

Audience Analysis: Building Information About Your Readers

Brought to you by the Purdue Online Writing Lab (owl.english.purdue.edu)

By H. Allen Brizee and Kety A. Schmaling

“Audience Analysis: Building Information About Your Readers” discusses your communication’s complex audience and provides key questions you can ask to determine readers’ needs, values, and attitudes. This section also provides useful charts to help you with your audience analysis.

Audience Analysis Overview

In order to compose persuasive, user-centered communication, you should gather as much information as possible about the people reading your document. Your audience may consist of different people who may have different needs and expectations. In other words, you may have a complex audience in all the stages of your document’s lifecycle—the development stage, the reading stage, and the action stage:

Development Stage

- Primary author (you)
- Secondary author (a technical expert within your organization)
- Secondary author (a budget expert within your organization)
- Gatekeeper (your supervisor)

Reading Stage

- Primary audience (decision maker, primary point of contact, project lead, etc.)
- Secondary audience (technical expert within audience’s organization)
- Shadow audience (others who may read your communication)

Action Stage

- Stakeholders (people who *may* read your communication, but more importantly, those who will be affected by the decisions based on the information you provide)

Keep in mind that documents may not go through a clear, three-step process. Instead, the lifecycle of your communication may consist of overlapping stages of evolution. User-centered writing calls for close cooperation between those who are composing the documents, those who will read and act upon the documents, and those who will be affected by the actions.

Section 2: Development Stage

Audience Analysis

A helpful way of gathering information about your readers is to conduct an audience analysis. Depending on the purpose and needs of your documents, you may perform a brief audience profile or an in-depth audience analysis (or something in between). You may expand or contract the following process to match your situation, but remember that the more you know about your potential readers, the more persuasive and user-centered your documents may be.

Some key questions (adapted from Johnson-Sheehan's *Technical Communication Today*) to ask about your readers are:

- Who are they?
- What do they need?
- Where will they be reading?
- When will they be reading?
- Why will they be reading?
- How will they be reading?

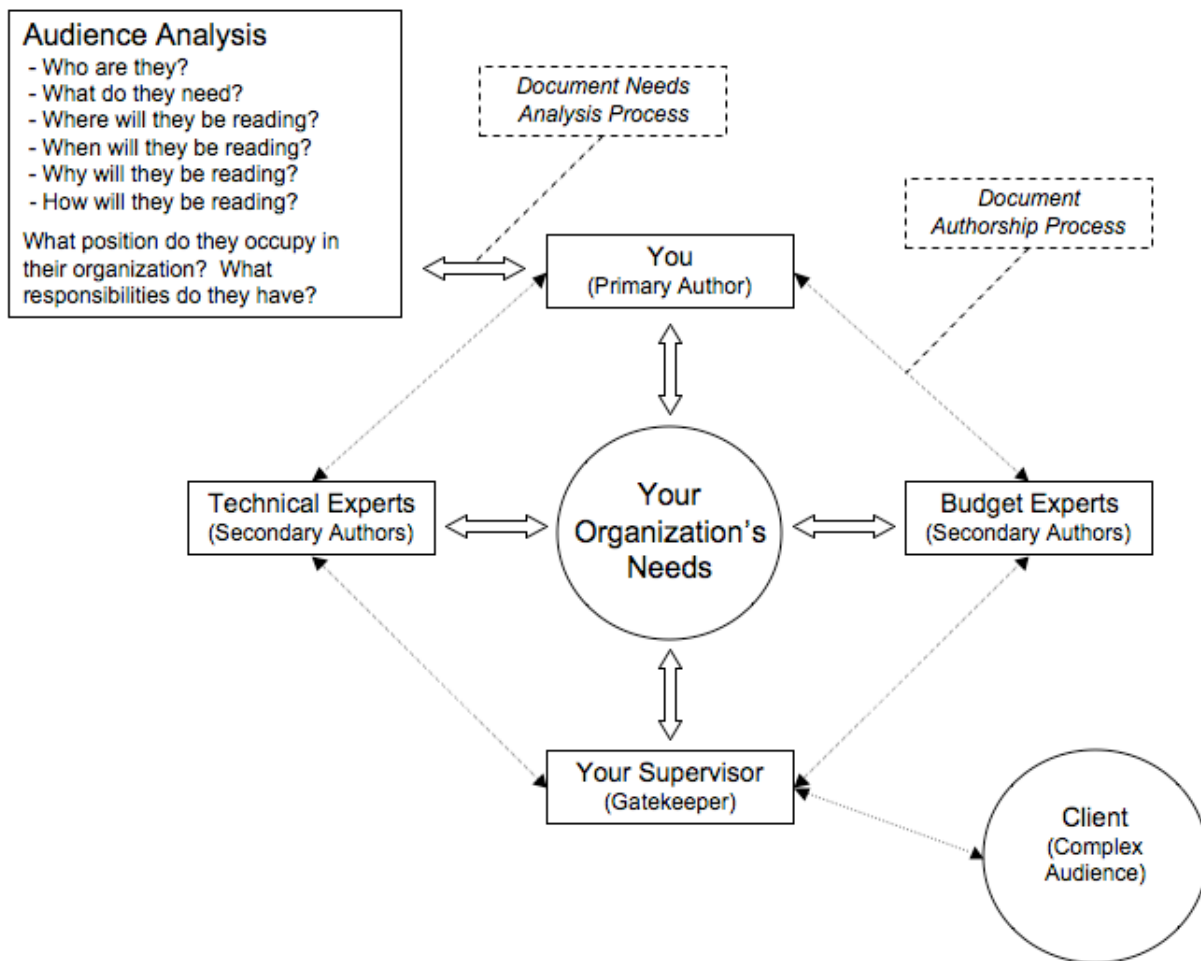
Meeting frequently (in person and/or virtually) with members of your audience to discuss their needs and expectations will also help you compose your documents. The following reader analysis chart (adapted from Johnson-Sheehan) is effective for investigating your audience:

