

# 1

## KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

### Words to Live By

*“While it is unclear how much longer the traditional newsprint versions of newspapers will remain, the need for journalism — and those who help get information to reporters — should never go away.”*

— Suzanne Struglinski  
*Media Relations Consultant*



Suzanne Struglinski

For more helpful hints and sage advice from Suzanne, see the “Professional Thoughts” feature later in the chapter.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- 1.1 Define an audience based on several characteristics, including demographic information, psychographic information and geography.
- 1.2 Use key questions to improve your connection with your audience.
- 1.3 Discuss the key interest elements that attract most readers, including fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact.
- 1.4 Identify key needs of audience members and how to meet those needs through your writing.

Media outlets today have a singular purpose: Serve the audience. This truism applies to advertising and public relations (PR), where practitioners craft messages to convince clients to create campaigns. In turn, those campaigns release messages that attempt to persuade consumers to purchase a product, trust a candidate for office or change their beliefs about an issue. This statement also relates to the field of news, where traditional and digital media reporters gather material from sources and craft messages to inform their readers and viewers.

According to research published in the *Journal of Communication*, media users engage in selective exposure.<sup>1</sup> This means audience members will gravitate to topics they know, writers they like and information providers they trust. This can be good for media professionals who

apply strong ethical tenets and good communication skills to reach readers, but it can also be bad, if people insulate themselves too much from outside information and opinion. Once people make certain choices about their media preferences, media outlets often keep them locked in through algorithms that limit discourse. A collection of studies in 2023 revealed that social media creates ideological “bubbles” for consumers, with little outside pushback allowed inside.<sup>2</sup> This makes it harder, but not impossible, for us to break through to our audience members and inform them about things they need to know.

As audiences continue to fragment and specialize, media professionals can’t assume that broad messages or generic bits of information will influence a wide swath of people. Instead, the goal for today’s media professionals, regardless of the specialty they practice, is to learn as much as possible about the people they serve and put forth content that targets those people.

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the importance of the audience as it relates to media writing, determine ways to define the audience and explain which information elements attract the most readers.

## HOW TO DEFINE AN AUDIENCE

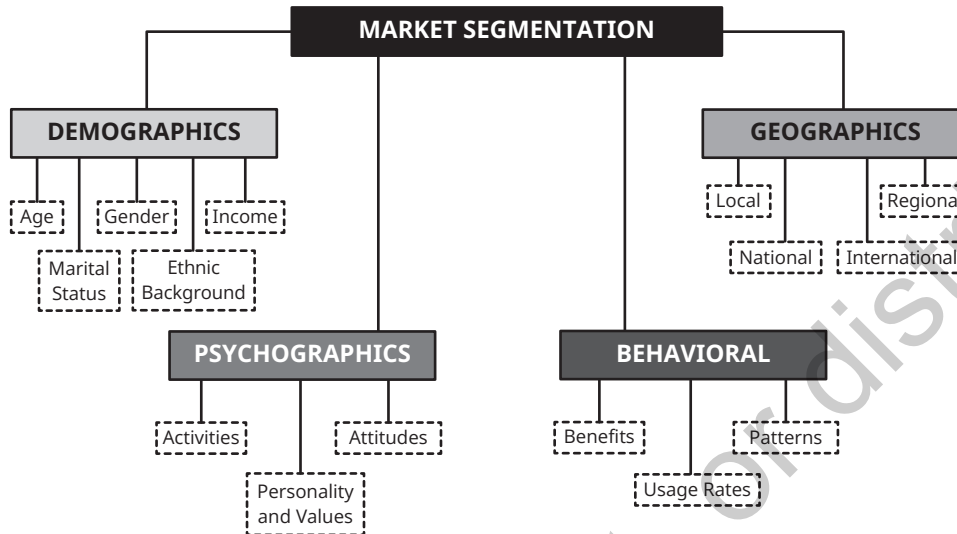
Before you create effective content, you have to define your **audience**, the group of people you think would have an interest in your work. When it comes to the various media disciplines, advertising professionals best understand the value of analyzing and segmenting an audience. In order to sell products, advertisers need to know who uses their products, why these people use the products and how best to reach active and potential users. Public-relations practitioners often deal with some of the most difficult audiences to reach, namely, news journalists who can use their media **outlets** to amplify the practitioners’ messages. PR professionals understand the needs of these fellow media practitioners as well as the needs of the public as they craft a valuable and engaging message. News journalists began to focus on audience centrality a bit later than their colleagues in other areas of the discipline. In years past, reporters viewed **audience segmentation** as unnecessary, because their job was to tell people what mattered based on predetermined news values. In addition, many news outlets held virtual monopolies over geographic areas, thus allowing them to operate with impunity. However, with loss of unilateral control over what people receive via news outlets, mainstream news operations now spend ample time catering to their audience (see Figure 1.1).

With the shift of news to digital **platforms**, more people have access to more news than ever. In addition, advertisers are now awash in even greater levels of message competition, and public-relations campaigns are expected to yield greater results with fewer resources than ever. As digital media continues to grow and to create fragmented audiences, all media professionals must be more vigilant in defining and understanding whom they serve. Here are the key ways in which you should look to define your readers:

### Demographic Information

The most basic way to define an audience is through **demographics**. These statistics reveal the measurable aspects of a group you hope to reach. Demographics commonly include age, gender, race, education and relationship status.

**FIGURE 1.1** ■ Market segmentation allows you to figure out who is in your audience and how best to reach them. For media writers, understanding the demographic, psychographic and geographic backgrounds of their readers will help them write better for those people.



Marketers traditionally use these population characteristics to divide a larger group into more manageable segments. For example, the purchasing habits of divorced women, ages 54 to 65, who have no children will differ from the purchasing habits of married men, ages 25 to 36, who have multiple children living at home. If you targeted both groups with the same types of material and the same products, you probably would fail to reach at least one of those groups.

**Microtargeting**, a process of targeting individuals based on specific personal parameters, has become a huge factor in political campaigns over the past decade. A 2024 *New Scientist* article outlined the ways in which organizations can use generative artificial intelligence (AI) programs to rewrite political ads that reach people on social media. These AI revisions can help match tone, personality type and interest levels at a granular level, making the advertising potentially game changing.<sup>3</sup> Critics argue that this approach further exacerbates the differences between individuals and can play havoc with important social systems, like elections.<sup>4</sup> However, like every tool we discuss in this book, demographic targeting can be used for societal benefit or detriment. It comes down to the media professionals using the tool and their conduct.

## Geographic Information

People relate well to events that happen near them and care somewhat less about those happening far away. When you consider that a single death can draw more attention than a massive genocide simply based on where the event occurs, you realize that **geographic information** plays a large role in how to target your audience.

Area placement means a great deal to advertisers and event organizers. A person might fit a demographic range for a particular event, such as a 5K run. The person might also have an interest in the charity that the run supports, such as breast cancer awareness or muscular dystrophy research. However, if the event takes place 500 miles from where that person lives, it is unlikely

the individual will consider participating in it. This is where geography becomes important. Also, advertisers know that the needs of citizens of Madison, Minnesota, are not the same as the needs of those of Madison, Florida, when it comes to snow-removal equipment or alligator deterrents.

People want to know what is happening near them. When a restaurant burns to the ground in a small town, news reporters know that readers likely have eaten at that establishment or know its owners. When a school district requests a tax increase or fires a teacher, the issue of proximity figures prominently into audience members' interest in the issue.

## Psychographic Information

Just because someone is your age, is your gender and has your level of education, it doesn't necessarily follow that the person has anything in common with you. **Psychographics** allow media professionals to examine an audience based on concepts like personal values, interests and attitudes. This category incorporates topics such as the strength of opinion on certain issues as well as general likes and dislikes associated with certain topics, activities and ideologies.

