

AUDIENCE AWARENESS FOR APPLICATION WRITERS

When most people start to write application essays or letters—whether it’s for a fellowship, job, or graduate program—their attention naturally turns inward. They think about their achievements, their experiences, and their stories. What they often fail to think about is the single most important factor shaping how their writing will be received: the audience who will read it.

Readers will notice when a writer understands them, and they can feel even more clearly when a writer has not considered them at all. In application writing, that perception matters because readers are evaluating whether an applicant understands what the program or organization is trying to do. An important part of application writing, then, is showing your audience that you understand their needs.

To do this, you must develop a working sense of your audience: who they are, what they are trying to evaluate, and how they will use your writing to make decisions. This requires shifting attention outward and making deliberate choices about what to include, emphasize, or explain. When you write with a real audience in mind, everything becomes sharper: your selection of examples, the level of detail you include, and the way you structure your story. This guide will help you build a realistic sense of your audience and use it to write a response that meets your readers’ needs.

IMAGINING YOUR READER

Effective writing is inseparable from its audience; without a clear sense of who you’re addressing, it’s difficult to make purposeful decisions about content, emphasis, and explanation. Before you draft, take a moment to imagine the person or the group who will read your application. This imagined audience isn’t fiction; it’s an educated guess based on the program’s or opportunity’s structure and priorities.

Applicants are rarely told exactly who will read their materials, but that doesn’t mean the audience is a mystery. You can make informed assumptions based on how different types of programs and organizations typically review applications. These practices are followed in many cases:

- Graduate programs use faculty committees to select incoming graduate students. Each year, this committee will be composed of some subset of the department’s faculty. So, the key readers of your application materials are experienced experts in the field of study you are applying to join. However, just because someone is a faculty member in a department does not mean they have a full command of every area of

research across the discipline or familiarity with your specific lab's work. To make your response accessible to readers who may not know your lab's research, provide a sentence or two of context—but remember that your goal is not to teach your research; it is to demonstrate how you think through a problem within it.

- An internship or industry job may rely on administrative staff or coordinators who may not share your disciplinary background at all. If you are applying for a technical role, your application may be read both by technical experts as well as by “product people,” the more business-oriented professionals who work with technical experts to guide their efforts toward meeting a customer-oriented goal. This means your materials must be comprehensible to both technical and non-technical readers. You should aim to signal your technical competence while also explaining the purpose and impact of your work in clear, accessible terms that a broader audience can follow.
- A fellowship may have a mixed committee, with professionals and scholars from many backgrounds reading the same statement. Fellowships employ generalist professionals who are focused on the fellowship's mission; they may also engage academic experts to evaluate the quality or originality of a proposed project. If this is the case for the fellowship you're applying for, then your statement must work for multiple kinds of readers at once. You should demonstrate the rigor and originality of your project while also clearly articulating its broader significance and alignment with the fellowship's mission.

These differences in audience shape how your writing will be read and evaluated. As you draft, you'll need to anticipate these perspectives and ensure your materials communicate clearly and effectively to all of them.

Equally important is understanding your readers' time constraints. Most reviewers must read many applications under tight deadlines. This means they are quickly scanning for relevance and direct answers to the prompt. A well-written essay that fails to answer the prompt will not interest them. In fact, it will cause frustration.

An effective way to begin brainstorming is by drafting a short paragraph describing who you think your reader is, what they value, what they already know, and what their highest priorities will be as they read your work quickly. The goal isn't to identify the exact person or committee reviewing your materials; it's simply to create a reader profile specific enough to give your writing a target. When you imagine a concrete audience, even if it's partly speculative, you make clearer decisions about tone, detail, and emphasis, and your application becomes much more focused and effective.

GROUNDING YOUR ASSUMPTIONS WITH LIGHT RESEARCH

Although your imagined reader begins as a guess, it doesn't have to stay one. A little research can go a long way. Many application guidelines leave subtle clues (and sometimes even explicit information) about who evaluates applications and what they care about.

Start with the program's or job's website. Look for “about” pages, bios, mission statements, descriptions of the selection process, or lists of program goals. These elements help you understand whether the committee values intellectual fit, professional readiness, creativity,

initiative, or something else entirely. Some organizations even publish profiles of past successful applicants, which can also be helpful. When you read these pages, don't treat them as unimportant content meant to skim past. They are clues about what the organization cares about and how it sees itself.

For example, if you look at the NSF GRFP [Call for Reviewers page](#), you can infer several key things about your audience:

- Reviewers include faculty, researchers, and professionals from both academia and industry.
- They are drawn from a wide range of disciplines.
- They must be able to evaluate research both within and across fields.

What this tells you as a writer is that your readers are not guaranteed to be specialists in your exact subfield. They are experts, but not necessarily your kind of expert.

Another example is reading about the past awardees on the [Fellows page](#) when applying to the Paul & Daisy Soros Fellowship. There, you can infer some things about what your audience values:

- Fellows come from a wide range of disciplines.
- Their profiles often highlight a combination of intellectual achievement and a compelling personal trajectory tied to the immigrant experience.

What this tells you as a writer is that your readers are not just looking for strong academic candidates. They are looking for individuals whose work, trajectory, and identity suggest a capacity to contribute meaningfully across domains, and often in ways that connect personal experience to broader impact.

