discover the true shipping costs. One solution might be simply to move shipping costs to the product pages so that people can make an accurate estimate of the complete cost of the item before wading into the purchase process. This approach might seem a little up front, even daring, but by telling people this information ahead of time, you avoid the moment of disappointment when they discover the real costs after laboriously typing in their name and address, credit card number, expiration date, and so on. In effect having looked at the use case that had dramatic problems, you would move that informative object—the shipping options and their costs—to a more relevant page.

A use case offers the following information:

- **A story** with screenshots and imagined conversation, and internal dialog.
- **A description** of a complete and meaningful experience from the consumer's point of view.
- **A focus** on the goals of the user, rather than the mechanics of the software.
- **A way of figuring out** how to improve your site, not just record the current process.

Use cases live comfortably in an environment of content management software built on top of a database full of objects that get assembled on a moment's notice to form pages for a particular

visitor. Unfortunately, unimaginative use cases often end up describing current practice, suggesting no need for new content. And even when the team focuses on problem areas, the theme is usability, with the subtext of action and transaction, but that often makes the team think about what is doable rather than what consumers really want. In the world of objects, people can easily become stick figures.

## Lumping people together into small groups

Niches are a compromise. Identifying a particular segment of the audience can help you figure out particular topics that will interest that group, develop a tone that establishes your attitude toward them, and signal the relationship that you hope to have with those people. But grouping people into a niche like this may overlook the unique character of individuals, the very specific facts you learn when you talk to people directly.

Traditionally, when creating a large document like a manual, book, or CD, we throw together topics that appeal to many different subgroups in the audience. We may create certain sections for absolute novices, offer troubleshooting for the competent performers, provide information on what's new in this edition for the old-timers, and show specs and behind-the-scenes data for the truly expert. All of that goes into a single document on the theory that different groups can find what they want in different places. But on the Web, we have the opportunity to create separate paths for each group we write for, displaying only the content appropriate for that group so the beginners don't bump into the 20 levels of hardware specs by accident, and the experts are never insulted with a home page featuring a marketing overview. (Each group can find the other material; but if we customize content by niche, first show each group what interests them most).

Based on your research and talks with actual consumers, you can probably figure out a half dozen niche audiences. For instance, when researchers tried clustering regular Web users, they found:

- Upscale, sophisticated, urban-fringe or ex-urban families use the Web to gather news and information, make travel reservations, buy stuff, and handle finances and stocks. For them, the Internet is a convenience.

*Who am I? In part a persona supplied by culture and in part one crafted by myself. My persona is the image I have of myself and what I want to project to others, how I connect to others, a set of self-concepts.*

—Robert Weber, *The Created Self*

- Small-town, middle-class families and working-class farm families prefer entertainment and sweepstakes sites, viewing the Internet as a replacement for TV.
- Men spend more time than women buying stocks, comparing and buying products, bidding at auctions, and going to government Web sites, whereas women prefer e-mail, games, coupons, and info on health, jobs, and religion. (Michael Weiss, 2001)

Niches form around income, age, gender, geographic location, occupation, and outlook, as advertising researchers have demonstrated over the last 30 years. Generally, people behave on the Web as they do in the rest of their life, favoring certain brands, attitudes, ideas, and activities. So demographic information developed over the years may help you flesh out what a particular niche wants from your text. On the other hand, the Web also allows upper-income folks to visit stores they wouldn't go into at the mall, and the Web shifts shopping times into the evening, and dampens seasonal variations in purchasing, so you need to define your own niches, based on your own research, supplementing it with the generic stuff. Nowadays, the customer relationship management folks think this way, developing clusters of people around their shopping habits, interests, and industries. But so far most of this data is being used to determine which ads to display to which visitors. Today, only the most advanced sites customize content for more than three or four niche audiences.

The smaller the niche you define, the better, because the focus helps you figure out exactly what topics they care about, what moves them, what examples might make sense to them, what ideas they resonate with. Imagine writing in five different voices for five distinct groups. As you become more attuned to the little groups within your audience, you become a ventriloquist or a character actor playing a series of roles.