Readers	Needs	Values	Attitudes
Gatekeeper			
Primary			
Secondary			
Shadow			

How readers will use your documents is also important. This context analysis chart (adapted from Johnson-Sheehan) is effective for determining how your audience will use your documents:

	Physical Context	Economic Context	Political Context	Ethical Context
Primary Readers				
Readers' Company				
Readers' Industry				

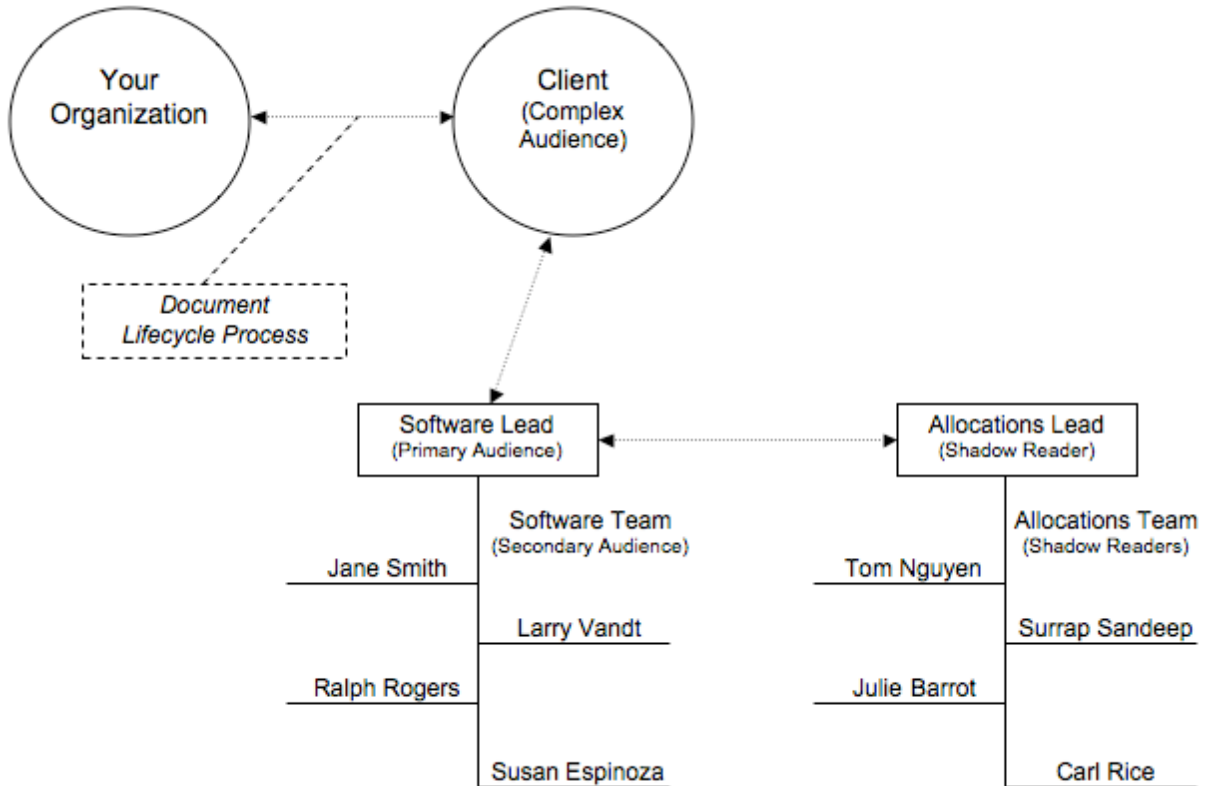
In addition, determining where your audience sits in their organization may help you understand readers' specific needs. Drawing a chart of your communication's lifecycle will help you gather this information about your audience. The following graphic illustrates the development stage where you might be authoring a document with a team of people in your organization:



