

# How to Write for a General Audience



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# Who Is Your Reader?



When you write a dissertation, monograph, or journal article, you're writing for a small group of like-minded academics. When you're an academic writing for a general audience, you're writing for college-educated adults with no specialized knowledge.

When you write for general readers, you need to understand who they are and how to get their attention. Beth Luey, the author of the *Handbook for Academic Authors*, says you should think of them

as alumni – your students of ten or twenty years ago ... back for a reunion with your book instead of with you. As students, they varied in ability and interest, so you must now write to appeal to as many as possible. When they were students, of course, you had more power over them than you have now, and you cannot require them to buy your book. You must instead arouse their interest, pique their curiosity, answer their questions, and keep them reading.

General readers will evaluate your work using a different set of criteria than peer reviewers and, contrary to what you may assume, they're more demanding. They're thirsty for knowledge, and they want you to inform them through well-considered, compelling, narrative-driven prose.

The bottom line is that *you will have to spend more time crafting your writing*. When you write for a general audience, your every choice – from titles and phrases to structure and documentation style – should be made with the reader in mind.

Here are a number of useful pointers on how to make your book appeal to the widest possible readership.

# Titles and Structure



Intrigue potential readers and keep your readers interested with engaging, informative titles and subheadings. Titles should capture the subject of the book, chapter, or section, not your methodology or theoretical framework.

Keep in mind that the title of your book doesn't need to convey everything. Readers will pick up clues from the paratext (blurbs, promotional copy, cover, and so on). Within your book, avoid titles such as "Conclusion," "Methodology," "Contribution of This Book," and so on, as they convey little real information about the content. Instead, try to capture – through a short pithy title – what is unique or important about the book, approach, chapter, or section.

Your chapter titles should be short and of comparable length and structure. They should provide a quick road map of the book, particularly when viewed in the table of contents.

Honour chronology. Academic works are often thematic, but general readers want things to unfold as they did in real life so they can focus on what you have to say rather than on making connections or tying together events.

# The Introduction



*“If the thought of drawing on literary techniques gives you pause, think of this: stories are more likely than rational arguments to compel people to right or wrong a situation.”*

– William Kilpatrick,  
*Psychological Seduction*

When you write for a general audience, your introduction should try to meet two goals.

First, it should hook your reader and hold their attention. Don't open with abstract statements about the book's subject. Open with a relevant quotation, question, story, problem, declarative statement, or illustration that encapsulates what you want to say about that subject. If you don't have a story to tell, engage the reader with a story about how you came to your subject and why you found it intriguing. Don't be afraid to use the first person. Even scientists use “I” when they write about their research.

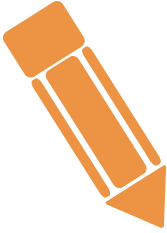
Second, the introduction should provide your reader with context and background. Rather than reviewing the existing literature and explaining how your research fills a gap, you should give the reader the information they need to know to understand the heart of the book, including competing theories, underlying consensus, and basic terminology. Most important, explain why your book matters. What is your book's relevance to the world? Refer to a broad range of sources to indicate wide reading and conversations outside your field or join an ongoing debate to drive home the book's relevance. Or involve the reader in the search for knowledge. How can learning about x help y? What are the consequences if we fail to understand or remember?

You don't need to remove the literature review entirely; you simply need to present the information in a different way. For instance, give a brief historical account of previous research, and don't assume that the reader will be familiar with books or scholars. Rather than writing “Said [1978] argues ...” write “In *Orientalism*, Edward Said, public intellectual and founder of postcolonial studies, argues ...”

Don't provide chapter summaries in the introduction. The reader has no way to evaluate your claims. The table of contents and the introductions to individual chapters should lay it all out for the reader. However, you do need to prepare the reader for what is to come. Focus on the relationship between the chapters rather than on their contents. Provide the reader with the underlying rationale for what is to follow.

