

Connecting with People Across Beliefs

The following is an excerpt from [*Writing to Be Understood: What Works and Why*](#). This is the conclusion of the chapter on Writing for a Tough Audience.



Methods for Writers

Connecting with People Across Beliefs

Writing about challenging or values-based topics requires a deft touch. Later chapters will discuss specific methods for addressing a difficult audience, such as storytelling and imagery.

You won't win over everyone. Perhaps you'll reach a few people outside your own sphere of followers or like-minded individuals. Maybe you'll reach a few *hundred*, or more. Start by setting realistic expectations.

There's no single formula for changing the beliefs of your readers—and that's a good thing. That doesn't mean you shouldn't try.

What *not* to do

Let's start with the easy part: what *doesn't* work. When writing about something that challenges or threatens a reader's fundamental beliefs, these strategies won't work:

Data, data, and more data. If you have an analytic bent, you may feel that you can change minds by providing more and better data. However, data alone rarely makes a lasting impression for people who are emotionally engaged with the subject. Answering emotion with data is like speaking to someone in a language they do not know. You won't reach agreement.

Remember the research about people who had a strong need for closure? They could stare at a picture of a cat and tell you it was a dog, if they had decided this was the case when the picture was less clear.

Or, remember Dave Gray's analogy of self-sealing belief systems? According to Gray, "If you give people facts without a story, they will explain it within their existing belief system."

Lecturing. Your perspective may be obvious to you, but not to your entire audience. When you fail to acknowledge other possible points of view, you risk disrespecting readers who don't agree with you. Beware of condescension and telling people how to think. Instead, help the reader see through another's eyes.

Insisting on being right. If you worry about defending the correctness of your opinions, then you may be focusing on *yourself* instead of the thoughts and ideas in the reader's head. To change someone's mind, guide them as they draw their own conclusions.

OK, that's what you should avoid. With that behind us, let's move on to methods you can deploy when writing for a difficult audience.

Survey your own beliefs and emotions

Before you can effectively reach people with different beliefs, first you must understand your own.

Which of the “moral taste buds” are strongest for you? You can assess your personal stance by taking the Moral Foundations survey at YourMorals.Org, where Haidt and colleagues continue to gather data.

Whatever you are writing about, stop first to consider what you may be taking for granted.

In his book *Liminal Thinking*, Dave Gray argues that we must cross the thresholds of our own belief systems to enter those of others. He advises that we should learn to understand the underlying emotions of our own opinions.

I asked him for his advice for writers in this situation, and this is what he offered: “I recommend that you learn to access your emotional state, especially as you react to new information or other people’s ideas. Are you feeling curiosity or a more negative emotion, like fear, anger, or anxiety? If you have a strong emotional reaction to a concept, it’s very likely you are having that feeling because the new information somehow threatens a belief that you hold. Ask yourself why you are feeling this way.”

Emotional self-awareness, then, is the first part of the battle. Once we realize that we’re in this territory, how does that influence our writing? We cannot ignore the emotional component; it must coexist with reason.

Says Gray, “You may want to bifurcate yourself into two personalities—the writer and the editor. The writer can be driven by strong emotion but the editor should keep a cool head and focus on triangulation. Ask yourself: Who agrees with these points? Who is likely to disagree? Who will be threatened by this?”

Fortified with a better understanding of your own biases, you’re ready to try to cross the divide.

Reframe the values

Understand and appeal to the various ethical foundations (moral taste buds) of your readers. Anchor the discussion around the beliefs that are important to your audience. If you are hoping to reach a socially conservative readership, think about ways to address concerns of loyalty or sanctity.

For example, environmental issues can appeal to multiple moral foundations. The now-famous images of suffering polar bears trigger to the care/harm foundation, but there are many others. Do we have a sacred obligation to be caretakers of the planet? Do we demonstrate loyalty to the community and the next generation by taking a long view? Is it fair for one group to consume finite shared resources or take actions that affect impoverished countries around the globe?

Experiment with presenting your ideas in relation to different values, beyond the ones that seem obvious to you. Are there other angles to your subject that don’t matter to you, but might resonate with resistant readers?

Once again, cognitive empathy is your ally. Revisit the methods in Chapter Two for ideas on finding your reader's perspective and apply them to the people you feel will be most difficult to reach.

Rules to remember

Without having any easy answers for how to communicate with a tough audience, this is the best advice I can muster:

1. Understand the moral taste buds you may offend.
2. Observe your own beliefs.
3. Connect with your readers on levels beyond reason and data alone.
4. Don't expect complete success.

For more like this, see the book [*Writing to Be Understood: What Works and Why*](#).