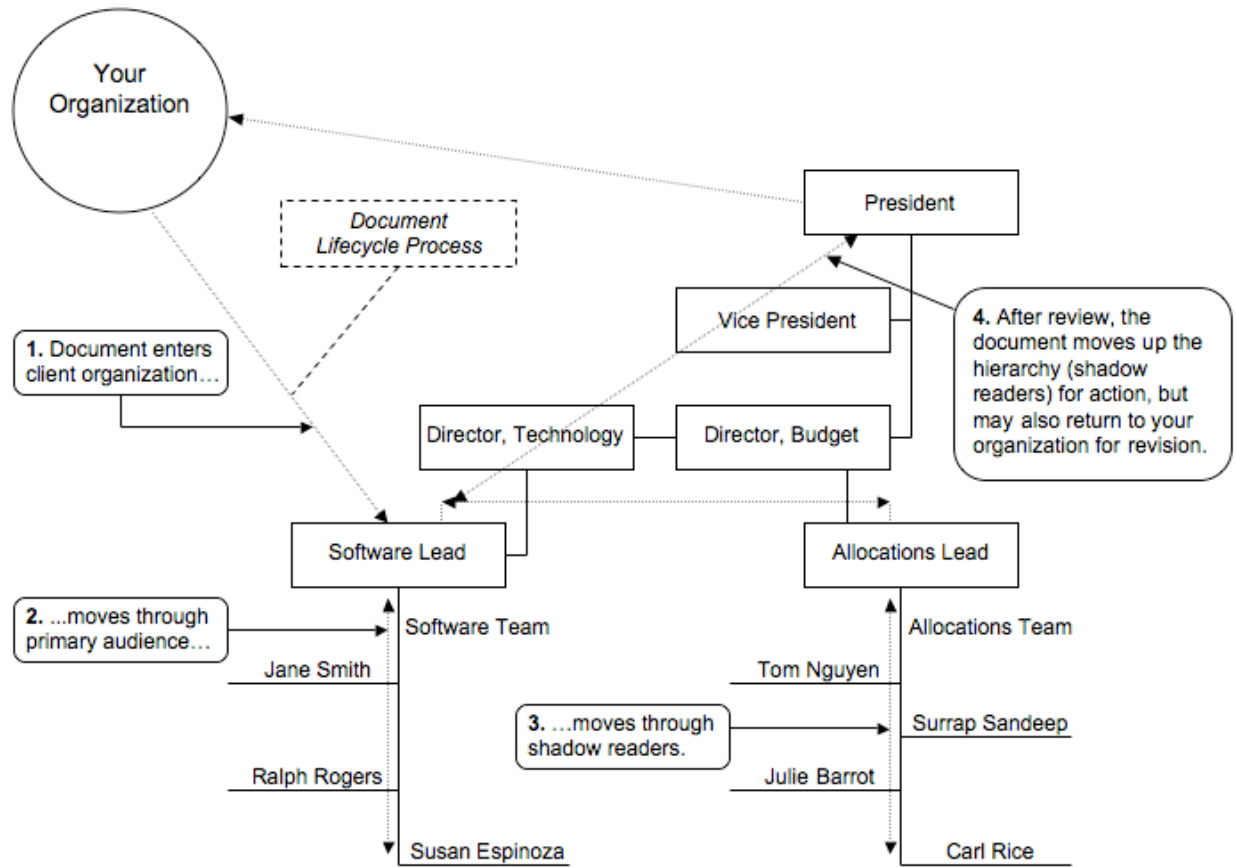
Development Stage

Section 3: Reading and Action Stages

The following graphics illustrate the reading stage where your communication might be read by a number of people including your primary audience, secondary audience, and shadow readers:

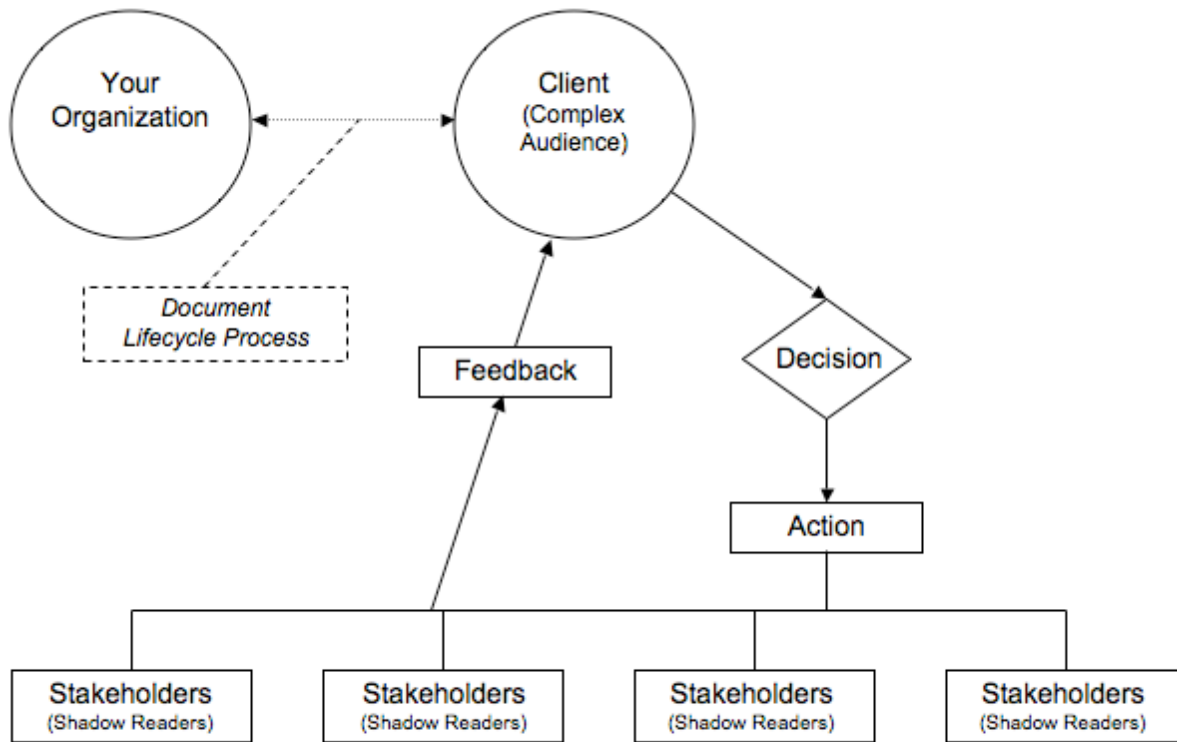


Reading Stage (General)



Reading Stage (Detailed)

The following graphic illustrates the action stage where your communication's information might lead to decisions, which in turn, can lead to action that influences the lives of your stakeholders. In a user-centered writing process, decision makers and stakeholders will provide feedback to help you further revise your communication:



_____ Action Stage

References

Anderson, Paul V. *Technical Communication: A Reader-Centered Approach*. 6th ed. Boston: Thomson-Wadsworth, 2007.

Johnson-Sheehan, Richard. *Technical Communication Today*. New York: Pearson-Longman, 2005.