Tips for Analyzing an Audience

Define target audience

In most audiences there will be a mix of opinions about any topic. There are usually some people who agree with a speaker’s claim, some people who are strongly opposed, others who are undecided, and still others that are apathetic. Conventional wisdom maintains that a communicator does not need to focus on the people who already agree with them and the people who strongly disagree with them will probably not be persuaded by one speech.

Therefore, generally the target audience is composed of those people who fall between the two extremes — they are the ones that a speaker should be primarily concerned with. Composing a speech with them in mind enables a speaker to have their greatest impact. Of course, the conventional wisdom is just that—conventional. Some speakers are so dynamic (or terrible) that they can transform beliefs of the audience that falls outside the ‘undecided’ category.

Research

At times, a presenter may be able to learn about their audience by researching in the library or on the internet. This can be especially helpful when speaking to members of a distinct organization. For example, if asked to speak to the local chapter of the Sierra Club, visiting their web page and finding out about the goals and beliefs of the organization would reveal publically stated goals. Obtaining brochures or other literature from the organization or group will enhance audience analysis.

At the very least, the person(s) who arranged the speaking engagement should be able to give some information about the audience that will be attending. Asking them about the audience’s expectations of the event, the setting of the speech, and other key questions about the different elements will make audience analysis more productive.

Survey

Conducting a survey is one way to find out about the values, beliefs, and knowledge of an audience. Surveys allow a speaker to gain specific information from a large number of people.

With access to the audience before a speech, an orator may be able to give brief written surveys to all audience members. Surveys may include open-ended questions (“How do you feel about animal research?”) and close-ended questions (“Do you approve of animal research?”). Here are some tips for constructing a survey:
Keep the survey short. Get the information you need in as few questions as possible.
Keep questions short and focused.
Choose the wording carefully and make questions concise.
Avoid leading or loaded questions.

Interview

Learning about an audience by conducting interviews is the most helpful but usually most unrealistic way to understand an audience. Unlike surveys that can obtain information from many people in a short amount of time, interviews are much more time consuming. Interviewing all members of the audience is often impossible or unreasonable. A possible alternative is to converse with a representative sample of the audience.

A representative sample is a small subset of the audience that maintains the demographic proportions of the whole audience. For example, if speaking to a group that was 90% female, making sure that interviewees were also about 90% female would establish a representative sample.

Reminders so nice they need mentioning twice:

Avoid stereotyping

Although thorough audience analysis demands taking demographic factors into account, such analysis does not legitimate stereotyping. Stereotypes are fixed beliefs or opinions about people in a particular group. Stereotyping neglects individual differences and often causes people to make decisions based on flawed reasoning. The best way to avoid stereotyping is to learn as much as possible about an audience using the above techniques instead of relying on preconceived notions of a group.

Do not simply tell the audience what they want to hear

The oldest and most common criticism of rhetoric, especially persuasive speech, is that it is mere flattery; a way for an advocate to pander to an audience. Politicians are often accused of doing just this—changing their stance on an issue to please different audiences that they address. To prevent this behavior, begin the planning of every speech with a clear goal to accomplish (i.e. “To inform my audience about online education” or “To persuade my audience that my research project deserves funding”).

This goal should remain constant regardless of the specific audience being addressed. Audience analysis should be used to discover the best available means to reach that goal. Be true to this purpose, but tailor the speech to the audience.

Continue to analyze the audience

Audience analysis continues even after beginning to speak. As a speaker, pay attention to the feedback that audience members give. If a presenter notices that several people look confused, then they may have overestimated their audience’s knowledge of the topic. Take the time to clarify terms and give necessary background information. If an audience looks bored, then figure out how to spice up the speech—either with more audience involvement or more excitement.

The speech will have the greatest opportunity for success if the speaker treats their audience members as active agents in the speaking process.