

Writing and Tutorial Center

Consider Your Audience

Harvard linguist Stephen Pinker coined a useful phrase: “the curse of knowledge.” This might seem odd, since knowledge is generally thought to be desirable rather than a curse. In his book, *The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*, he defines the phrase:

[T]he curse of knowledge is the chief contributor to opaque writing. It simply doesn’t occur to the writer that readers haven’t learned their jargon, don’t seem to know the intermediate steps that seem to them to be too obvious to mention, and can’t visualize a scene currently in the writer’s mind’s eye. And so the writer doesn’t bother to explain the jargon, or spell out the logic, or supply the concrete details—even when writing for professional peers.

The curse of knowledge affects both developing and professional writers. Outside of purely creative work, most writing is directed at *someone*; in college contexts, that probably means it’s your professor, classmates, or a general reader. Before you even start writing, ask yourself who your intended audience will be and how much context they’ll need to understand your argument.

EXAMPLES

Before: “After the SCOTUS ruling, the Dobbs precedent effectively nullified Casey.”

After: “After the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in the Dobbs case, the legal protections for abortion rights established in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* were effectively eliminated.”

How can you avoid making assumptions about what your readers know? When you get to the editing stage of your writing, ask yourself the following questions:

Have I provided all the necessary background information for my readers?

Have I left out any logical steps?

Have I defined any key or unusual terms?

Have I explained everything clearly so that a generally well-educated reader can understand it?

Have I checked with a friend that my writing makes sense and that I haven’t left out any details, examples, or development in my explanations?

TIPS

Sometimes students ask: “...But isn’t my professor my audience? How much do I still need to explain if my audience already knows so much about the topic?”

The answer is: it’s a balance. You should include enough context and information to demonstrate that you have a firm understanding of the material and the subsequent implications of your arguments—at the end of the day, your instructor is the one grading your assignment and you need to prove that you know what you’re talking about. On the flip side, overly explaining simple concepts could come across as stalling or adding fluff to boost your word count. But skipping over things too much risks leaving logical gaps in your writing! There’s no one-size-fits-all solution; when in doubt, imagine you are writing to an intelligent reader who may not know much about this particular topic.

Sentence 1:

“She was giving total Miss Havisham vibes in that decaying wedding dress.”

Questions:

What background knowledge does the writer assume?

Who might understand this? Who might not?

How might you clarify or rephrase it?

Sentence 2:

“The painting’s visual syntax echoes Derrida’s *différance*, undermining the possibility of a stable interpretive center.”

Questions:

What background knowledge does the writer assume?

Who might understand this? Who might not?

How might you clarify or rephrase it?

Sentence 3:

“As with many late-stage capitalist phenomena, influencer micro-entrepreneurship occupies the ambivalent space between neoliberal self-branding and the affective labor of online community maintenance.”

Questions:

What background knowledge does the writer assume?

Who might understand this? Who might not?

How might you clarify or rephrase it?

Now, look at a passage of your own writing. Who is your audience? Have you made everything clear enough for your readers?

Read your paper out loud to yourself, ask a friend to take a look and see if everything makes sense, share it with a family member, or better yet—meet with a writing tutor! Sometimes we can be “too close” to our own writing, in that we may mentally skip over things because we’re overly familiar with the words. Getting feedback from outside sources is invaluable when it comes to articulating clear arguments and robust chains of logic.