For example, if you were to examine the demographics of College X, you might find that it has a 52%-to-48% split leaning slightly more female, with an age demographic that primarily sits in the 18-to-24 range. You might find that this school has an 82/18 proportion of white students to those of various other racial groups. College Y might have similar demographics that show a 52%-to-48% split between men and women, an 80/20 split between white students and various other racial groups and a similar age range. However, if you were to run a promotion at the first school for a bar's "Drink Like There's No Tomorrow" specials, you would probably do poorly in sales, given that Brigham Young University has a policy and tradition against alcoholic consumption. If you did the same at the second school, you might do pretty well, given West Virginia University's consistent ranking among the top 20 party schools in the country.

## CONNECT

### The Personification of Your Audience

One approach you can take to conceptualize your audience more clearly is to view them in a way that makes them more real for you. Some media specialists refer to this as the **personification** of the audience. This approach to audience understanding has you create a mini-biography about your prototypical reader that lets you to reflect on his or her wants and needs as you approach your writing.



iStockPhoto/BongkarnThanyakij



iStockPhoto/miniseries

Here are a couple of examples of personification:

“Anne is a 55-year-old public school teacher who has lived in the same medium-sized city for her entire life. She always wants to keep up with what is happening all around her, but she places a premium on local information. She still subscribes to the daily newspaper and reads it from cover to cover every day before work. She listens to local news radio during her daily work drives. She will shop where she gets the best deal, and she is an avid coupon clipper. She puts the needs of her two teenage children above her own, in terms of purchase intentions and educational opportunities. She owns a mobile phone, but it is several years old, and she turns it on only for outgoing phone calls.”

“Burt is a 19-year-old college sophomore at a small, private college. His school is rooted in a Christian belief system, but Burt puts more emphasis on the quality of his education than the underlying religious aspects of the institution. Burt has limited finances, but he enjoys being at the front of most trends. What his friends think about who he is and how he acts matters a great deal to him. Burt gets all of his information through social media sites and avoids mainstream media. He is never without his phone, and he uses various apps to manage his news, his schedule and everything else around him. He loves cheap eats and other great bargains, but he won’t carry around a wad of coupons. He relies on internet codes and digital sharing to find good deals.”

Personifying your audience can allow you to better conceptualize who is reading your work. This will also help you figure out if you are meeting the needs of those people you serve.

## KEY QUESTIONS TO IMPROVE YOUR CONNECTION WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

As a media professional, you will be expected to ask a lot of questions during your career. Interviewing, which is discussed in Chapter 6, is a key way you will gain knowledge and gather information. However, to fully understand what you must do for your readers, here are three key questions you should ask of yourself:

### What Do My Readers Want From Me?

In many cases, media writers write from their own perspectives. In other words, they ask, “What do I want to tell people?” Many writers believe that if a topic matters to them, it should matter to the audience. In some cases, your interests and your audience members’ interests will intertwine, especially when you operate in a **niche** area.

If you start a blog that is all about knitting because you really enjoy knitting, you will have a lot in common with knitting aficionados who frequent your site. That said, some of the people will be interested in spinning their own yarn by hand, whereas others might rely solely on processed materials. Some knitters enjoy knitting socks, and some love sweaters. Even more, some sock knitters will only knit “toe up,” while others are fervently “top down” knitters. Just because you prefer certain ideas and approaches, you shouldn’t become myopic about them.

In writing promotional material for a company, an organization or a department, you can easily fall into a rut of writing lead sentences like “The Boone County Chamber of Commerce will host a comedy event on Saturday to benefit a local charity.” It makes sense to you because you are writing what you think is most important: Your organization is doing something.

Don’t write for yourself. Write for your readers. Ask yourself, “What is it that will be most compelling to those people who pick up this press release or read this promotional material?” As you answer this question, rely on information elements like fame, oddity and immediacy, which we will discuss below, to amplify the value to your readers.

*Bill Smith, the only man to ever eat an entire elephant, will perform his comedy routine “One Bite at a Time” on Saturday, with all proceeds going to the Boone County Make-a-Wish Foundation.*

Work for the readers and figure out what those people want from you. If you give it to them, you will likely have a lot of readers who are interested in what you have to say.

### How Do My Readers Want the Information?

Think about the last meal you ate. How much did it cost? Did you prepare it or was it prepared for you? Did you eat at a restaurant or did someone deliver the food to you? Did you eat your meal at a leisurely pace, at a table, with other people, or did you grab it on the go?

The point is, you were consuming something based on a variety of factors, and how you needed to eat played a big role in what you ate. If you were in a hurry to get to class this afternoon, a bagel from the school’s food cart might have been your best option because you could eat it on the go. A porterhouse steak with mashed potatoes and a side of asparagus might have sounded much better to you at that point, but cost, time and portability made the steak an impossible choice.

Delivering media content to readers is like delivering a pizza to a dorm room in some simple ways. How your readers want to get their information should factor into how you write and how you transmit your content.

Some readers want all of their content in a central location that will allow them to sift through everything at their leisure. Other people want bits of information sent to them as each item becomes available. Still others will want a mix of both forms, depending on the type of content involved.

In many cases, the lives of your readers dictate what they want, and intelligent media professionals will use that to their advantage. A recent Pew Research Center study showed that 86% of U.S. adults used their mobile devices to access news content either “sometimes” or “often.”<sup>5</sup> To that end, writing in a way that is easy to read on a smartphone and looking for ways to push content out to readers as it becomes available make sense. If you can be a convenient source of information, your readers will hear more of what you have to say.

## ADAPT

### Shifting Content to Satisfy an Audience

When thinking about how to write, you should consider the platform (newspaper, television, desktop, mobile) and the outlet (the New York Post, Vogue, ESPN.com).

Some people will want a quick burst of information, and that's it. It could be a notification that a company is having a sale on a particular date or a simple sentence that reveals the results of a football game. Other people will want to sit down and study an extended analysis of why a company's stock is performing well or read a personality profile about a local community leader.

Analyze your audience for outlet and platform preferences. What your readers use and how they use it will help you tailor your approach. Most people won't want to read a 10,000-word profile on their mobile phone screen. However, those same people won't want to wait until a print newspaper arrives on the doorstep to find out who won that night's baseball game.

Take advantage of these preferences. You could use X to alert the readers to that 10,000-word feature, thus piquing their interest and inspiring them to read the full version later on their tablets or laptops. You could pair that sports score alert with a link to other short pieces available on your mobile site, thus sponsoring more audience engagement on the topic while not forcing the readers to shift platforms.

In the end, you want to use the right tool for the right job and meet your readers where they are. Then you can use your writing and promotional skills to guide those readers to additional information that matters to them.

### Does the Audience Change Over Time?

In some cases, audience characteristics remain constant over time, but the members of that audience will change. It is your job to figure out how this will influence your approach to content and what you need to report to your readers.

For example, the magazine *Girls' Life* started in 1994, catering to teenage girls with an interest in music, fashion and the inside scoop on the teen idols. In the inaugural issue, the top "Fave Song" of the magazine was "The Sign" by Ace of Base, the top celebrity crush was Jonathan Taylor Thomas and the top story was about the show "Clarissa Explains It All," starring Melissa Joan Hart.

A 2024 issue hypes Janice LeAnn Brown's performance in the "Wizards of Waverly Place" reboot and features advice from singer Taylor Swift. It promotes your "Chill Girl Year" as a way to get away from stress spirals and offers an inside scoop on AI homework helpers.

The magazine still meets the audience needs outlined above: teen gossip, music scoops and beauty tips. However, over the 30-plus years between the first issue and the most recent one, the audience has changed. The idols of the 1990s don't cause the girls of 2024 to swoon. The people who read the magazine in 1994 have long since moved beyond the makeup tips and teen drama outlined in the pages of the publication. Although the specific information might change over time, the basic underlying tenets of this magazine have not.

Magazines often follow this pattern of writing as new members filter in and out of the audience. New parents will want to know if their children are eating properly or if their babies will ever sleep through the night. Engaged men and women will want to know how to plan a wedding,



what to do about family drama and how to save enough money to make their dreams come true. In some cases, the underlying questions and answers the audiences have remain the same. In other cases, changes to social norms, trends or technology might lead writers to approach these topics in different ways.

