

## The Writing Context (from *The Sundance Reader*)

Writing does not occur in a vacuum. All writing occurs in a context formed by the writer's purpose, reader's needs and expectations, discipline or discourse community, and nature of the document. To understand your audience, consider your readers' perceptual world.

The term "perceptual world" refers to the way people perceive events and information, the way they respond to what they see, hear, and experience. Political pollsters and marketing executives study the perceptual worlds of voters and consumers. Lawyers hire jury experts who study how jurors will respond to potential testimony.

The perceptual world is often represented as a circle or pie chart consisting of several slices because all of these factors act simultaneously and automatically. Differences in perceptual worlds explain why people react differently to the same movie or why one person laughs at a joke another finds offensive and other thinks is inane.

### Elements of the Perceptual World

- **past experiences** -- people tend to evaluate new experiences based on previous experience. A labor union with a long history of conflict and bitter strikes will view a management proposal differently than one with a record of cordial contract negotiations. Your attitudes toward the opposite sex, jobs, banks, car dealers are all shaped in part by your personal experiences.
- **age** -- obviously teenagers have different interests, values, and concerns than their parents and grandparents. All of us are shaped by generational experiences. People who came of age in the 1960s respond differently than those who lived through the Depression and World War II.
- **status** -- people who have a lot invested in existing programs, institutions, and society have more to lose than those with little investment at risk. An eighteen year old is less concerned about changes in Social Security payments than a sixty-four year old anticipating receiving a check in a few months.
- **reference groups** -- all of us respect the opinions of others, especially if we have trouble making a decision on our own. A doctor unsure of prescribing a new drug may defer to the opinion of the AMA. In making a decision about buying a new car, you might ask advice from your mechanic and a cousin who sells cars.
- **education** -- people interpret events and ideas in terms of their knowledge base. The more educated a person is, the more comparisons he or she can make to analyze a new experience or situation. Many people have specialized training in examining data, interpreting statistics, and making evaluations of proposed ideas.
- **occupation** -- career experiences provide people with distinct ways of looking at the world. Defense attorneys and police officers have different views of the justice system. A fast food operator and a gourmet restaurateur have different views of customer service. But a Broadway choreographer and an NFL coach might have strikingly similar attitudes toward leadership and teamwork.

- **social norms** -- people have varying attitudes toward social behavior. Attitudes toward spending money, drinking, gambling, jobs, serving in the military, and sexual behavior greatly influence the way people respond to ideas and experiences.
- **values** -- religious beliefs, political philosophies, and membership in professional and social organizations influence people's attitudes and responses.
- **gender** -- men and women view certain issues differently based on their socialization, common experiences, and biology. More women than men might be expected to show an interest in childcare.
- **culture** -- the collective experience, shared values, artistic expression, and social prominence of Jews, the Irish, African Americans, and Japanese Americans have created cultural differences in the way people view government policies, American institutions, and corporations.
- **roles** -- the responsibilities people bear in society greatly influence their thinking. Parents have added concerns than their friends without children.

In planning to persuade your readers, consider their perceptual world -- how will they respond to your ideas? What examples or evidence will influence them? What emotional appeal will work? Which historical references will they understand? What comments should you avoid?

In looking at the perceptual world of your readers, avoid biased judgements or basing conclusions on stereotypes. Not all African Americans think alike. Not all business executives oppose labor unions. Not all rock musicians tolerate drug use.

Courtesy of: [http://sundance.heinle.com/reader3e/wr\\_context.htm](http://sundance.heinle.com/reader3e/wr_context.htm)