This chameleon-like ability to take on the tone and attitude of a niche audience is not as insincere as it sounds. People do this all the time, to earn their way into a particular community, adopting that group's way of talking. More subtly, you can prove that you

should be considered a **member** of the community. Here's how:

- Show you recognize the divisions within the community.
- Indicate that you agree on the boundaries of the community (who is in, who is not).
- Accept the latest definition of what is hip and not hip.
- Stress the values and attitudes that are widely and deeply shared by the community.
- Follow the general agreement on what topics are important today.
- Take sides in the arguments that go on continuously within the community.
- Contribute new ideas, comments, and support to the ongoing conversation (taking part, caring enough to hold up your end of the conversation).
- Position yourself in relation to the rest of the community (as a leader, follower, troublemaker, what not).
- Use key slogans, totem ideas, and jargon in the right way (not like a school principal trying to talk to kids in their own slang).
- Refer regularly to activities that people in this community take for granted and do not mention activities they disdain, can't afford, or never heard of.

In a way, you are like a method actor pulling out personal memories to build a new character. To help clarify what you need to do to appeal to the niche audience, you'll probably want to draw up some guidelines—lists of likely topics, positions, and arguments. But like an actor, you may also want to think of personal experiences that resemble the activities, evoke the values, and support the ideas of the group.

To succeed in writing for a niche, you must really join the niche, wading right into the conversation. For writers a community has more to do with their discourse than their purchasing habits. Despite working for a particular site and taking its direction, you are adopting the group's style, adding to its stock of ideas, and becoming a member.

## Create personas to represent the people you are writing to

When you write as if you were someone else, fitting into his or her skin, you are adopting a persona. But Alan Cooper, inventor of Visual Basic, suggests creating a persona for each important segment of your audience to give a personal face to the group's prominent characteristics, and to get past the blandness of demographic generalizations. In his book, *The Inmates are Running the Asylum*, Cooper advocates using personas during the design of software. As you try to make sense out of what you have learned about the people who consume your text, you may find his approach helpful in planning your writing, particularly if you already have a taste for fiction.

A persona is a made-up person you will write to. A real person may have several different goals in mind, but a persona is built around a single goal or one main objective. Every time you spot a different goal, you create a new persona.

Remember that a goal is the persona's purpose, not a set of tasks. Too often we focus on the tasks the "average" user might want to accomplish, particularly if that sucker does what our management wants and buys, buys, buys. Task thinking quickly leads to decorating the site's functions with labels and help, assuming, for instance, that everyone has the same reason for using the shopping cart, and therefore offering the same boring FAQ text to everyone. (What if some people are just using the shopping cart to hold products they might buy, but fear they will never find again, in your confusing morass of a site?) Emphasizing one goal per persona helps you get your mind out of the gearbox.

Once you have a persona's goal clearly defined, dress the character up. Assign a name, an age, an employer, a daily routine, and a car, but not just any car—a particular car with a dent on the front right bumper. The specificity is important because it helps you believe in your own creation. For instance, starting from the fact that many consumers come to your site with the goal of deciding which kind of software to buy, you might create a persona named Emma Aragon.

*Is this then a touch? Quivering  
me to a new identity.*

—Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Emma is a 35-year-old mother of Adrian (12), Lucero (10), and Jose (6). Her husband Herb is the head of the morning shift down at the Sears Auto Parts shop at the Coronado Mall. She works as an architect of one-family homes in a three-architect firm, Aragon, Carter and Rodriguez, in downtown. She's responsible for meeting potential clients, interviewing them, preparing preliminary estimates, sketching out floor plans, refining the design, working with the engineering team on air, electrical, and plumbing plans, preparing budgets, supervising contractors during construction, meeting with the partners to plan expanding their practice into office buildings and manufacturing plants. She has a Masters in Architecture from the University of New Mexico, and is working on a Masters in Business Administration through the Anderson School of Management at UNM (only two more years of night and weekend courses). She drives a six-year-old white Ford pickup with a dream-catcher hanging from the mirror. Her concerns include daycare for her youngest child and healthcare for her grandmother Elisa Baca, who lives in the house next door. She is also concerned about the poor quality of her neighborhood elementary school, Los Gallegos, which regularly ranks in the bottom third of all schools in the state. For blueprints, she uses AutoCad but hates its interface, and for presentations to clients, she uses consumer programs such as 3D Architect, because the results look more attractive and help clients imagine what the house will look like. Her main objective is to create such imaginative designs that when her clients move into their new homes, they are delighted. She expects her drafting software to offer technical precision as a minimum, but as an experienced designer, what she really seeks is flexibility.