Here is some additional guidance on how to use program websites to understand your audience and what they value:

- Mission statements (sometimes also called or accompanied by vision statements) tell you what the organization believes is important and what kind of impact it wants to have. If a fellowship's mission emphasizes "leadership" or "community engagement," that's a signal that they are looking for applicants who can show those qualities through specific experiences.
- Bios and staff pages can show you who makes decisions and what backgrounds they come from. This helps you pitch your past work at the right level and avoid assuming your readers already know why your work matters.
- Descriptions of the selection process may offer more specific insights into who reads your application and what they are looking for. Some opportunities offer ample information, like providing direct information about who reads applications or a rubric that application readers use. Others are more opaque, offering few details about how they select candidates.
- Information about past winners may not tell you who your readers will be, but they will offer information about what the readers are looking for.

- Pay close attention to repeated words or phrases across the site. If the same ideas appear in multiple places (for example, “interdisciplinary work,” “innovation,” or “real-world impact”), it means those values are central. The reader of your application will be looking to see that you understand and embody those priorities.

As you develop a better understanding of who your audience is and what their goals are, be prepared to engage them authentically. Rather than mirroring the language from the website back to your readers, your job is to understand what the organization values and then present your own goals, interests, and experiences in a way that convincingly connects to those priorities. A strong application shows that you know who you’re writing to and why you’re a good fit for what they’re trying to do.

If information is scarce online, it is perfectly appropriate to ask. A short, polite email to a program administrator along the lines of, “Could you share who typically reviews applications?” or “Are readers disciplinary experts?” is acceptable. At best, you’ll receive helpful information that can guide your approach. At worst, they will simply say they can’t answer the question.

In addition to these approaches, you can consult CALE for support in tailoring your materials to industry or professional audiences. For fellowship applications—especially questions about audience and who will read your materials—plan to meet with FASA for more guidance.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOUR READERS WANT

The type of responses that readers want is surprisingly straightforward. There is no mystery to guess at.

They Want You to Answer the Question They Asked

Nothing is more frustrating than reading a well-written essay that simply doesn’t respond to the prompt. Think of this as a first check for them to see how well you follow instructions. How well can you do what’s asked of you rather than doing something that you think will show you in a better light? To stay focused on the question they’ve asked, reread the prompt several times. Break it into parts. Answer those separate parts. Then ask yourself whether a reader who shares the program’s goals would see what they need to see. A committee reading dozens or hundreds of statements is not hoping you will impress them; they are hoping you will make their job easier by being clear, on-topic, and genuine. They want evidence of your fit and whether and how your goals, experiences, and ways of thinking align with what the program values and supports.

They Want Writing That Respects Their Time and Holds Their Interest

Readers rarely request an expanded CV or a laundry list of accomplishments, even if they are relevant. Instead, most prompts aim to elicit one or two well-developed examples that show why you belong in this program, as these are not redundant with other application materials and are more engaging and illustrative of your fit for the program. In addition to being uninteresting to read, lists are easy for readers to skim past and just as easy to forget. They also ask readers to

do the hard work of interpretation, to figure out what matters, how pieces connect, and why any of it is significant. A relevant anecdote, by contrast, invites attention. The corresponding analysis does the heavy interpretive work for readers. When you use a well-chosen personal anecdote, you leverage the brain's natural preference for narrative structure: when you provide a brief story with a beginning, middle, and end, readers are more likely to stay engaged, remember what they read, and understand how your experiences shaped your decisions or values. In application writing, a brief, focused anecdote can do more work than a long inventory of accomplishments by showing how you think, act, and respond in real situations.

They Want You to Provide the Context They Need to Understand the Stories You Tell

Application readers are often knowledgeable, but they are not guaranteed to share your specific background or subfield. When writers assume too much prior knowledge, readers are forced to work to understand what the project is, why it matters, or what the writer actually contributed. That extra effort can create distance rather than engagement. Where appropriate, translate your work for an educated but non-specialist reader: explain the problem your work addresses, why it is significant, and what is at stake. Avoid unnecessary jargon, and define key terms when they are essential. At the same time, providing context does not mean oversimplifying. When readers do have expertise, they are looking for signals of disciplinary competence and precision.

For mixed committees, the most effective approach is to write accessibly while still demonstrating depth where it counts. Framing your work in terms of real-world or disciplinary significance also gives readers a point of orientation if they momentarily lose their footing in a technical passage. In short, they want the right level of detail: enough context to understand the story, and enough specificity to trust your expertise.

QUESTIONS TO GET YOU THINKING BEFORE YOU DRAFT

You should plan to incorporate this list of questions about audience into your drafting process as a starting exercise. This is not busywork, and thinking about your audience shouldn't be considered an optional step. It's some of the most important brainstorming you will do, as it directly influences which stories you choose, how you frame them, and how clearly you articulate your goals.

- Who do I think is reading this, and what is their background?
- What would they most want to know about me to make a decision?
- What expectations or values does the program emphasize?
- What misconceptions might my reader have if I don't explain something clearly?
- What parts of my story best demonstrate the qualities this audience is looking for?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Writing with real readers in mind helps you select details that matter. It helps you cut anecdotes that do not serve the application, it challenges you to avoid listing things that sound impressive, and, most importantly, it helps your narrative feel purposeful instead of scattered.

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