A long-held tradition stated that the parents of the bride would pay for the wedding, so early wedding magazines would list ways to address these issues with parents or how to establish the amount of money available to the couple. Those traditional expectations have long since faded, so while money still must be addressed, writers in this field must look at issues such as how couples can set aside money to pay for their own weddings or how to balance their current financial obligations with their nuptial desires. What's more, second weddings, same-sex marriages and melding families have become more prominent and thus are likely to be more germane to this generation of couples.

The core values and interests of a publication can remain the same over time, whether it is a corporate newsletter or a gossip publication. However, writers must continually assess the needs and wants of the audience as the members of that group change and grow over time.

## WHAT ATTRACTS AN AUDIENCE?

As media outlets continue to divide audiences along demographic, psychographic and geographic lines, several concepts remain interesting to many audiences. You want your audience to see what you wrote as an important focal point of their lives, and these **interest elements** can help you do that. To remember them, you can use the mnemonic **FOCII**, like the plural of “focus” but with two I’s.



Justin Timberlake addresses the media after his arrest for drunk driving in 2024. Timberlake's fame made the story much bigger than most other arrests of this nature.

Lokman Vural Elibol/Anadolu via Getty Images

### Fame

In some cases, it's not what someone does but who is doing the deed that matters. For example, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than 1.5 million people are arrested each year for drinking and driving. However, when Justin Timberlake was arrested on suspicion of driving while intoxicated in 2024, it became big news. In this case, the status of the person drew the attention of readers and viewers to what is usually a minor criminal offense. The more important the person, the more likely people will pay attention.

**Fame** falls into two main categories. The first category is for people who are famous over an extended period of time. This can be due to their positions, such as president, prime minister or pope, or to their value to popular culture, such as actors, singers and sports stars. In

some cases, fame can rest with the infamous, such as serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy. The name Charles Manson still sends shivers up the spines of people, even though he spent the majority of his adult life in prison. The more famous the person, the more the audience members care about what that person is doing.

The second category of fame is based on artist Andy Warhol's well-known statement that “in the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.” In many cases, circumstance thrusts ordinary people into the spotlight, and they become the center of our attention for a limited amount of time. Once the fervor around them dies down, these people often drift back into anonymity and



life moves on. People like Ken Bone, Capt. Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger, Yusuf Dikeç and Brian Collins became part of everyday conversations throughout the nation (and in some cases around the world) when they found themselves the subject of media fascination. If most of these names mean nothing to you, it only serves to further the point about this form of fame.

## Oddity

“Holy cow! Did you see that?”

When a friend asks that question, he could be pointing out a thunderous dunk at a basketball game, a classic sports car rolling down the highway or someone eating the bark off a tree in the park. Very rarely will someone be wowed by a free throw, a 5-year-old Toyota Corolla or someone jogging on a trail.

In other words, we like to see rarities.

The reason a video of a cat flushing a toilet gets 4 million views on YouTube is because not all cats flush toilets. The reason baseball fanatics celebrate a perfect game is because, of the nearly 240,000 professional games played since 1876, only 24 met the standard of perfection. The Hope Diamond mesmerizes people because no other gem of its kind exists.

In the field of media, we focus on these rarities and highlight the elements that make them different from everyday occurrences. Advertising professionals accentuate the aspects of their products that separate them from competing products. These features could include having the lowest price in the field or having the best safety rating among the category’s competitors.

Fundraising campaigns often use **oddity** to draw attention to a cause. For example, charities often use gimmicks such as important people who sit on top of a billboard until a certain amount of money is raised.

News is filled with oddities, such as Chuck Shepherd’s classic “News of the Weird” features. In these cases, the writers promote weirdness to attract readers. Inept criminals who injured themselves breaking into a bank and had to call 911 for help make for great stories that keep people entertained. Beyond bits of strangeness, the novelty of firsts, lasts and onlys also engage audience members, whether the novelty involves the first person to walk on the moon or the only person to vote against the impeachment of a state official.

## Conflict

Any time two or more individuals or groups seek a mutually exclusive goal, **conflict** will arise. The idea of watching people, teams, organizations or nations fight draws on an almost primal desire and tends to attract a lot of attention.

Celebrity feuds happen frequently and provide a simple way to see one-on-one conflict. In 2024, a long-simmering feud between Drake and Kendrick Lamar escalated through music streaming services, as the artists released multiple diss tracks within a few months, featuring everything from criticism about each other’s music output to allegations of adultery, pedophilia and domestic abuse.<sup>6</sup>

Conflict also relates to sporting events, where teams attempt to exert dominance over each other. In some cases, geography can intensify conflict issues in sports. For example, Duke and the University of North Carolina have a strong rivalry in basketball, enhanced to some degree because the schools’ campuses are only 8 miles apart. Other rivalries, such as between Ohio State and Michigan or Florida and Florida State, are also geographically enhanced.

Aside from these clear-cut examples, conflict also tends to weave into the day-to-day lives of media professionals in every background. Advertising agents want more people to like their

products or services as opposed to a competitor's offerings. Drinkers of Powerade are likely to remain loyal to that beverage and thus reject Gatorade's attempts to sway them.

People who raise money for a specific charity or cause know that people tend to set aside a finite amount of money that they will donate in a given period. If the money goes to Cause A, it can't go to Cause B. Conflict can also arise when organizations seek support and funds but are diametrically opposed in terms of philosophy, such as the National Pro-life Alliance and NARAL Pro-Choice America.

In a news setting, conflict is ever present. When a company wants to build a store, conflict can emerge between that company and other companies that want to put facilities on that land. In addition, members of the boards and councils that approve land use might argue over the value of that type of land use. Citizens could protest the loss of green space associated with the construction.

In looking to serve an audience, you want to understand the multiple facets of an issue. Depending on who wins, the outcome will mean something to the people you serve. It could be good, or it could be bad, but it will matter.

## Immediacy

The classic goofball comedy "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby" contains the immortal line "If you ain't first, you're last." If you skip past the grammar issues and logical lapses in that sentence, you see that Will Ferrell's statement perfectly captures the importance of **immediacy**.

People want to know what is happening around them at any given point in time, and they want to know before anyone else does. The surveillance need that people possess dominates the digital world, and media professionals need to understand how to meet it. News journalists also value immediacy when they "break" news that is important to readers and viewers. Broadcast journalists cater to this interest element when they interrupt current programming to update people on a developing situation. In July 2024, President Joe Biden faced significant pressure to drop his bid for reelection, as polls showed he had virtually no path to victory. When Biden posted a letter to his "fellow Americans" on X confirming he would withdraw from the race, journalists scrambled to post stories about the decision online, while television stations broke into their live programming to share the announcement with their viewers. More than 20 years before that event, television networks cut into their morning shows and went directly to New York City after the first plane slammed into the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001.

Today, platforms such as X and Facebook are used to provide users with information on a 24/7 basis. Audience members who choose to follow people, organizations and businesses can get up-to-the-minute updates on everything from product launches to celebrity sightings. As immediacy remains an important interest element, digital platforms and mobile devices will see their value increase exponentially.

## Impact

This element of importance helps you explain how the information you put forth will directly affect the readers. In some cases, readers can feel the **impact** on an individual level, such as the amount of money a tax increase will cost each citizen. In other cases, the impact can be felt on a broader level, such as the positive effects that building a theater will have on a community or the negative effects of global pollution.

In most cases, you can measure impact from a **quantitative** or **qualitative** perspective. Quantitative perspectives measure the numerical reach of an impact, and qualitative perspectives examine the severity of the impact.

For example, a newspaper might report the death of a single citizen who was killed in a car crash. Death, something from which you can't recover, is a qualitative impact. In most cases, people have not experienced a fatal car crash, so the story has not only a serious impact but also an oddity factor.

However, that publication might also report ways in which people can deal with an illness, such as a cold. Although you might feel like you are dying when you are sick, you will probably recover from a cold within two weeks. Since the average adult gets two or three colds each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the quantitative reach of the impact is worth noting.

Some situations, like the coronavirus pandemic, have both qualitative and quantitative elements to them. When the impact is both wide reaching and severe, people have a vested interest in keeping track of what is happening in a given situation. This is why news outlets provided wall-to-wall coverage and advertisers shifted their messaging to address changes in the way people consumed goods during the outbreak.

