

Rhetorical Analysis for Professional Documents

Business and technical documents are written for particular audiences to accomplish particular outcomes. They are meant to make things happen, and they are most likely to do so when writers take careful account of what, why, and for whom they are writing. Writers in professional settings often create a profile of their audience and the intended function of their documents. Taking time to think and write about some of the following questions will help you target your readers effectively and achieve the response from them you desire. The answers to these will help you decide on the genre, format, visuals, tone, language, and level of detail to use.

The Basics: What, Why, Who

- What kind (genre) of document are you writing? Think about why is it suited to this writing situation. Be sure you understand its features and functions.
- What action do you want to result from this document? (To make a sale? For readers to successfully accomplish a task? For readers to act on a problem?)
- Who are your readers?

Focusing on Audience

- Who is your primary audience for the document? (I.e., who can/will act on what you communicate in your document)
- Who else will read the document?
- What relationship do you have with your readers? (Is this document your first contact with them? Do you have a good established relationship? Have you had problems or misunderstandings with them?)
- What is your reader's role in their organization?
- How familiar are they with the subject? (How much, or how little, do you need to explain or detail?)
- What is your reader's level of technical knowledge in relation to the subject? (If your primary readers are engineers, they will be comfortable with technical language used in specifications for a piece of equipment; account representatives might need a less technical language and more explanation and definitions).
- What is your reader's attitude toward the subject? (Are they anxious about it? Comfortable? Wary?)
- What questions might your reader have?
- What cultural factors might affect your audience's reception of your document?

Focusing on Purpose and Outcome

- What is the primary purpose of this document? Are there other purposes?
- What is your reader's reason for reading? What does he or she need to know or do? What goals of your reader does the document help meet?
- How will your document be read? (Beginning to end? Skimmed? Used as a reference? Will different audiences read it in different ways?)
- How will readers use the information? (Choose a course of action? Buy a product? Complete a task? To gain professional knowledge? To build a professional relationship?)
- What will, or should, change as a result of your document?