Audience Analysis

Overview

Audience analysis involves identifying the audience and adapting a speech to their interests, level of understanding, attitudes, and beliefs. Taking an audience-centered approach is important because a speaker's effectiveness will be improved if the presentation is created and delivered in an appropriate manner. Identifying the audience through extensive research is often difficult, so audience adaptation often relies on the healthy use of imagination.

As with many valuable tools, audience analysis can be used to excess. Adapting a speech to an audience is not the same thing as simply telling an audience what they want to hear. Audience analysis does not mean 'grandstanding' or 'kowtowing' to a public. Rather, adaptation guides the stylistic and content choices a speaker makes for a presentation. Audience adaptation often involves walking a very fine line between over-adapting and under-adapting – a distinction that can be greater appreciated by understanding the general components of this skill. The Communications Department offers tips for analyzing an audience.

Audience Analysis Factors

Audience expectations

When people become audience members in a speech situation, they bring with them expectations about the occasion, topic, and speaker. Violating audience expectations can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the speech. Imagine that a local politician is asked to speak at the memorial service for a beloved former mayor. The audience will expect the politician's speech to praise the life and career of the deceased.

If the politician used the opportunity to discuss a piece of legislation, the audience would probably be offended and the speaker would lose credibility. Of course, there may be some situations when violating the audience's expectations would be an effective strategy. Presenters that make political statements at the Academy Awards do so precisely because the message's incongruity with the occasion increases the impact of the proclamation.

Knowledge of topic

Audience knowledge of a topic can vary widely on any given occasion, therefore, communicators should find out what their audience already knows about the topic. Never overestimate the audience's knowledge of a topic. If a speaker launches into a technical discussion of genetic engineering but the listeners are not familiar with basic genetics, they will

be unable to follow your speech and quickly lose interest. On the other hand, drastically underestimating the audience's knowledge may result in a speech that sounds condescending.

Try to do some research to find out what the audience already knows about the topic. Giving a brief review of important terms and concepts is almost always appropriate, and can sometimes be done by acknowledging the heterogeneous audience and the importance of 'putting everyone on the same page.' For example, even if the audience members were familiar with basic genetics, a brief review of key term and concepts at the beginning of a speech refreshes memories without being patronizing.

Attitude toward topic

Knowing audience members' attitudes about a topic will help a speaker determine the best way to reach their goals. Imagine that a presenter is trying to convince the community to build a park. A speaker would probably be inclined to spend the majority of the speech giving reasons why a park would benefit the community.

However, if they found out ahead of time that most neighbors thought the park was a good idea but they were worried about safety issues, then the speaker could devote their time to showing them that park users would be safer in the park than they currently are playing in the streets. The persuasive power of the speech is thus directed at the most important impediment to the building of a park.

Audience size

Many elements of speech-making change in accordance with audience size. In general, the larger the audience the more formal the presentation should be. Sitting down and using common language when speaking to a group of 10 people is often quite appropriate. However, that style of presentation would probably be inappropriate or ineffective if you were speaking to 1,000 people. Large audiences often require that you use a microphone and speak from an elevated platform.

Demographics

The demographic factors of an audience include age, gender, religion, ethnic background, class, sexual orientation, occupation, education, group membership, and countless other categories. Since these categories often organize individual's identities and experiences, a wise speaker attends to the them. Politicians usually pay a great deal of attention to demographic factors when they are on the campaign trail. If a politician speaks in Day County, Florida (the county with the largest elderly population) they will likely discuss the issues that are more relevant to people in that age range – Medicare and Social Security.

Communicators must be careful about stereotyping an audience based on demographic information – individuals are always more complicated than a simplistic identity category. Also, be careful not to pander exclusively to interests based on demographics. For example, the elderly certainly are concerned with political issues beyond social security and Medicare. Using

demographic factors to guide speech-making does not mean changing the goal of the speech for every different audience; rather, consider what pieces of information (or types of evidence) will be most important for members of different demographic groups.

Setting

The setting of a presentation can influence the ability to give a speech and the audience's ability and desire to listen. Some of these factors are: the set-up of the room (both size and how the audience is arranged), time of day, temperature, external noises (lawn mowers, traffic), internal noises (babies crying, hacking coughs), and type of space (church, schoolroom, outside). Finding out ahead of time the different factors going into the setting will allow a speaker to adapt their speech appropriately. Will there be a stage? Will there be a podium or lectern? What technology aids will be available? How are the seats arranged? What is the order of speakers?

While these issues may appear minor compared to the content of the speech and the make-up of the audience, this foreknowledge will soothe nerves, assist in developing eye contact, and ensure that the appropriate technology, if necessary, is available. Take into account the way that the setting will affect audience attention and participation. People are usually tired after a meal and late in the day. If scheduled to speak at 1:00 PM, a speaker may have to make the speech more entertaining through animation or humor, exhibit more enthusiasm, or otherwise involve the audience in order to keep their attention.

Voluntariness

Audiences are either voluntary, in which case they are genuinely interested in what a presenter has to say, or involuntary, in which case they are not inherently interested in the presentation. Knowing the difference will assist in establishing how hard a speaker needs to work to spark the interest of the audience. Involuntary audiences are notoriously hard to generate and maintain interest in a topic (think about most people's attitudes toward classes or mandatory meetings they would prefer to not attend.)

Egocentrism

Most audience members are egocentric: they are generally most interested in things that directly affect them or their community. An effective speaker must be able to show their audience why the topic they are speaking on should be important to them.

Check Your Understanding Questions

Answer the following questions using your own words. Do not copy and paste from the article.

1. Define audience analysis using your own words.
2. What does it mean to "put everyone on the same page" and why is it important?
3. Why is it important to know the audience's attitude towards the topic?
4. How does audience size relate to formalness of the presentation?
5. Give some examples of demographic factors.
6. Why is it important to avoid stereotyping?
7. What are some factors related to setting to consider?
8. Why is it important to know the voluntariness of audience members?
9. What is egocentrism and why is it important in presentations?

Note from Teacher:

When we do audience analysis in class, follow this format:

Acronym	Key Words	Question to Answer
A	Attitude	What is the audience's **attitude** towards the topic? How do they feel about my topic?
U	Understanding	What is the audience's level of **understanding** of the topic? (high, medium, or low?)
D	Demographics	What is their **demographics**? (age, education, background, etc.)
I	Interest	How **interested** is the audience in your topic? (voluntariness)
E	Expectations	Is there anything the audience **expects** from your presentation?
N	Needs	Are there any special **needs** from the audience?
C	Customization	How can I **customize** my presentation to suit this audience specifically? Consider their needs, demographics, and expectations.
E	Environment	What kind of **environment** will I be giving the presentation in? (audience size, technology, etc.)