Make sure you examine the ways in which your writing can affect your readers and then focus on that during the writing process.

## PROFESSIONAL THOUGHTS

### Suzanne Struglinski

In a career that spans two decades in the field, Suzanne Struglinski has worked at nearly every type of media job possible. At each stop in her professional life, one of the most important aspects of doing the job well was knowing her audience, she said.

"Knowing your audience is not just an empty phrase," she said. "Sometimes it is easier to know when something is wrong for your audience than describing what is right. Who do you want to read whatever you are writing or see what you are creating? A business proposal sent to a law firm will use much different language than a brochure encouraging someone to join an organization."



Suzanne Struglinski

Struglinski spent most of her career after college as an online and newspaper reporter in Washington, D.C. She spent time at E&E Publishing's Greenwire, an online subscription-based news service focusing on environmental and energy news, before heading to a newspaper job. In 2003, she worked as the Washington correspondent for the Las Vegas Sun, and in 2005, she became the Washington bureau chief for the Deseret News. After the Deseret News closed its Washington bureau in 2008, Struglinski turned her suddenly shortened journalism career into one as a successful communications strategist.

"Some of my favorite elements of being a journalist were telling stories, meeting new people, making connections, and the ability to figure out things quickly," she said. "Every job I have had since has used these skills. On top of this, journalists take for granted that we know how to write, meet deadlines, and can juggle several projects at once."

Struglinski has worked as the press secretary for legislative affairs at the Natural Resources Defense Council, a writing specialist at global law firm Baker McKenzie, director of membership engagement at the National Press Club, and a media relations manager at the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists.

In 2020, literally days before the COVID-19 shutdown, she joined Industry Dive, a business journalism company in Washington, D.C., as its public relations manager. She worked with

reporter colleagues to promote their work and handled corporate communications. Informa acquired Industry Dive and had its own communications department, so her role was part of a restructuring and she was let go.

After some short-term public relations work for the National Organization for Women, Suzanne received a once-in-a-lifetime offer to teach intercultural communication at Tsinghua University in Beijing. She used her different job experiences to explain how different media styles work and how these differ in the United States compared with other countries.

She emphasized to her students how important basic writing and communication skills can be, regardless of your profession.

"I am curious when someone who wants to go into public relations says they do not need to know how to write, what they exactly think their job is going to be," she said. "The broad category of public relations has many roles and responsibilities under it, but solid writing, telling a story, and knowing how to organize information are skills that apply across the board."

As artificial intelligence enters the mainstream, Struglinski said much of what she has seen only reassures her that human writers are vital to quality communication.

"I use AI tools to brainstorm ideas, summarize things, and as super-charged grammar or spell check, but I draw the line between telling it to write something and simply using whatever copy comes out without reading or editing it," she said. "With search engines, spell-check, and other tools, we have been using AI for a while now. As with any tool, using it responsibly and ethically matters, but I don't see a reason to never touch it completely."

Even as the journalism world continues to change around her, Struglinski said that knowing who is in your audience and how to meet their needs will always be valuable skills that employers will prize above all else.

"Whatever your job, you need to define your audience before you can meet their needs," she said. "If you are working for a cosmetics company's blog, that is one audience and style of writing versus an investment bank. Imagine if a preschool parent magazine's content appeared on a political news website and vice versa. Your audience is coming to you for a certain type of information, so you need to deliver it in a way they will understand."

## HOW TO MAKE YOUR AUDIENCE CARE ABOUT YOUR CONTENT

The interest items outlined in this chapter can help you draw an audience, but once you have your readers' attention, you need to communicate with them in an effective way. If you focus on what the audience members need, you will improve the likelihood that your writing will do its job well. Outlined below are three key needs and the questions they evoke as well as the best ways to meet those needs and answer those questions:

### Key Need: Value

#### Question: Why Does This Matter to Me as a Reader?

Media professionals often write their copy from the wrong perspective. They construct a story, a pitch or a proposal to emphasize the issues they see as important or ideas they would prefer as consumers. However, the audience and the writer aren't always on the same page regarding **value**, and because the audience matters most, the writer needs to adapt.

When rookie news writers cover stories on topics like tuition increases, they tend to focus on the numbers from a collective perspective. It sounds stunning when they write "School officials said the university would collect an additional \$12.4 million from students because of this increase." The number sounds big and scary, but it lacks value to the individual readers who will see their tuition bills rise.

Self-interest is a human trait that media writers need to embrace. The people who are reading news releases, watching commercials, analyzing marketing pitches or surfing a news site aren't doing so for the greater good of humanity. They are looking for the answer to the basic question, "What's in this for me?" Good writers will look for the opportunity to present the value of material in a way that clearly answers that question.

## **Meet the Need: Explain**

### **Answer: Show Your Reader a Personal Impact**

As a writer, you should use your expertise to help other people understand important concepts. The more difficult each concept is, the slower you need to explain it and the more detailed you should be in your descriptions.

In the tuition-increase example, the writer needs to explain the value on an individual level: What does this mean to me, as a student, in terms of the dollars and cents I need to come up with to stay in school? This is where self-interest drives the value.

A good writer would note, "This tuition increase means the average student will pay \$130 more each semester to attend the university." In explaining the tuition increase this way, the journalist would create a more direct line between the story and the reader. Students who read this sentence can figure out whether they need more hours at their jobs, need to take out additional loans or need to consider selling a kidney on the black market.

Regardless of the media platform you use or the purpose of your communication, you want to present your readers with value. Look for ways that you can effectively give your readers a clear sense of why they should buy a product, donate to a cause, take part in an activity or look at a specific side of an issue. People are more likely to pay attention to items and look at issues if they know what is in it for them.

## **Key Need: Engagement**

### **Question: Can You Tell It to Me in an Interesting Way?**

When small children dislike a book or television show, their complaint is usually voiced in a specific and clear way: "This is BORING!" The material the child is consuming might have value or contain interesting information, but the way in which it is being put forth has not engaged the child's interest.

Contrast this with the reaction of children who loved the "Harry Potter" book series. These school-age children would line up with their parents for hours outside of bookstores in anticipation of the midnight release of each new volume. They would voraciously tear into the books and read until they had consumed every page. Clearly, those books tapped into something when it came to **engagement**.

The most important information in the world doesn't matter if the people who need it aren't paying attention.

## **Meet the Need: Stimulate**

### **Answer: Tell a Story That Will Pique Reader Interest**

How you tell a story is the difference between having an enraptured audience and having people who are bored stiff. The way you emphasize certain elements of your story will determine how well you stimulate your readers.

For example, children enjoy stories that contain characters who are like them. Successful children's novelists like Beverly Cleary and Barbara Park tapped into this with main characters who were dealing with the trials and tribulations of children. Stories about the "Stupid Smelly Bus" and sibling conflicts at age 8 helped engage children because the tales met the readers at their own level.

This basic idea can translate well to help pique the interest of your readers. If you work in a field where you are promoting financial growth products, chances are your readers will want basic numbers and facts. Use a direct approach in your writing that will outline the best numbers first and use them to draw readers into your work. If you work for the National Marrow Donor Program, instead of using numbers to draw in your readers, you might use a more narrative approach, focusing on a single individual. This personal approach, known as using an exemplar, will create an emotional tie between the readers and message, as you put a human face on a larger issue.

### **Key Need: Action**

#### **Question: What Can I Do With What You Just Told Me?**

A classic New Yorker cartoon by Robert Weber has two people sitting on a couch at a party. One says to the other, "I used to be in advertising. Remember 'Buy this, you morons'? That was mine." Although most advertisers would avoid this kind of blunt and insulting statement, the underlying concept has merit: You have to tell people what to do if you want to succeed in this field.

Advertising copy often has a clear **action statement** because advertisements should persuade consumers to do something. However, most other forms of writing fall short in this crucial area.

In opinion columns or persuasive pitches, action is about telling people what to do if they agree with you. Most writers assume this element is implied, but you don't want to rely on the readers to take that last step alone. You want to bring the main idea home and help your readers see what they should do next.

