

# Writing to a Global Audience

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*Writers and communicators responsible for conveying information to global audiences must take extreme care when developing communiqués. To ensure that messages are conveyed in a sensitive fashion, all communicators and writers must be aware of the cultural and social contexts in which information is received. Thus, it is important that writers and communicators take appropriate steps to fully understand the standards and conventions used by a particular audience outside the United States, and become familiar with the societal, cultural and belief systems of a target group before the distribution of communication materials.*

Communicating with people face-to-face offers the luxury of listeners who can provide encouragement and suggestions to make what is being conveyed more understandable, write Robert Scholes and Nancy R. Comley in *The Practice of Writing* (p.4). The art of face-to-face communication provides individuals an opportunity to express themselves in ways designed to elicit physical and verbal reactions from an audience, which help the communicator determine whether or not specific communication techniques are successful in reaching diverse audiences. However, written documents do not provide this kind of exposure or assurance that what is being conveyed in printed form is understood by a particular audience. Furthermore, when faced with the prospect of communicating to a global audience, writers and communicators must negotiate the challenge of communicating information across cultural and societal barriers associated with both people and industry, which represents a daunting task for even the most seasoned professional.

At the most fundamental level of this issue exists the need to discern an audience's conventional forms and standards of communication. If, for example, a period in English indicates the end of a sentence, what does this symbol represent in another language? Do meanings of certain phrases take on opposite meanings when translated into another language? Do these same phrases become wordy, vague and abstract following translation? Once the conventional forms of a particular audience and culture are fully understood by writers, the development of an effective communication vehicle is made easier. In addition, the particular structure in which written information is produced and conveyed is critical for the successful communication of ideas and concepts across cultural and societal barriers. To further emphasize this point, Marilyn Schauer Samuels (1989), author of *The Technical Writing Process*, suggests that writers create a structure that "makes meaning

accessible. Otherwise, readers will impose a structure—not necessarily the one the writers intended" (p. 4).

As Samuels, other scholars and practitioners suggest, writers and communicators must have a firm comprehension of the beliefs and ways a target audience looks at things when crafting a specific structure of communication. Since most readers often file information based on a structure they are familiar with, comprehending the way an audience absorbs and responds to information is of critical importance. Without the establishment of an effective structure, readers may apply their own framework in an attempt to comprehend meaning, which may be faulty, cause them to distrust a writer's expertise and question his credibility.

Concepts such as the need to develop an appropriate structure for a particular communication also apply to other cultural and societal-based modes and symbols of communication. For example, if a photograph published in a publication offends one segment of an international audience, the communicator must be prepared to explain or defend the reason for choosing the photograph. Understanding the cultural and societal beliefs and philosophies of global audiences aid writers in developing texts those diverse readers can comprehend. Writers must learn to communicate information to any reader, and to adapt the same information to different readers in different contexts (Samuels, 1989).

Inherent in the concept of global writing suggested here is the need to understand not just the differences in conventional language, but differences in cultures and societies. Writers and communicators responsible for producing materials for global audiences are in a particularly sensitive position. To some extent they must act as anthropologists, studying the cultural, societal, belief and value systems of an audience *before* creating and distributing a document or other form of written communication. Writers should consider this issue in terms of marketing research analysis, in which a researcher examines the purchasing data of a specific group of consumers before developing a marketing plan for a new product. Once the research data on purchasing habits and tastes is gathered, analyzed, interpreted, and the test communiqué developed, a representative from the target audience reviews it to determine its effectiveness in presenting the information in an efficient and professional manner appropriate for the target audience.

Another issue to consider when preparing to develop communication materials for global distribution is the impact of translation on audiences who do not use English as their primary language. For example, translation services

are widely available, but organizations employing them must include representatives from translation companies in all activities associated with the project or written document to ensure accuracy of content in all written communication materials. Inclusion of translation services at the start of the writing process provides these organizations an opportunity to see what many corporations and companies term the “big picture” regarding the impact of a particular piece of documentation or project on a global audience. In “Cross-Cultural Communication: Is It Greek To You?” author Nancy Caswell Coward (1992) emphasizes this point by writing that marketing executives, for example, often “find themselves at the mercy of a translation service” (p. 264). She goes on in her article to write that these executives

“...rely on outside translators not only to translate product materials, but also to accurately interpret technical information and to convey an appropriate implied marketing message through the style and tone of writing. This approach is like a company hiring a writer with no specific product expertise to develop marketing literature, manuals, and training materials without assistance from marketing and technical experts” (p. 264).

