

Primary Sources

How to Write Content that Grabs and Won't Let Go by Kim Pearson

If your marketing plan includes writing articles, blogs, or maybe even a book or two, you've probably been told that writing new and useful content is of vital importance. Content is King, in other words.

Content is vitally important, but it isn't King. We don't live in a monarchy, and your readers are not your loyal subjects. You don't get to stuff your content down your readers' throats – or through their eyes. (Sounds painful, doesn't it?)

Content is more like the President. It's only good if it's elected by a majority of the populace – the readers. That's because the president serves the people. He or she cares about what they think, because if he/she doesn't, he/she won't be president very long.

Many writers say, with great pride, that they “write for themselves,” as if this means they are a “real” writer, in touch with their Muse. But this is only true if you are writing a journal, meant just for your eyes.

Books, articles, blog posts and the like are communication vehicles. All effective communication is two-way. The written word is no exception. You have to know what is important to your reader. Otherwise, he or she will not read your writing. People have a choice to read your book or blog, or not to read it. It's as simple as that.

How you present your ideas must be done in a way that your readers will understand or be entertained by. Yes, I am talking about *slanting* your writing.

Some people think that “slanting” your writing to what your reader cares about is selling out, betraying “the muse”, pandering, or manipulation. No! Slanting your writing so that your reader can “get” you is simply good communication. It shows respect for your reader. You are paying attention to who they are, and what they care about. Aren't you more likely to listen when people pay attention to your interests, and offer you respect by talking in terms you understand? Of course you are. It's the same with writing.

Tailoring your writing to your reader's “care abouts” will allow you to elicit emotional responses from them. You want bells to go off in their heads, or for them to snap their fingers with delight, or be dazzled by the brilliant light you have poured over them.

Emotional responses lead to action or change. And that's ultimately what you're trying to get from your reader – you want them to do something, or learn something.

You can only emotionally hook them if you know what they care about.

You might be tempted to think that your particular topic is something that everyone needs to know about. Maybe so, but no matter what you think, not everyone is going to be interested in what you have to say. So the first step in writing for your readers is to define who they are.

It is true that with written work going out into the big wide world, you cannot know for sure who will be reading what you write. But you can know two things: you can know who is *most likely* to read it; and you can know who you *want* to read it. Is the topic of your writing going to appeal to men more than women, or vice versa? Will it appeal to people in their thirties and forties, or seniors over 65, or teenagers? Are you writing for experts in your field, or laymen? Do you want to “win over” the liberals -- or the conservatives? Are the people who will want to read your

thoughts going to be intellectuals or jocks, engineers or artists, or of a particular ethnicity? Get as detailed as you want -- for instance, are your hoped for readers middle class moms, or environmental activists, or people challenged by cancer?

Why is this important? Because you are going to tailor your writing to whoever your audience is. Different people respond to different kinds of words, different slang, different metaphors, different jargon. This does not mean you are pandering or betraying your own muse. All it means is that you are treating your readers with respect, and paying attention to who they are.

After all, the reason you write is so someone else will read it. It's not about you.

So to figure out who is most likely to be interested in your subject, and who you want to be interested in your subject, you need to ask yourself some categorization questions. These questions range from general and broad to as detailed as you want.

The two broadest and most general, of course are:

1. Gender. Are your readers more likely to be men or women? There have been many things written about the differences in gender communication styles.
2. Age. Are your readers like to be under thirty? Over fifty? Mid-life, seniors, Generation X, Y, or Z?

But don't stop there. The more detailed you make the description of your ideal or most likely readers, the better you will be able to grab their attention. Here are some other categorizations you might want to ask yourself about the readers who will most likely read your book, or who you want to read your book.

- Knowledge level. Will your readers be experts, or conversant, with your subject, or are they from the general public whose knowledge is limited?
- Financial status. Are your readers people with money or people who are struggling with money? Money is an important factor in people's care abouts.
- Education level. Are your readers mostly college educated or not? Do they have specialized knowledge, such as medical or legal knowledge?
- Social status. Are your readers members of a particular social class or sub-culture? If so, is this status based along cultural or racial lines, or financial wherewithal?
- Geographic location. Are your readers from the Southern States or Eastern Seaboard or Great Midwest? Or even – are they mostly Americans?
- Interests. What are your readers' hobbies and favorite pastimes? For example, a book about how to write one's memoir would probably appeal to amateur genealogists.
- Political ideas. Are your readers right-wing conservatives or left-wing liberals or middle-of-the-road Independents?

And so on ... are your readers outdoors people or couch potatoes? Engineers or artists? Romantics or realists? Intellectuals or jocks?

After you've thought about the qualities of your potential readers, you might want to stake out some of them before you begin to write for them. Here are some more ideas that might help you find out what your readers care about.

Go out to coffee with a friend or acquaintance who typifies your ideal reader, and have an in-depth conversation with them about the subject of your writing. Ask them what they care about, in terms of your topic. What questions does he or she have? Does he or she have any objections to your position? What problems do they have that your writings might solve for them? A good idea is to record these conversations (with their permission, of course.)

Or you might want to take surveys of your potential readership. If you have a email distribution list, or a group of friends on a social networking site, or have joined clubs or other interest groups, ask these same kinds of questions of them.

Social networking sites can be very valuable for finding out what people are thinking. For instance, when I want to find out what my potential readers are thinking about a particular subject, I've learned that asking a question in my status line on Facebook or

Twitter will bring me many opinions. Or I might ask that same question in a Facebook group that pertains to my subject.

Find out what your potential readers are thinking and wondering about. How will your writing help them? Ask them and find out!

Try to make your ideal readers as real to you as possible. You might want to browse through magazines and cut out pictures which represent who you are writing for, and put those pictures right by your computer, where you'll see them. Or you can write about your readers – just a paragraph or two about who they are, what they care about, and what you want them to “get” from your writing, and why they would *want* to “get” it. Anything that helps you visualize these people will help you write for them.

I sometimes have dialogues (imaginary) with my hoped-for readers. I talk to them as if they are sitting right in front of me. Even if my book is written in the narrative style, I'll pretend that it isn't, and address my reader as “you.” This makes them real to me.

Sometimes I even give them names, but don't tell anybody.

© 2009 - Kim Pearson is the author of five books, including Dog Park Diary, and a ghostwriter of more than thirty non-fiction books. Dog Park Diary is the first she has ghostwritten for a dog. For more about Dog Park Diary, visit www.dogparkdiary.net, and for more about Kim's ghostwriting services, visit www.primary-sources.com.