For example, when students write opinion pieces in the student newspaper that complain about the parking conditions on campus, they can clearly demonstrate value to the readers. On most campuses, parking is often at a premium, and students usually feel they don't get enough of it.

The column can then engage the readers with anecdotes about students who have to park several miles from the main part of campus. The writer can then support these claims with numbers that show how students get far less good parking than do faculty members.

At the end of reading the column, the readers will likely see the writer's point and feel the writer's outrage. However, if there's no action element present, the writer leaves the readers wondering, "OK, now what?" Should they complain to administrators? Boycott the parking system? Ride bikes to school? Take part in a protest at the parking office?

### **Meet the Need: Propose Options**

#### **Answer: Offer Readers Ways to Act**

When you have the opportunity to tell people what you want them to do with the information you provided, you should do so. This concept extends beyond opinion pieces or promotional material and can be useful across all forms of writing.

In advertisements, the action is clearly implied: If you like what we are saying, go buy our products. However, other levels of writing in advertising require a more nuanced explanation of how action should occur.



For example, a creative pitch (see Chapter 14) should include not only the campaign ideas but also how much money should be spent, what types of ads should be purchased and how long the campaign should take. In addition, information such as start and end dates need to be explicit.

In terms of news, if you write stories about tax increases or changes to public policy, do so far enough in advance to give people a chance to attend meetings where officials will debate these issues. You can also include contact information so the members of your audience can reach out to the decision makers.

If you promote events, you must include time, date and place information so people know where to go and when to get there. You also could include other helpful information, such as whether tickets are necessary.

If you write “how-to” pieces, you should address every important issue at each step in a process so that people can make sure they are doing it right. In some cases, images can be extremely helpful, but your writing alone should be able to do the job properly.

## THE BIG THREE

Here are the three key things you should take away from this chapter:

1. **Focus on the readers:** You are the writer, but you aren't writing for yourself. You are writing for an audience that has specific wants and needs. The better you understand who these audience members are and what they need, the better chance you will have in reaching them.
2. **Content is king:** You need to reach people on a variety of platforms and devices, but what you tell these people will always trump any element of technology. If something is important, well written and communicated effectively, people will read it. Focus on the ways in which you can meet your audience's needs as you create your content.
3. **Rely on core interest elements:** Fame, oddity, conflict, immediacy and impact are the primary interest elements for media writers. When you start writing content and you are unsure what to do, consider each of these elements and look for ways to emphasize them as you try to reach your readers. This will provide you a solid foundation upon which you can build the rest of your work.

## KEY TERMS

action statement

audience

audience segmentation

conflict

demographics

engagement

fame

FOCII

geographic information

immediacy

impact

interest elements

microtargeting

niche

oddity

outlets

personification

platforms

psychographics

qualitative

quantitative

value

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What media do you tend to consume to gain information? Discuss this in terms of both the outlets you use and the platform or format. For example, do you read the student “newspaper” in print or only online? Do you watch television on your mobile device? What about the content drives you to consume it, and what makes you prefer the platform you use?
2. Of the three types of audience segmentation listed in the chapter, which one is most important to you as a reader? Why do you think this is? Which one is least important to you? Why do you feel that way?
3. Reread the information associated with the three key needs listed near the end of the chapter (value, engagement, action). When you look at the media you consume, do you think the writers do a good job of working through all three needs? Which ones are traditionally handled the best? Which ones are usually handled poorly? Why do you think this is?

## GIVE IT A TRY

1. Take 10 minutes and look up some basic statistics about the students your school serves. Most universities and colleges have this information on their websites. Then, look into some basic information about media consumption habits associated with people who fall into those statistical categories. Finally, write up a short personification of your audience that mirrors the approach in the chapter. Compare and contrast your personification with those your classmates have created. Take particular note of specific similarities and differences you find during your class discussion.
2. Find a story that is of interest to you on a website you frequently visit. Then, boil that story down from the computer version to something you would send out as a tweet or an alert. Make it a single sentence that fits the parameters of what you tend to see on your mobile device.

## WRITE NOW!

1. Review the five interest elements listed in the chapter and determine which ones are most influential when it comes to things you consume in the media. Then determine which ones are least important. Finally, pick a story that interests you from a local media outlet and see which interest elements are present and absent. Write up your findings.
2. Find a story topic multiple media outlets have covered and select two articles on that topic that serve different audiences. For example, you might look at a specific movie review that ran in a teen publication versus one that ran in a general-interest publication. You could also look at a story on a political topic on sites that tilt toward one side of the political spectrum or the other. Read through each of these and note how the coverage meets the needs of the audience. How much of the content is similar and how much is different between the two? What are your thoughts on how these publications covered these topics.
3. Explore the demographic details of your school in terms of age, gender, race and the in-state/out-of-state gap. Write a paragraph that outlines these details. Then select another institution that has a similar demographic breakdown and take the same approach. Now, compare and contrast your schools in terms of other details, including geography and psychographics. How similar are your schools and why do you think that is? Use examples to illustrate your point.

# 2

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

### Words to Live By

*“Embrace your fears and insecurity because that is a sign you are moving in the right direction. ‘The War of Art’ by Steven Pressfield changed my perspective on imposter syndrome, something many of us experience. Pressfield explains the concept of resistance, depicting it as the voice in your head telling you that you can’t or shouldn’t do something. He says we should use resistance as a compass, guiding us toward what we don’t want to do because if resistance tells us not to do something, that is a sign to do it.”*



Delaney Ehrhardt

*“Writing ‘Prompting Originality’ fresh out of college, I was terrified. My imposter syndrome had never been so strong. What do you mean I’m writing a book as my first post-grad project? But then a quote from Pressfield stood out in my head, ‘It’s better to be in the arena, getting stomped by the bull, than to be up in the stands or out in the parking lot.’ So throw yourself in the game and start playing. You’ll only regret staying on the bench.”*

— Delaney Ehrhardt  
Coauthor, *“Prompting Originality”*

For more helpful hints and sage advice from Delaney, see the “Professional Thoughts” feature later in the chapter.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter, you should be able to:

- 2.1 Explain the basic history of traditional and generative artificial intelligence.
- 2.2 Identify the ways in which, as a media writer, you can effectively use generative AI.
- 2.3 Describe the limitations of artificial intelligence and the problems they can create for you.
- 2.4 Demonstrate best practices for getting quality results from your AI interactions.

Technological advancements have long provided significant benefits for media practitioners. When computers replaced typewriters, people could see when they made spelling mistakes and easily fix them. When cameras shifted from film to digital, photographers could take far more images in a single setting and see the results without having to process their work in a darkroom. When the internet made information available to anyone with a digital connection, researchers and fact checkers could verify content more quickly and definitively than if they had to search volumes of dusty books.

As we embraced these advances, we quickly realized that the benefits were not without significant drawbacks. Computer spell checkers seemed like a great idea until they couldn't save us from stories about the opening of "pubic libraries" or an athlete with a "herniated dick" in their neck. The digital camera made it less important to take care in capturing specific images, instead replacing quality with quantity. The internet made it easier to find information than traditional books did, but the quality and accuracy of that information often left something to be desired.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is yet one more step in a progression in which technology allows people to more fully embrace the maxim "work smarter, not harder." The ability of machines to do the work that was once solely the purview of humanity has helped us improve our work, eliminate mundane tasks and generally get things done more efficiently. Users have also found that technology can't do everything we want it to do and that blindly relying on it can create more harm than good.

This chapter will give you the basic history of how artificial intelligence became part of our lives and how it has expanded rapidly over the past few years. The chapter will also discuss the benefits and drawbacks of this particular tool in your media-writing toolbox. Finally, the chapter will discuss some of the best practices you can employ while you use generative AI to assist you in your work.

## THE BASICS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

**Artificial intelligence** as a field of study began when scientists wondered if computer-based machines could eventually mirror human intelligence and perform cognitive tasks based on learned experiences. Simply put, researchers wanted to figure out if machines would ever be not just as smart as humans, but also capable of doing things that rooted in our humanity. Over the course of these scientific advancements, we could see both incremental changes as people pushed technology to do more for us, as well as the exponential growth that came about when the computers became capable of doing things without our help.

