

Student Achievement Workshop  
*(Student Success Series)*

# **Know Your Audience**

*Tailoring Your Message  
to Get the Results You Want*



Student Achievement Workshop Series  
Academic Support and Achievement Center  
Mt. San Antonio College  
6-101

## **Overview:**

Knowing how to identify your audience and tailor your message accordingly is a fundamental part of effective communication. It is also an essential skill expected of people who attend college. Workshop participants will learn why it is important to tailor their message to their audience, consequences of not tailoring their message, what tailoring the message involves, receive tips for identifying their audience, and steps to take when tailoring the message. Participants will also receive referrals to resources on campus that can help students them tailor an effective message for their audience.

## **Learning Outcomes:**

Participants will be able to:

- Explain why it is important to tailor their message to their audience
- Identify the consequences of not tailoring their message
- Define what tailoring the message involves
- Gain tips for identifying their audience
- Identify steps to take when tailoring the message
- Name resources on campus to help them tailor an effective message for their audience

## **Why is It Important to Know Your Audience?**

When you need to communicate with someone, it is important to tailor what you say and how you say it so your audience will understand what you want them to understand. Otherwise, it is too easy for them to get the wrong message, which can potentially have very serious consequences.

## **What Happens When You Don't Tailor Your Message?**

When communicators fail to get their point across, problems can occur. They run the risk that they won't be heard or understood. They are likely to judge each other in negative ways. Both the speaker and hearer will become stressed and frustrated. They also run the risk of making mistakes and people getting hurt.

For example, imagine two people who live together. The speaker is the kind of person who believes in being subtle when asking someone to do something, but the hearer prefers that the speaker be more direct and just tell someone what to do. That way there is no confusion about what is expected. The speaker says to the hearer, "We're out of milk", assuming that the hearer will get the hint and go out and buy some milk. Yet the hearer assumes that the speaker is just informing them and will go out and get the milk themselves. However, when morning time comes around, and no one can eat their breakfast because there is no milk, both parties are likely to get mad at each other because they both assumed the other person would do it. They are also likely to judge the other person as being lazy, irresponsible, and inconsiderate for having not done it.

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## **What Does “Tailoring” Your Message Involve?**

Tailoring your message involves changing the tone, language, approach, and examples you use to help your audience understand what you want them to understand.

## **How Do You Tailor? Get You Know Your Audience?**

To help you tailor your message to your audience, you first need to identify and understand them. Asking the following questions can help you get a sense of who you are communicating with.

Who is my audience? \_\_\_\_\_

What is their demographic information? (*Age, generation, education, race/ethnicity, gender, personality, values, religion, socio-economic status, etc.*) \_\_\_\_\_

Why am I trying to communicate with them? \_\_\_\_\_

What do they know? \_\_\_\_\_

What do they not know? \_\_\_\_\_

What do they care about? \_\_\_\_\_

What do they not care about? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do they need to know this? \_\_\_\_\_

What kind of experiences can you use as examples? \_\_\_\_\_

What kind of tone (direct, soft, professional, empathic, non-emotional, animated, articulate, etc.) do they expect a speaker to use with them? \_\_\_\_\_

## **How Do You Tailor Your Message?**

***Find a Common Ground:*** One of the most effective ways to tailor your message to your audience is to find something in common with them. By doing so, you can more easily come up with language, examples, and metaphors/analogies that will help them understand, relate, and respond to what you are trying to say. For example, do you both love sports, music, or animals? Do you share the same religion? Do you have the same major in school? Do you come from similar backgrounds?

***Change the Tone:*** Sometimes messages are not understood because the tone is either too harsh, soft, direct, subtle, mean, logical, compassionate, realistic, imaginative, casual or professional, academic, rude, etc. For example, some students have difficulty communicating with their teachers because their tone is too casual and informal when the teacher expects them to communicate with professionalism and an academic tone.

***Change the Language:*** Using language your audience understands and can relate to will help them understand what you are trying to say. Have you ever had a teacher or some other person use such complex vocabulary that you could not understand what they are saying? Contrary to what some people assume, generally the simpler the language, the easier it is to

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understand. Yet at the same time, you may find that your professors expect you to use the vocabulary that is taught in their class regardless of whether or not it is simple. There are typically two reasons why: 1) They want to know that you are understanding and applying what they are teaching. 2) For skills-based classes, you will likely be expected to use that language when you work in that job. The following example, can illustrate how language usage affects understanding. Which title of a document better explains its purpose?

