

Basics

When a text is written, the writer always has a reason or purpose for writing. Identifying that purpose is an important part of understanding the text. An effective reader will look for clues in the text, the title and the illustrations to identify the writer's purpose.

The academic context

The purpose of most academic texts is usually clear from the title. Looking for words such as *analysis* or *clarification* can help you understand the writer's purpose more quickly.

Key features

Texts can have many purposes. Here are some examples:

- to inform
- to persuade
- to advise
- to analyze
- to argue
- to describe
- to explain

How can we find out the writer's purpose?

- Context: Who is the writer and what is their job, for example?
- Title: Look for any of the key verbs above in the title. These can be big clues to the purpose of the writer.
- Illustrations: Do the pictures give you any clues? For example, advertisements are persuasive and often have pictures of products.
- Type of text: A skim read may help you find clues in the text. The list below may also help you, with possible writer purposes in *italics*.
 - Does the writer want you to do something? *Persuasive text?*
 - Is the writer simply telling you about something? *Informative text?*
 - Is the writer trying to help you? *Advisory text?*
 - Is the writer trying to tell you why something happened? *Explanatory text?*
 - Is the writer trying to make you agree with them? *Argumentative text?*
 - Is the writer looking at something in detail? *Analytical text?*

Challenges / difficulties

Sometimes writers will try to hide the purpose of their texts. For example, an advertisement may be disguised as a description of a product. In academic texts this is less common, but sometimes a product may be named in an academic text and this could be seen as an advertisement.

How can I develop this skill?

When you are reading for your course, take a minute to try to identify the purpose of the text you are reading. See if you can note down any features of the text that helped you to identify the writer's purpose. These could be specific language features, like the use of the imperative in instructions, or more general features, like the use of tone.

Learning outcome

Students will be able to demonstrate that they can identify the writer's purpose in a reading text.

Theory to practice

Here are some extracts from seven texts (1–7). Read them and see if you can match them with one of the purposes (a–g). Put the letter of the purpose next to the text. One has been done for you.

- a advise
- b analyze
- c argue
- d describe
- e explain
- f inform
- g persuade

- 1 **There are two ways of backing this up onto your laptop.** e
- 2 Let's take a detailed look at how the project is going to develop.
- 3 The university Wi-Fi will be down at 0500–0800 tomorrow for essential maintenance.
- 4 Under these circumstances, the best thing is to speak to your personal tutor.
- 5 **The main reason that this is the fastest way to finish the process is that ...**
- 6 This is the best cloud solution, and I really suggest you all use it for backup.
- 7 The library has five sections, over two floors.

Ways to get more practice

Keep a copy of this list of purposes in your notebook, and when you read a new text, try to make a note of what the purpose is.

- to inform
- to persuade
- to advise
- to analyze
- to argue
- to describe
- to explain