Let's look at how this came to be with an examination of traditional artificial intelligence and generative artificial intelligence at a basic level.

### The Development of Early AI

In the mid-20th century, scientists wanted to see if computers could be "trained" to think like humans and complete human tasks. In one case, IBM engineer Arthur Samuel wrote a computer program that could play checkers by learning from previous successes and failures on the board. He named his approach "machine learning," which set the scene for several other breakthroughs in this area. Perhaps the most important creation of that time came in 1956, when Allen Newell, Cliff Shaw and Herbert Simon developed Logic Theorist, a computer program that was able to problem-solve in much the same way that people could.<sup>1</sup>

As they moved deeper into the world of AI research, scholars looked for ways to combine the logical rules of reasoning with the human nature of trial-and-error learning. The results of this

field of inquiry have done everything from giving us writing assistants in word-processing programs that alert us to misspelled words and grammar errors to entertainment apps that prevent us from using the same strategy each time to win a game. In short, you've probably encountered a lot of artificial intelligence without thinking too much about it.

What has changed with regard to AI is that it now has the ability to produce material independent of a few limited prompts. In addition, it can do creative work, such as essay writing, image creation and video development, that was once thought of as being solely the purview of humanity. This is why your teachers are freaking out about ChatGPT being used to write essays and government officials are losing sleep over deep-fake videos that might lead to an international incident.

## The Advent of Generative AI

The major shift we have seen with regard to artificial intelligence came about because of the prevalence of **big data**, a term that refers to the massive sets of information that organizations have gathered over long periods of time. The size, variety and complexity of these data sets make it possible for researchers to use technology that can find information patterns and intricate correlations beyond what humans might notice on their own.<sup>2</sup>

Programmers developed algorithms and let the artificial intelligence loose on the data, which served as the training ground for the technology. These programs essentially “learned” from this process, which allowed them to accurately predict outcomes, make informed decisions and create content.

This approach to content creation is called **generative artificial intelligence**. The program takes complex pieces of information from millions of data points and breaks them down into simple elements that the AI device retains. The program can then reassemble those simple pieces into complex content based on the rules it learned during its “training” process.

Although computers have been taught to “learn” everything from chess moves to mathematical models for decades, what has made this system different (and more relevant to us in this book) is that the computers can now do this with written and visual content. So, instead of just being able to add numbers or solve a chemical equation, AI can now write essays about classical literature, create graphics that outline how a technical process works or even create an image of Santa Claus riding Godzilla into battle against an army of Easter Bunnies.

## HOW AI CAN HELP YOU AS A MEDIA WRITER

The generative AI options available to you are vast and can provide you with a lot of help as a media writer. This is particularly true of some of the rote tasks you will need to accomplish, such as transcribing notes or developing background information on a topic. That said, AI isn't limited to those simple, repetitive tasks we tend to find boring. AI can help you break through a bout of writer's block, rethink a concept and deal with many other things along those lines.

One of the most important things to remember here is that these tools are meant as assistants, not to do all the work for you without your participation. Not every result that comes back from an AI program will be entirely accurate, and some of the programs have had issues dealing with reality. (We'll discuss those more later in the chapter.) The point here is to remember that in this field, it's always best to double-check information before you put it out for public consumption, whether AI was involved or not.

With that in mind, let's dig into this a bit more.

## Find a Starting Point for a Piece

One of the most difficult things a writer confronts is the beginning of a piece. Once you get into the middle of whatever it is you are writing, you can muddle your way through and eventually get to the end of it. After that, going back and editing will help fix the problems you had in various spots and give you a chance to reshape the beginning of your piece or identify any holes you find in your writing. All you need is that starting point, but it often seems like an impossible task to find it.

AI programs can provide you with a few ideas on how to start a piece. Even if the AI offers you odd or laughable options, the ability to reject them will help you figure out how you *don't* want your piece to start, and thus allow you to eliminate options as you narrow your focus. In addition, AI writing programs can read through the body of your piece and find some common themes that could serve as your main assertion.

## Break Through Writer's Block

Much like having trouble starting, writers often have difficulty persisting in their work, finding topics that interest them or generally creating content that makes them feel satisfied with their material. The term **writer's block** is often used for a wide array of mental, physical and emotional problems that get between the writer and the writing. Anyone who has ever experienced this before will attest to the idea that it feels like drowning in quicksand: The harder you fight it, the worse it gets and the more desperate you become.

AI programs such as Copysmith can help break the block and get you moving in a positive direction with your writing. Some of these offer basic writing prompts, which can be useful in “unsticking” your brain and freeing your fingers to create content. Others are more specifically directed, with the ability to work with the writer to bounce ideas back and forth until something strikes the writer's fancy. Programs like ShortlyAI can help you write by pushing you to write a little bit and then having the system continue your work in a way that reflects the tone and feel of your voice.

## Organize Content and Find Patterns

As we will talk about in the next few chapters, a lot of what makes for good media writing is the research and interviewing you do to gather information on your topic. When you are exchanging emails with sources, writing up summaries of documents that you read or generally scratching out some general ideas, a lot of things can get lost or disorganized.

AI tools like Mem, Notion AI and Evernote are extremely helpful for keeping you organized, summarizing your work at any given point and making sure you don't lose key information because you forgot where you put it.

In addition, programs like this can help you ascertain patterns in your work that might not be obvious to you initially. For example, if you are doing a number of interviews on a topic, you might have several ideas about which direction a news story could go. The application of an AI program could examine how often each idea comes up in each interview and give you a better idea of which concepts are most and least prevalent.

## Summarize and Clarify Unfamiliar Concepts

Reading through massive amounts of research articles, position papers and client content can be difficult and time consuming, especially if all you really need is a broad overview of a topic. In some cases, it's really helpful to have an expert walk you through the basics of a topic, but not everyone has an expert at the ready. In addition, experts aren't always the best at finding ways to simplify their work for regular people.



Programs like Jasper AI and QuillBot can take these complex topics and boil them down into a shorter, clearer form for you. Some programs will allow you to adjust the level of detail or the expected understanding level of the audience for you. This approach can save you a lot of time when all you need are some basic bits of information to help people grasp a core concept.

## ADAPT

### AI Tools for Journalists

As we explain almost to the point of distraction in this book, most of what you are doing here is adding tools to your toolbox as a media professional. AI is just one more tool, in that it is neither good nor bad, but rather as helpful or destructive as the person using it. Think about it like a hammer: You can use a hammer to build a doghouse for a new family pet, which is a sweet and caring thing to do. You can also use a hammer to bludgeon someone to death, which is a felony in most states.

The book “Dynamics of News Reporting and Writing” includes a list of AI tools that can be helpful to journalists, which we’ve adapted here to focus on media writing and to more broadly consider all media-writing approaches.<sup>3</sup> Given the speed at which AI continues to evolve, the specific apps or programs listed here might change or die off before this book sees the light of day. That said, the underlying tools and concepts are likely of value to you as a media-writing professional:

**TRANSCRIPTION:** Using a recording device can be crucial to capturing dialogue among sources or backing up your interview notes when you want a direct quote. However, transcribing these recordings is time consuming and tedious. AI provides you with a number of transcription services, like Jojo and Otter.ai, that can take the audio files and convert them to text within a reasonable range of accuracy. The nice thing about these programs is that you can edit the text as you go through the files. For example, in Otter.ai, the program will play the audio file at specific points where you click on the transcribed text. That allows you to listen to what the source said and compare it with what the program wrote. This system makes it a lot easier to catch errors and fix them right then and there.

**RESEARCH:** Good media writing requires good research, because most of what we do is based in facts, not a “best guess.” It’s often easy to find basic facts with searches using programs like Google and Bing, but the companies that created these search engines are also developing AI options. Google introduced Pinpoint in 2024, an AI program that helps you dig through troves of documents to find specific content. Google states that a Pinpoint collection can contain up to 200,000 documents, including written text, images and audio files.<sup>4</sup> Other AI tools, like Artifact, can summarize a document to help you determine if it fits into the content you are trying to create.