Finally, avoid signposting or metadiscourse. When you announce your intentions with sentences such as “In this chapter I ... and then I ... I then ...” you disorient readers by pulling them out of the analysis or narrative. Simply delete the explanation and proceed straight to the discussion.

# The Text



**Nominalization** (turning a verb or adjective into a noun): “The police conducted an investigation into the matter” versus “The police investigated the matter”

**Noun strings:** “Early childhood thought disorder misdiagnosis often occurs ...” versus “Physicians are misdiagnosing disordered thought in young children because ...”

There are a number of easy-to-follow rules that you can apply to make your prose clear, concise, and compelling:

- Use concrete nouns and vivid verbs and keep them close together at the beginning of the sentence to help your reader figure out “who is kicking whom.” Why say “bovine entity” when “cow” will do. Avoid writing exclusively in the passive voice. *Test 1:* Is someone doing something in this sentence? *Test 2:* Find the verb. If it is “to be,” there’s no action in your sentence.
- Avoid jargon, nominalizations, and noun strings. If you must use jargon, provide your reader with the tools and information they need to understand the concept. Provide a gloss for terms and explain how the term offers a deeper understanding of the subject in question.
- Avoid too many words. *Test:* Are there more than twenty words in the sentence? If so, get rid of some.
- Reframe negatives as positives: Don’t write in the negative. Write in the affirmative. To understand a negative, the reader has to translate it into an affirmative and infer your meaning.
- Provide lots of examples to make your writing more concrete and descriptive. Give your readers images to hold in their minds. Use anecdotes to illustrate abstract concepts.
- Don’t quote other scholars’ work. Simply report their conclusions. Use quotes sparingly and only if the language of the passage is particularly elegant or powerful.
- Progress from the concrete to the abstract, whether it’s in a paragraph or an introduction.
- Each sentence should present familiar information first and new information at the end.
- To draft coherent paragraphs ask yourself whether the subject in each sentence is the same person, place, or thing. If the subject shifts from sentence to sentence, you’ll likely lose your reader’s attention.
- People your prose. Include vignettes of characters to arouse readers’ admiration, empathy, or disgust.
- Convey facts in interesting ways, for instance, through quotes or descriptions.

# Documentation



You must always give credit where credit is due. However, the form that credit takes should be crafted for the intended audience. Awkwardly placed in-text citations or ponderous notes will alienate general readers. If you are writing for a general audience, avoid in-text citations [APA style or *Chicago* author-date style] altogether. They are a form of academic shorthand that detracts from readability. Use *Chicago*-style endnotes instead, but use them sparingly.

- Credit authors directly in the text: “In 1974, historian Catherine Cleverdon published *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada*. In it, she argues ....”
- Don’t use notes to amplify or qualify. If the knowledge is necessary, include it in the text; if not, delete it.
- Don’t use footnotes to blatantly name drop. You don’t need to prove that you’ve read every relevant article and book. Readers will assume you have because you have a PhD.

If necessary or useful, include a “For Further Reading” section. It can be divided by theme or chapter and can include lists of relevant works or an annotated discussion of relevant works or primary sources. You can also provide readers with citations for quotes, statistics, and other information, but keep this section short.

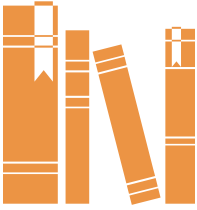
# Illustrations and Tables



Include photos in your book but only if they illustrate a point exactly. The captions should be able to stand alone from the text. Avoid numbering photos and referring to them with callouts (e.g., “see Figure 2.1”).

General readers often find tables and charts difficult to interpret. Ask yourself whether the chart or table is really necessary. Could the information just as easily be presented in the text or in a more interesting way?

# For Further Reading



There are many great style and writing guides. The following are particularly useful for nonfiction writers and academics:

William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

Helen Sword, *Stylish Academic Writing*

Joseph Williams, *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*

Beth Luey, *Handbook for Academic Authors*

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