

## To Whom Do You Think You're Writing?

When writing business documents—letters, memos, reports, even emails—one thing to keep in mind is that it is NEVER about you, the writer. It is ALWAYS about your reader: who are they, what do they already know about the subject matter, and what do they need or want to know? Always write from the reader's point of view.

### Who is your reader?

- Are they male or female?
- What is their age?  
While too much focus on gender and age can lead to stereotyping, it is important to understand that basic differences exist in the way men and women and people of different generations communicate. For example, men are usually more direct, while most women like to first build rapport. Regarding age, today's workplace may have at least three generations of employees: Radio-Agers (born between 1922 and 1945); Baby Boomers (1947-1964); Generation X (1965-1980). Generation Y (1981- 2000) haven't been in the workforce very long, so they may or may not need be considered. Generally speaking, Radio-Agers have a strong work ethic, lead by directives and communicate formally, via memos. Baby Boomers like to work hard and play hard, prefer a consensual leadership style and in-person communication. Generation X are self-reliant, challenge others (i.e., ask why), and want *immediate* communication.
- Where are they in the company hierarchy (job title, department)?
- What is their educational background?
- Are they familiar with industry jargon and acronyms?

### What do they know?

- Do they know less, as much, or more than you about this subject?
- What do they *think* they know?

### What do they need/want to know?

- How interested are they in reading this information?
- What is important to them?
- Do they need to respond to or act upon the information? If so, do you need to give them direction?

### Always write from the reader's point of view.

- Use language that is meaningful to your reader.
- Avoid jargon (industry-specific terminology) unless you're sure they understand it.
- Anticipate questions or objections and address them in the document. Don't wait for the reader to come to you after they've read it.

You're probably wondering what you should do if you're writing to several people—different generations, male and female, at different levels of the company hierarchy, with various educational backgrounds and subject knowledge. In these situations, it's best to target the middle of the road: relay enough information in easily understood language so that the least knowledgeable reader is brought up-to-speed, without talking down to them or insulting the intelligence of the more knowledgeable reader. If you use jargon, acronyms or abbreviations, define them the first time you use them. Ask yourself how you would relay this information if you were talking to each person individually. Then put yourself in the reader's place: ask yourself, "If I were this person, how would I want this information communicated to me?"

**MARY WARD MENKE** is owner and president of WordAbilities, LLC, a writing and editing services company. Visit their website, [www.WordAbilities.com](http://www.WordAbilities.com)

©2007 Mary Ward Menke You may reprint this article in its entirety as long as you include the full by-line that appears at the bottom of the article.