**FACT-CHECKING:** The research options in AI can help provide a broad sense of what is and isn’t accurate on a given topic. However, AI also provides some specific applications for checking facts. Tools like Chequeado’s Chequeabot are capable of taking factual statements and looking at how those statements match up against a vast array of content on the topic.<sup>5</sup> These applications can make it easier to make sure you are sure about your work before you publish it.

**WRITING:** Most of the academic freakout regarding AI relates to programs like ChatGPT, because they can take a simple prompt and create an expansive amount of text on the topic. This can be problematic, as we saw when Gannett attempted to automate its sports coverage, only to realize that the readers thought it was terrible journalism.<sup>6</sup> Sports Illustrated had a similar problem when readers discovered that the publication had created entire AI profiles for fake journalists who were creating AI-based content.<sup>7</sup> Like most tools, the writing options for AI have positives and negatives, most of which depend on the users. Tools like Writesonic, Notion AI and Text Blaze can help you say things in a different way and consider taking different angles on a given topic. The thing you need to remember is that the tool is there to assist you, not do the work for you.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF GENERATIVE AI IN MEDIA WRITING

As is the case with most technology, understanding its potential means having to recognize its limitations. If we just let the tech do its thing without worrying about the downside, we can find ourselves in bigger trouble than if we never used the machine at all. Consider a few basic issues that limit the benefits of AI:

### Fear of the Black Box

One of the core problems associated with generative AI is the **black-box phenomenon**. This refers to a system for which we know only what goes in and what comes out, not how the internal mechanism works. In other words, we know *what* it does, but not *how* it does it. Experts say they are getting close to solving this problem in some systems,<sup>8</sup> but here is why it's a problem for media writing.

On the whole, the machines we build, programs we write and technology we develop all follow a similar set of rules, based on what we tell those machines, programs and technology to do. A car moves forward when we put it into drive because a series of parts were assembled in a specific way to meet that goal. Striking the “X” key on a keyboard results in the letter “X” appearing on the computer screen, because the program we are using contains a series of rules and operations that make it happen. We are able to access our phones through facial recognition, which also keeps people who don't look like us out. Even if we don't know exactly how they work, the people who designed the car, developed the word-processing program or created the facial recognition technology do, because they built it.

AI doesn't work that way, instead conducting its work like the human brain. It takes in mass quantities of data and then learns on its own how to recognize distinctive patterns. It breaks down information into simple elements and then reconstructs new things out of those elements based on its sense of what should and shouldn't be. In short, it's basically rendering an opinion on a topic, and we have no idea where that opinion came from. If we don't know what is creating that story or constructing that image for us, how much should we trust it, and to what degree are we OK with it?

Think about it like this: If you had a black-box system in which you put a dollar bill into one side of a machine and you got a ten dollar bill out the other side of it, the output would probably be very appealing to you. However, if you found out later that a kitten inside the box was tortured as part of the process, would you still be happy with the machine? In short, if we're going to use something to provide us with an important service, we need to know how it works.

### Built-In Biases

The goal of having technology that acts more human can bring along some of humanity's baggage, such as biased thinking. AI platforms learn from having tons of content from a wide array of sources poured into them so they can see as much information as possible. They then pick out prototypes of each element and use them to create something new out of what they have seen. This process generally means that the more something is present in the AI's information source, the more likely AI is to view it as “correct.” This is great for things like math and science, but not so much for things in which biases tend to propagate.

Researchers have found that large language models demonstrated gender-based and race-based stereotypes, judging jobs like “secretary” and “flight attendant” to be female-based roles, while “lawyer” and “judge” were seen as jobs for men.<sup>9</sup> Image generators tended to create biased content as well, with “servers” being shown as young and female, while “criminals” were

shown to be male and nonwhite individuals. Additional elements of ageism and classism were also present in these programs, according to researchers in the field.<sup>10</sup>

A continually self-feeding loop of information that reinforces the worst social stereotypes we subscribe to as a society is not something that will improve life on the whole. Until there is a way to have AI better seek representation within a trove of information, or otherwise mitigate biases, this problem will require constant human oversight.

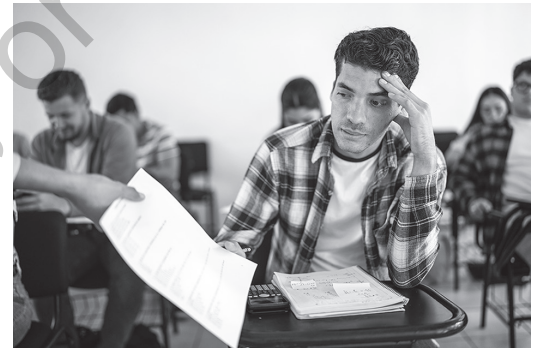
## The Shades of Mediocrity

The most amazing thing about AI is also likely its most problematic element when it comes to content creation. The goal of AI is to pull together as much content as possible from a massive set of sources and create what is essentially the average response for the user. In the book “Prompting Originality,” authors Norty Cohen and Delaney Ehrhardt explain that this approach essentially creates the most middle-of-the-road answer possible to whatever question the user has asked.<sup>11</sup>

In some cases, this isn’t a problem, especially when the majority of the content on a given topic fits into a narrow window of accepted tenets. For example, if you asked ChatGPT to write up a 500-word piece that explains the basic rules of baseball, the answer would probably be pretty solid. The numbers of innings, outs and strikes and balls required for certain outcomes are generally agreed upon. The sizes of the fields are relatively similar, and rules for winning and losing the game are pretty standard.

However, in more nuanced situations, AI will likely be less helpful in providing quality content. When generating a piece of writing, AI incorporates everything it sees in the realm of possibilities, and then produces an average explanation of the given topic. The goal is to create a perfect mean score of the material gathered and present it in a generic, broad-based fashion.

In short, if you’re using AI to write your essay on Shakespeare, you’re setting yourself up for a grade of C at best.



If you rely on AI to do the writing for you, expect to get “C-level” results when you get your assignments back.

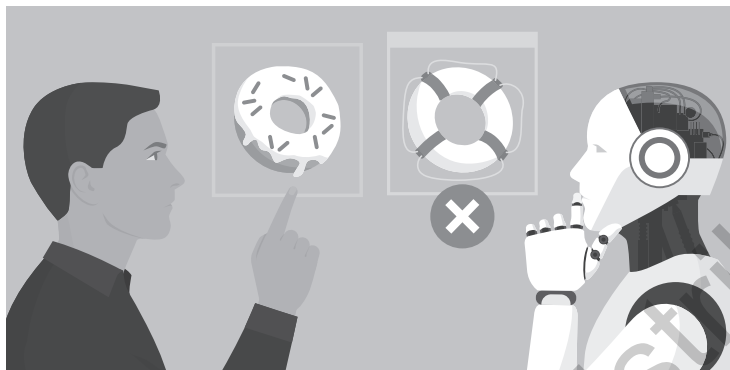
iStockPhoto/FG Trade Latin

## AI Hallucinations

In most cases, we tend to seek outside knowledge when we feel we don’t know enough about a topic. You don’t Google things like “What is  $2 + 2$ ?” or “Who was the first president of the United States?” because you know those things well. However, you’re more likely to Google something like “What are the pros and cons of using a general linear model in predicting statistical outcomes?” or “How important was President Millard Fillmore’s rise to the presidency in relation to the Compromise of 1850?” If you ask an AI program to fill you in on topics for which you have no predicate knowledge, you will have a hard time figuring out if what AI presents you is or isn’t right.

As much as we’d like to believe that computers tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, artificial intelligence can have a problem known as **hallucinations**. Just like a human hallucination, where we see things that aren’t there, AI has been known to make mistakes, incorporate falsehoods or simply lie about things. Experts who have helped develop these bots explain it by noting that the bots simply use previous words to predict subsequent words in a sentence or paragraph. Therefore, they are likely to incorporate some level of inaccuracy.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, these programs can easily find and assess patterns of information, but when they are asked to expound upon it, that's when the wheels can come off.