You want to create a character you can believe. Borrow facts from the people you have actually met, but do not just copy wholesale from a real person. Build in the details that will influence what you write. If you succeed at developing a believable character,

*We must produce more selves for newer situations because, in William James's sense, the number of social selves is growing rapidly.*

—Robert Weber, *The Created Self*

*Serious creations of the self, like the inventions of technology, have the capacity of transfiguring life and society.*

—Robert Weber, *The Created Self*

you will stop letting yourself assume that if a sentence makes sense to you, it will do. Now you have to make sense to Emma.

You escape the conventional idea of skills, too. You begin to see that individuals have expert skills in some areas, but novice abilities in other areas. No one person is a complete idiot. By focusing on goals, you can get away from the easy but simplistic distinction between power users and beginners, a distinction that was probably first created to excuse failures in interface design and programming (“Well, any power user could manage this feature,” or “Well, we know beginners can’t figure this out, so we provide a wizard for those dummies.”)

A persona helps you focus on the main activities this kind of person wants to carry out, pursuing her goal, encountering your text as part of the interface, and then as meaningful content. A persona embodies a niche audience in action, following an intention through your prose. Now you are in a virtual conversation with an individual, and your prose takes on a warmer tone.

Develop a cast of personas and then winnow the list down. You might create a few dozen, then recognize similarities, toss out redundancies, and end up with six or seven. Give top priority to any persona who must be satisfied with your text, and who cannot be satisfied with text intended for someone else. In this way you end up with a set of “real” people you are writing to, like familiar e-mail correspondents, and you can create targeted text for each.

You’re going to create content for each persona. You’re not going to make one persona read something that’s really intended for another, the way a magazine site often does. “The broader a target you aim for, the more certainty you have of missing the bull’s eye,” says Cooper.

And, because you come to envision each persona as if he or she were a living person, you develop a unique relationship with the persona, and your tone reflects that, making your style more, well, personal.

## Personalize, Honestly

*The impersonal computer screen seems to invite a no-holds-barred communication that is, paradoxically, more personal.*

—Constance Hale, *Wired Style*

*The more differences that exist among customers in what they need from the enterprise, and the more difficult or complicated it is for a customer to specify those needs, the more benefit can be gained by customizing.*

—Don Peppers and Martha Rogers, *Enterprise One to One*

### Fitting into the “ize”

People want to be recognized, catered to, and served personally. You can't keep feeding them generic content, when they are able to customize their own content on places like Yahoo.com, Lycos.com, and the *Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition*. And you can't win repeat visitors if you post a bunch of generic, all-purpose pages on your site, when consumers are seeing how delightful real personalization can be, when they visit pioneering sites like Amazon.com, Lands' End, and Reflect.com.

The content you do create must live within this increasingly personalized environment, being dished up in different ways to different people.

- Greeting guests by name, because the site has recognized them on arrival. Most people find this recognition reassuring, even though it is a cheap trick.
- Displaying the content they asked for, arranged in their own personal order and format. Picking out the news feeds that interest them and prioritizing them, gives people a feeling of control over the subject matter.
- Offering products that are similar to ones a visitor has just bought, or bought on earlier visits. Far from offending, these relevant offers smooth a visitor's path, inform each one of news in areas they care about, and, generally, lead to sales.
- Wish lists. These help friends and family figure out what to buy—encouraging them to visit the site.
- Custom pricing. Rarely done, but clearly this can make a site very attractive to repeat customers.
- Express transactions, like Amazon's patented, copyrighted, trademarked, and locked-up, 1-Click® shopping, which makes all sales after the first one so simple that visitors can hardly resist.

