

W-1 Writing Contexts

Whenever we write, whether it's an email to a friend, a toast at a wedding, or an essay, we do so within some kind of context—a rhetorical situation that helps shape our choices as writers. Whatever our topic, we have a purpose, a certain audience, a particular stance, a genre, and a medium to consider—and often as not, a design. This chapter discusses each of these elements and provides some questions that can help you think about some of the choices you have to make as you write.

W-1a Purpose

All writing has a purpose. We write to explore our thoughts, express ourselves, and entertain; to record words and events; to communicate with others; to persuade others to think or behave in certain ways. Here are some questions to help you think about your purpose(s) as you write:

- What is the primary purpose of the writing task—to entertain? inform? persuade? demonstrate knowledge? Something else?
- What are your own goals?
- What do you want your **AUDIENCE** to do, think, or feel? How will they use what you tell them?
- What does this writing task call on you to do? Do you have an assignment that specifies a certain **GENRE** or strategy—to argue a position? report on an event? compare two texts?
- What are the best ways to achieve your purpose? Should you take a particular **STANCE**? write in a particular **MEDIUM**? use certain **DESIGN** elements?

W-1b Audience

What you write, how much you write, and how you phrase it are all influenced by the audience you envision. For example, as a student

writing an essay for an instructor, you will be expected to produce a text with few or no errors, something you may worry less about in an email to a friend.

- What audience do you want to reach? What expectations do they have from you? What's your relationship with them, and how does it affect your **TONE**?
- What is your audience's background—their education and life experiences?
- What are their interests? What motivates them? Do they have any political attitudes or interests that may affect the way they read your piece?
- Is there any demographic information that you should keep in mind, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, or economic status?
- What does your audience already know—or believe—about your topic? What do you need to tell them?
- What kind of response do you want from your audience? Do you want them to do or believe something? accept what you say? Something else?
- How can you best appeal to your audience? What kind of information will they find interesting or persuasive? Are there any design elements that will appeal to them?

W-1c Genre

Genres are kinds of writing. Reports, position papers, poems, letters, instructions—even jokes—are genres. Each one has certain features and follows particular conventions of style and presentation. Academic assignments generally specify the genre, but if it isn't clear, ask your instructor. Then consider these issues:

- What are the key elements and conventions of your genre? How do they affect the type of content you should include?

- Does your genre require a certain organization or **MEDIUM**? Does it have any **DESIGN** requirements?
- How does your genre affect your **TONE**, if at all?
- Does the genre require formal (or informal) language?

W-1d Topic

An important part of any writing context is the topic—what you are writing about. As you choose a topic, keep in mind your rhetorical situation and any requirements specified by your assignments.

- If your topic is assigned, what do the verbs in the assignment ask you to do: **ANALYZE**? **COMPARE**? **SUMMARIZE**? Something else?
- Does the assignment offer a broad subject area (such as the environment) that allows you to choose a limited topic within it (such as a particular environmental issue)?
- What do you need to do to complete the assignment? Do you need to do research? find illustrations?
- If you can choose a topic, think about what you are interested in. What do you want to learn more about? What topics from your courses have you found intriguing? What local, national, or global issues do you care about?
- Do you need to limit your topic to fit a specified time or length?

W-1e Stance and Tone

Whenever you write, you have a certain stance, an attitude toward your topic. For example, you might be objective, critical, passionate, or indifferent. You express (or downplay) that stance through your tone—the words you use and the other ways your text conveys an attitude toward your subject and audience. Just as you likely alter what you say depending on whether you're speaking to a boss or a good friend, so you need to make similar adjustments as a writer. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is your stance, and how can you best present it to achieve your purpose?
- How should your stance be reflected in your tone? Do you want to be seen as reasonable? angry? thoughtful? ironic? Something else? Be sure that your language—and even your font—convey that tone.
- How is your stance likely to be received by your **AUDIENCE**? Should you openly reveal it, or would it be better to tone it down?

W-1f Media / Design

We communicate through many media, both verbal and nonverbal: our bodies (we wave), our voices (we shout), and various technologies (we write with a pencil, send email, tweet). No matter what the medium, a text's design affects the way it is received and understood. Consider these questions:

- Does your assignment call for a certain medium or media—a printed essay? an oral report with visual aids? a blog?
- How does your medium affect the way you write and organize your text? For example, long paragraphs may be fine on paper, but bulleted phrases work better on slides.
- How does your medium affect your language? Do you need to be more formal or informal?
- What's the appropriate look for your writing situation? Should it look serious? whimsical? personal? Something else?
- What fonts and other design elements suit your **WRITING CONTEXT**? Is there anything you should highlight by putting it in a box or italics?
- Would headings help you organize your material and help readers follow the text? Does your genre or medium require them?
- Will your audience expect or need any illustrations? Is there any information that would be easier to understand as a chart?