

Knowing “To Whom it May Concern”

By Dianna Booher

How many countless documents have crossed your desk that left you scratching your head with their redundant remarks, incomplete ideas, or unclear instructions? I call these “so-what” messages because your likely response to them is, “So what?”

Whether it is a presentation to your peers, a memo to your staff, or an email to an associate, it’s not always what you say or how you say it but how you connect to your audience that will determine the success of your messages.

Who is your audience?

Are you communicating to an entire client organization, an average-sized department, or a few colleagues? Are they decision makers, managers, or those with only veto power? Is their relationship to you that of a supervisor, a peer, or a subordinate?

More often than not, your reports, letters, and memos will go through several people—either for approval or general information. When writing to a mixed audience, first rank readers in importance. After you have pinpointed and ranked each reader or group of readers, give the most important readers their information first.

Knowing your audience will help you streamline your research, shape your key message, select the most appropriate details, and adapt your words more appropriately.

What are their interests?

Vocabularies, areas of expertise, even mindsets differ as you move across company hierarchies, as well as up and down them. What is of little concern to a CEO may hold greater interest to a sales manager and be of extreme importance to a marketing director.

Management will most likely be concerned with issues regarding profit projections, a project’s overall significance to the company, corporate image concerns, and necessary next steps in planning. *General professionals* will be more concerned with the day-to-day issues, why a project is undertaken, how the research is carried out, and what specific part they play. *Specialists* will be more interested in information required to do a specific job such as statistics, forms, flow charts, maps, formulas, and other things generally included in the “fine print.”

Make your readers’ interests a priority, and you’ll grab and keep their attention.

How will they use your information?

Delivering a specific point in your document is *your* responsibility. Do you expect your readers to consider, discuss, act on, research, or instruct others? The answer to this question will help you decide whether to write, phone, or meet face to face.

If your oral presentation or document is meant to keep them informed on new advances in their field, give a broad scope of the discovery and zero in on its significance for

other projects and decisions. If you want them to duplicate or build on your work, give them direction—all the if’s, and’s, what’s, and how’s. If they are to use your info as the basis for a decision, present your case persuasively to win their cooperation.

Identify the “to whom it may concern” of your documents and oral presentations and customize your intentions and details accordingly.

Clear intentions result in effective results.



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