- Access to the guest's own account and profile information. Turns out people like to see everything they've bought from the site, going back to the first dinosaur saddle. Using the account, they can check on orders, see when things will be sent, change their address, and add express credit card info. Being allowed to modify their account directly lets them see what the site sees, and reassures them that it is accurate, and on the level. Also, because people see all the preferences they checked, they can make changes, to bring it up-to-date—if they believe that the site is really acting on their preferences.
- Tailored e-mail alerts. If the consumers have to opt in twice, they are much more likely to welcome tailored e-mail marketing, particularly if it really does tell recipients about subjects they care about. What stinks is e-mail that obviously has no relevance to the topics they ticked on the form.

If your text is going to stay afloat in this sea of information about products, prices, positions, and transactions, you need to remember personalization's larger purposes:

- **Making the site easier to use.** If the site guesses right about what people are interested in, they do not have to search, or stumble around the menu system. Personalization saves time.
- **Increasing sales.** People are not averse to buying. In fact, they enjoy it. Making product pitches relevant helps them get to the fun part faster.
- **Increasing loyalty.** Once a guest has filled out some registration info, and seen that the site really responds, he or she might as well come back, to avoid taking the time to fill out the same info at some other site. Plus, there's a certain satisfaction to being recognized, catered to, cajoled personally.
- **Giving the consumer control.** When guests feel as if they can manipulate the content on a site, the site itself becomes a little like their own personal application, a tool they can use.

*If you're making personalized offers to customers based on what you know about their interests, at what point does that practice become invasive?*

—Patricia Seybold and Ronni Marshak, *Customer.com*

Of course, a lot of sites pretend to personalize their content, but have no idea what content to deliver to which visitors. If the site doesn't collect much information in the user profile, then the software will make stupid decisions about what to offer a particular visitor, providing trivial, generic, or off-the-wall content. Some sites ask a lot of questions, developing quite a detailed profile of each visitor, then fail to act on that information, leaving the consumer feeling cheated, or disappointed. The best sites develop a very rich profile, and act quickly, and very visibly, to show the user the payoff with intelligent suggestions, relevant content, and smart services. Paul Hagen, of Forrester Research, defines the best personalization this way:

Content and services actively tailored to individuals based on rich knowledge about their preferences and behavior. (Hagen, 1999)

## Customizing and personalizing content

Customizing content means addressing a niche group. Personalizing allows an individual to get exactly what he or she wants, whether or not that matches the content delivered to his or her group. Customizing goes a long way toward satisfying most people, but personalizing makes people consider the site their own.

To write customized content that can then be personalized, you have to look behind the curtain to find out what information the profile contains, what business rules or inferences the software is going to use, and what categories of information the site already uses. For each piece of information in the profile—each nugget of personality—you need to figure out how you could create new material or adapt existing material, to show that you have “heard” the group, or the person.

Much of this thinking ends up dividing the audience into very small groups, micromarkets, or niches. For instance, if you recognize that your most valuable visitors fall into five different niches, then you should create specific content for each one. Perhaps one group wants to see specs right away, while another group prefers broader strokes with large benefits and graphs. For each group,

*An enterprise gets smarter and smarter with every individual interaction, defining in ever more detail the customer's own individual needs and tastes.*

—Don Peppers and Martha Rogers,  
*Enterprise One to One*

*Customers don't relate to anonymity on your part or theirs. If you want to differentiate yourself based on personalized service, you need to be prepared to interact with customers—even millions of them—as individuals.*

—Patricia Seybold and Ronni Marshak, *Customer.com*

put the information they want first, and move the other material to a See Also, or linklist in the sidebar.

Customizing content means writing text for a small group, organizing the content in the order they want to see it, and demoting or hiding content they do not care about. In some circumstances, you may also prevent one group from seeing what another reads, such as confidential pricing terms, development reports, or in-progress manuals.

But you have to keep coming up with new stuff for each niche. For instance, take customer support people to lunch and find out what the latest problems are, by audience group. Help solve these problems within a day or so by posting new content, addressed directly at those groups—for instance, revising labels in the forms they use, adding a new topic to their own list of Frequently Asked Questions, or rewriting a key paragraph at the top of their personal pages.