- 1) “Identity Development Culmination Matrix”
- 2) “Pulling it All Together – What Does it Mean?”

***Change the Examples:*** When you are trying to get your point across, you will want to use examples that help your audience understand and apply the concepts you are trying to convey. When you do, try to come up with examples they can relate to. For example, when talking to a 3-year-old, you might want to use an example that applies to their toys.

***Change the Metaphors/Analogies:*** A metaphor is a picture or story that represents something else. An analogy is making a comparison between two similar things. It is important to use metaphors and analogies that your audience will understand. For example, if you use a reference to the Civil War and its impact on the present-day culture in the United States with an 18-year-old immigrant college student who has only been here for a year, they may not understand what comparison you are trying to make. However, if you use analogies and metaphors about homework, studying and being in class, they are much more likely to be able to understand and relate.

## **How Can You Be Sure Your Message Was Effective?**

Once you take the time to tailor your message, you should take the time to get feedback from others to make sure that it makes sense and that your audience will get the message. Try to find people who know how to give feedback instead of just saying, “It’s great.” Instead find people who know how to question whether or not your message makes sense, and can tell you when it does not. Ideally, try to find someone who is closer to your audience in description than you are. For example, if your audience is of another generation, then try to find someone who is of that generation.

### ***Get a Tutor/Editor:***

Generally, someone who is skilled at writing and communicating can be a help in crafting and revising your message for your audience. In particular, English tutors should be able to help you with tailoring your message to your audience because that is a critical part of writing. An English tutor will be able to help you identify if your message is clear and appropriate for your audience.

### ***Test Your Audience:***

Once you think you have your message crafted and you have had a tutor review it, it is helpful to actually test your message on someone who is as close to your defined audience as possible. For example, imagine you are going to make a presentation to a bunch of high school kids. You have a family member who is in high school, so ask them if they would be willing to offer their feedback after you practice on them. Ask them if they understood the message, if the language, tone, examples, and analogies/metaphors were appropriate? Ask them if there was anything that

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stood out in a bad way? What was the best part of the message? Do they have any suggestions?

## **Practice:**

To help you practice tailoring your message, answer one of the following two question sets differently based on who the audience is:

**Question:** What would you say if you were asked, “**Why are you going to college?**”

Answer: (Talking to a employment interviewer)\_\_\_\_\_

(Talking to a 3-year-old)\_\_\_\_\_

**OR**

**Question:** What would you say if you were asked, “**How do you feel?**”

Answer: (Talking to a doctor)\_\_\_\_\_

(Talking to a 3-year-old)\_\_\_\_\_

How should your answers be different? Would the 3-year-old understand as much as the employer/doctor? Would the employer/doctor be offended of you spoke to him/her as if s/he were three years old?

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## **Do You Need Help Tailoring Your Message?**

If you still find it challenging to tailor your message to your audience, don't worry. There is help on campus. There are several tutoring centers on campus that tutor in English and/or writing. Tailoring a message to the audience is a fundamental part of writing, so English tutors should be very helpful with this process.

You can find English tutors in the Academic Support and Achievement Center (ASAC).

<https://www.mtsac.edu/asac/tutorialservices.html>

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You can also find English tutoring at some other campus tutoring centers as well.

<https://www.mtsac.edu/tutoringcenters/index.html>

### **Other Resources:**

Do you not have access to the hardware and/or software you need to get your homework done? Don't stress because there is support for your technology needs.

### **On Campus Computer Labs**

Mt. SAC has several campus computer labs where you can use their computer equipment, software and print your documents. Most of these resources (except printing) are free for eligible students to use. Be sure to bring your student ID cards because most of these labs require it to use their equipment.

<http://www.mtsac.edu/computerlabs/>

### **Summary**

Knowing how to identify your audience and tailor your message accordingly is a fundamental part of effective communication. It is also an essential skill expected of college students and working professionals. It is important to tailor your message to your audience, to avoid negative consequences. Mt. SAC has several resources on campus that can help you tailor an effective message for your audience.

### **Reflection**

What did you learn from this workshop?

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How can you use this information this week?

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