Coward also suggests that perhaps one of the best ways for companies to ensure appropriate translation of information geared toward global audiences is to include bilingual employees on the communication team responsible for producing and conveying information to the target audience. These employees can serve as a kind of internal focus group by providing specific insight into whether or not a communication vehicle is effective in reaching the audience and conveying the correct message in a sensitive way. However, writers and communicators whose primary language is English must remember to use simple forms and conventions if they wish to successfully communicate a message to global audiences. Rob Sellin and Elaine Winters emphasize the significance of this point in *Cross Cultural Communication*, Section Six: Writing for Translation. According to Sellin and Winters, English speaking writers and communicators should adhere to the following guidelines when formulating communication materials that will undergo translation and global distribution:

- include one thought or action per sentence;
- use standard terminology;
- provide a list of acronyms and technical terms for translators;
- use active prose—verb tense changes and passive voice constructions complicate the translation process;
- use prepositions clearly; and
- avoid over-modified nouns.

Failure to address these and other issues associated with global communication have a direct and measurable impact on the ability of a company to sell their product in overseas markets, which is tied specifically to a company’s ability to generate revenue. A specific example of how this cost issue is manifested in a particular field is represented by the development of technical documents for the global pharmaceutical industry. According to Robert J. Bonk (1998), an adjunct assistant professor at the University of Delaware and practitioner of medical writing, technical writers employed in the pharmaceutical industry must maintain a “balance among many competing forces in today’s global pharmaceutical industry....Each new drug successfully reaching the market on average consumes over 200 million U.S. dollars and seven to 10 years of effort” (p. 319). Considerable expense is expended for the development and marketing of certain drugs. The creation of written documentation in support of pharmaceutical efforts can often influence the correct use of the drug, which may have a direct bearing on a company’s profit margins. More importantly, Bonk suggests that writers have to “remain abreast of updates in regulatory requirements on an international level, as well as of document design and rhetorical techniques” when preparing written documents that describe findings to international audiences concerning the development of new drugs (p. 323).

To help writers and communicators learn more about their target audiences, a number of resources are available. For example, *The New York Times*, long considered the leading publication of the journalism industry in the U.S., is a significant resource from which writers and communicators can cull information about an audience outside the country. Additionally, community service organizations such as United Ways in large urban areas can be extremely helpful. In Detroit, United Way Community Services (UWCS)—the umbrella United Way for southeast Michigan—conducts programs that gauge and identify the needs of ethnic groups located in the city and surrounding suburbs. These community service organizations often develop and use research tools such as community assessment profiles and community scans to obtain specific information on the beliefs, values, attitudes and expectations of groups of people new to the United States. This information, most of which is available electronically or by contacting the human service organization directly, offers valuable insight into how audiences recently living outside the U.S. comprehend and interpret messages communicated to them. To make sure written documentation and materials are translatable across societal and cultural barriers, writers should remember the following:

- Use simple English. Since English is a complex language, it is necessary to make text as easy to read as possible. Some great American writers, such as Ernest Hemingway and Raymond Carver, achieved a large global audience using simple words and sentence

structures throughout their novels and short stories that were easy to translate into a number of languages.

- Decide whether to use Machine Assisted Translation (MAT) or a translation-consulting firm. Be aware that although MAT is inexpensive, it is not always accurate. Translation consulting firms are more expensive than MAT, but substantially more accurate, as long as representatives from these firms are included in project plans from the start of the process.
- Network with the community, business associates, area colleges or consulates. Input from these sources can help refine your project and ensure the use of non-offensive language following translation.

There are several points to remember when writing to a global audience. First, writers must understand the specific standards and conventions used by a particular audience and industry when crafting written documents and materials for a global audience. Second, writers must place themselves in the shoes of the person who will receive the document to better determine its overall effectiveness. Finally, writers must remain sensitive to the needs and level of understanding of any global audience if they hope to successfully communicate important information through written documents.

## REFERENCES

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