In this environment, you are often creating new objects, not whole documents. In fact, you are probably going to be using an elaborate tagging system, with XML, to indicate which niches (identified by their personas, perhaps) each chunk is suitable for. You might have an attribute such as Audience, and an agreed-upon list of audiences, so when you create a new text chunk, you say, “Well, this is for the suburban mom, only.” (Or Rebecca).

The more you can tailor your text to a particular group, the more the members feel your content is relevant. You can then offer personalization, allowing individuals to pick and choose the content they like best, offering personal tips directly to them based on their recent clicks, and setting up a one-to-one chat or e-mail conversation with individual visitors. In fact, the best way to talk personally to one individual is by chat and e-mail. Your Web content may be niche-y, but your chat and e-mail must show you have really read the person's last message, and are responding to that particular person's unique (they think) situation. From customization to personalization, the path leads through you, personally.

## Consider your aims, honestly

By its nature, mass marketing aims to sell. But to win the loyalty of consumers, to get them to come back, you must give some real value

when you customize and personalize your content, or they will rebel, clicking away from the page, or deleting your e-mail in disgust. The values you can communicate through personalization include openness (showing all you know about them), privacy (allaying their legitimate fear of cross-selling, junk mail, and credit card fraud), and reliability (showing an order confirmation page, e-mailing a confirmation of the order, e-mailing when you ship, e-mailing after arrival, including a return address label in the box, not arguing about returns). But honesty works best. If you don't know the answer, say so, and promise to get an answer soon—then amaze them by actually following up.

Honesty is the beginning of open communication.  
Communication is the beginning of interaction.  
Interaction is the beginning of personalization.  
(Eric Norlin, *Personalization Newsletter*, 2001)

## Develop an Attitude

*It's the voice of quirky, individualist writers that best captures the quirky, individualist spirit of the Net.*

—Constance Hale, *Wired Style*

*Customers expect to receive a consistent branded experience no matter which touchpoint or channel they use.*

—Patricia Seybold, Ronni Marshak,  
and Jeffrey Lewis,  
*The Customer Revolution*

### Cut through the anonymity

On paper, corporations, universities, and governments have always favored an impersonal style, talking in a consensus-seeking committee speak, avoiding taking any stand that might offend anyone anywhere, squeezing out resolutely anonymous prose. In the rush to fill up Web sites, a lot of this faceless prose got posted. So now some sites are like Wall Street at midnight in winter—cold as granite under ice.

Your style reflects your attitude toward your readers, implying a relationship. The old approach was authoritative: “We know what we are doing, and you are lucky to be listening to us.”

But the Internet works best as a series of two-way conversations. Interact with your visitors. Ask their opinion. Start a conversation. If you intend to provoke a conversation, reveal yourself. At the least, tell your readers as much about your own life as they reveal in registering, answering your questions, or stating their preferences. Instead of being all-knowing, admit when you feel confused. Include a byline. Hell, put your picture at the top of your articles.

When people sense that you are a real person, they respond. And if you take a definite position, clearly distinguishing your ideas from the herd, refusing to take a corporate snoot at them, people get the sense that you might listen to their opinions. The more you express your own individuality, the more you cut through the plastic, silicon, wire, and glass of the computer and the Internet.

Tone shows how you react to your readers. Contemplate the relationship with Emma, if you have developed a persona to represent an important niche audience.

Figure out what your stance is. What are you doing in this conversation? What is your aim, in this relationship?

- **If you want to amuse people**, as on a site like a webzine, be outrageous. Go beyond the norms. Get into the intimate details of your emotional *sturm und drang*, your paranoid fantasies, if you think they will be entertaining on a particular site. Recognize what people normally think, and come up with something different. Your job at a webzine is to provoke discussion, and the hotter your prose, the more they talk.
- **If you want to teach**, then be considerate. Be willing to start with the familiar and move step-by-step into the unfamiliar. Teaching requires enormous sympathy, an intuitive awareness of each moment when the student may be puzzled, upset, or drawn off course. The more you pay attention to the student's internal experience, the more you can articulate your subject matter for them. (Too many academics write Web pages to impress their colleagues, leaving students far behind).
- **If you want to help people become more aware**, then open yourself up to sense their inner life each moment. Tune in to their fears, desires, dreams, and as you write, imagine how the readers react. Shifting your attention from your made-up self to your listeners lets the meaning flow through. Your text loses some of its personal flavor, but takes on a deeper significance. Oddly, at that moment, some people will start to praise you for your "original style."
- **If you just want to be helpful**—a good scout—then be plain. Give up all those tricks you learned in school, when you were struggling to be persuasive, attractive, plausible, and convincing. When you are mentally trying to demonstrate how unusual, special, fascinating, mysterious, or complicated you are, your writing draws attention to itself, away from the subject— it's okay if you are deliberately showing off, but not particularly helpful.

## Let's talk persona to persona

So you have to invent some kind of persona on your own side, to figure out how to talk to the individuals in your audience, whom

you may have caricatured in a set of fictional personas. Generally, we consider creating a writing persona as a little dishonest, almost like putting on a mask. True, when the intent is to deceive, overawe, or attack. But you can create a perfectly reasonable persona, one that has some of your own background, concerns, and pet ideas without being dishonest.

You are about to engage in a virtual conversation, after all, where you don't know a lot about the person you are talking to. Sure, you've read the profile, plowed through the e-mail, checked the transaction history. But you are still guessing. And so you really don't start out with a human relationship.

But if you build your own persona sincerely, out of your own real experience, you will develop a definite connection with the person you are writing for. If you reveal a few facts about yourself, watch the response. People realize, gosh, there is a person there. Suddenly, they want to know about your town, your hobbies, and your kids.

To guard your own privacy, and to keep your own boundaries secure, you need a carefully developed persona—a public personality. In fact, you may need to develop a different writing persona for each major group you talk to, so you can morph into their team, looking at things from their point of view as much as possible, using their language, dealing with their concerns.

The process resembles writing a script, where you switch from one character to another, speaking as intensely as you can in that voice, then switching character, and responding. Sound crazy? Well, sure. Nutcases carry on imaginary conversations and get locked up. The challenge for you is to stay sympathetic enough with each group and each person so that you don't feel strained adopting the appropriate stance for your relationship.

So you are acting in a role, as one persona, and when you address a niche audience, you are talking to a character you have invented, a persona who stands in for the real people who are members of that group. That's talking persona to persona.

And when you answer e-mail, or type responses in a chat session, or post replies on a discussion board, you are, in a way, writing person to person. But even here you are acting in a role,

*We celebrate subjectivity.*

—Constance Hale, *Wired Style*

*You ask. I answer. You ask. I answer. You're not supposed to watch the sun set, listen to the surf pound the sun-bleached sand, and sip San Miguel beer as Paco dives for abalone while you craft your e-mail.*

—Guy Kawasaki, *The Guy Kawasaki Computer Curmudgeon*

adopting a persona, and the other person is too. So the conversation has an artificial flavor.

Your job is to break through the artificiality of the experience, the distance imposed by the medium, and the constraints of your own context. You have to work hard to become a human being on the Web.

Imagine the way you would like the virtual conversation to go—what you will say, and what she will say, and how the exchange will progress. Envision a satisfactory outcome. What exactly do you want to happen, as a result of the texts you send and the responses you get back? Where is this relationship headed? As Ann Landers asks, what will make you both happy?

Stretch the canvas and sketch in the basic outlines of the goal. But leave the picture unfinished.

Let the unknown enter—the unpredictable other, the amazing quirks, the surprising feelings, the odd twists of the other person's thoughts—and your own. Because people turn out to be full of surprises, if you listen with an open heart, build your persona loosely enough to make room for their side of the conversation.

**See:** Bruffee (1986), Clark (1990), Cooper (1999), Dumas and Redish (1993), Fish (1980), Freed and Broadhead (1987), Hagen (1999), Jonassen, Hannum, and Tessmer (1989), Norlin (2001), Norman (1980), Ong (1975), Porter (1992), Redish (1993), Rubin (1994), Seybold and Marshak (1998), Seybold, Marshak, and Lewis (2001), Shneiderman (1998), Stevens and Gentner (1983), Weiss (2001), Wood (1996).