Artificial intelligence doesn't always think the way humans think when it comes to creating content, leading to some disappointing outcomes.

iStockPhoto/elenabs

To be fair to the technology, it continues to improve with each iteration, and those improvements help mitigate or limit the number and scope of errors. For example, in 2022, a computer scientist made GPT-3 hallucinate by asking it a nonsense question, to which the bot answered by explaining that the Golden Gate Bridge had been transported across Egypt twice. The GPT-3.5 version no longer spouts that kind of falsehood, but experts warn that people need to be on the lookout for errors and other forms of hallucination.<sup>13</sup>

## PROFESSIONAL THOUGHTS

### Delaney Ehrhardt

As a 2023 college graduate with an emphasis in strategic communication, Delaney Ehrhardt landed a job at Moosylvania that put her on the path to seeing how artificial intelligence and human activities could yield amazing results.

When she met the company's CEO, Norty Cohen, they began discussing a book on originality, which is where they started tinkering with the concept of AI.

"After our first meeting, we decided it would be wise to include AI as it was becoming increasingly prevalent in our industry," she said. "Eventually, this led to an entire handbook about the coexistence of AI and originality, named 'Prompting Originality.' We spent that summer researching and interviewing experts in the field while gaining an understanding of the different models and their processes."

Since joining the St. Louis-based advertising agency as a junior copywriter, Ehrhardt has put ample time into leading the company's AI initiatives. She is responsible for helping



Delaney Ehrhardt

educate colleagues on the applications of AI in advertising and has done presentations to a network of agencies about the future of AI in the world of media.

Ehrhardt said the company's perspective on AI has always been "a glass half-full," with the idea that if dealt with appropriately and effectively, artificial intelligence can yield beneficial results.

"There has always been fear and skepticism with any innovation, which is healthy, but looking at history can ease our minds about the future," she said. "When calculators emerged in the mid-1960s, people thought math would become obsolete since we could compute more efficiently. This creation actually allowed us to do more challenging math, opening up the worlds of engineering, mathematics and science. When Photoshop came out, designers thought that human creativity and vision would disappear now that computers were involved. Eventually, those who refused to assimilate and get on board with Photoshop lasted only a short time."

"AI is no different than any of these previous innovations," she added. "People are so afraid of what AI *could* do that they don't want to see what AI *can* do. So, while there's always hesitation when implementing new technologies, it's more productive and progressive to think about what it can do for you instead of take away from you."

Ehrhardt said she treats AI like any other tool in her toolbox. She said AI can help her pick better words, write in a more grammatically correct fashion, and learn more about areas outside of her realm of knowledge, and it can assist her with interviews by simulating human responses to her questions.

"There is a line in 'Prompting Originality,' that I feel encapsulates this philosophy: 'You can let AI do your work for you, or you can make AI work for you,'" she said. "AI can help us with writer's block, pre-interview anxiety, idea articulation, generating key art to communicate the vision in our brains and so on. In short, if you use it correctly, it democratizes creativity."

In all of her research on AI, Ehrhardt said her biggest takeaway was that people will always find reasons not to do something, especially if they are afraid of the outcomes. By researching the ways in which AI works and what it can do, she said she's not worried what AI will do to the field.

"Economist Richard Baldwin said it best: 'AI won't take your job; somebody using AI will take your job,'" Ehrhardt said. "It's all about creating that advantage for yourself. With anything new and daunting, it's easy to doom-scroll and only consume media that fits your opinion and confirms your bias. But if you branch out of your ideas of what the future will be, you can start to see what the future *can* be."

## BEST PRACTICES FOR USING AI EFFECTIVELY IN MEDIA WRITING

Based on what you have learned about AI to this point, it should feel a lot less scary (if you are afraid of it) or a lot less omnipotent (if you believe in its infallibility). Regardless of what AI tools you use, a few best practices can guide you in getting the most out of your experience. Let's look at some specific hints and tips for using AI, inspired by or borrowed from "Prompting Originality."

### Use AI, Don't Rely on It

As with most technological advances, AI has given people a shortcut to complete difficult tasks. With that, many people who have mastered those tasks without the assistance of such technology often are concerned about what it will mean for future generations. When digital calculators became prevalent, math teachers worried that students would not be able to do simple adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing without them. When computerized assistance became

part of word-processing programs, writing teachers worried that students' ability to spell things correctly and use proper grammar would atrophy. The same kinds of concerns happened when students could cut and paste content from the internet for their history reports.

To be fair, some of this has happened and will continue to happen, but people with a strong interest in a given field will be more likely to engage with content and less likely to let the computers do it all for them. Furthermore, as AI continues to develop, it's possible that certain programs may no longer do what users once had them do, or companies could make these systems cost prohibitive. Thus, people who can function well without a total reliance on AI are more likely to thrive.

The best thing you can do as a media practitioner is to use AI as a tool and not become overly dependent on it. That means you need to know how to find information and make sense of it without letting a generative AI program do it for you. You need to pair your human instincts with generative content to create something beyond the regurgitated information an AI program spits out. Just like a good carpenter can use a hand saw when the power saw isn't available, you need to know how to do quality work on your own, just in case you can't rely on AI.

### Use Specific Statements and Smart Follow-Ups

When you interview humans, it's not always crucial to be pinpoint accurate in your questions. Most people can get the gist of what you mean, so they can adjust to a less-than-perfect question. Conversely, AI will give you exactly what you ask for, so it's crucial to form intelligent, specific statements with the goal of obtaining answers that will be focused and helpful to you.

For example, if you ask an AI program to "List five popular Christmas movies," you could get a wide array of answers. There might be classics from the golden age of cinema like "Miracle on 34th Street" and "It's a Wonderful Life." On the other hand, you might get movies like "Home Alone" and "A Christmas Story." It could also return you a list of the last five things shown on the Hallmark Channel and call it good. You might even get "Die Hard" or the "Star Wars Holiday Special" in the mix.

The question can be significantly improved through the introduction of time elements ("produced in the last 50 years") or what should be considered a film ("originally shown in movie theaters" or "not including made-for-TV movies"). If that prompt gets you close to the kinds of films you had in mind, you can improve upon the list through specific follow-up prompts ("Eliminate any movie from that list that involves terrorists taking over a building" or "Prioritize movies involving Santa Claus.").

Through trial and error, you can determine how best to use statements and questions that will give your AI a focus that matches what you have in mind. Once you have the basics down, you can rely on your mind to stretch the creativity of the program.

### Fact-Check Your Bot

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, generative AI isn't perfect, and it can grab information from less-than-credible places. It can confuse similar topics in a way that creates factual errors, and it can hallucinate, thus presenting fabrications as fact. Taking what AI says as gospel is probably going to land you in the unemployment line, so it's best to approach content it generates like anything else you get from a source.

Unlike dealing with human sources, you can't ask the bot, "Where did you get that from?" or "Are you sure you are right?" Instead, you need to put on your skeptic's hat and start picking at the content you receive. Fact-checking approaches are discussed at length in Chapter 3, but one key maxim seems to apply nicely here: Assume everything you see is incorrect until you can prove it to be true.



That means you should look at every name, date, place and time to see if they are accurately presented. You should examine word usage to make sure the bot didn't consider words that normally mean the same thing but don't in a given situation. For example, "green" often means "inexperienced" when you are talking about a person, but that doesn't mean you can refer to the NFL team as the "Inexperienced Bay Packers," as one AI program did.<sup>14</sup> You should also look at any other areas that might require human nuance that a bot might not understand, such as sarcasm. Give everything a good look to prevent yourself from having to apologize later. It's never an excuse to say, "Well, the AI program said it was true...."

## CONNECT

### When Write Goes Wrong: AI and Ethics

In 2024, editors at the State Press at Arizona State University announced that they had retracted 24 stories from the paper's website. The student newspaper noted that this included 13 weekly horoscopes, nine news articles about art and two editorials. The reason for the retraction? The staffer had used generative AI to create them.<sup>15</sup>

To blame this entirely on artificial intelligence would be to ignore decades of deceit that predated ChatGPT. In 2004, USA Today correspondent Jack Kelley resigned from the paper after allegations arose that he had fabricated some of his stories.<sup>16</sup> A year earlier, the New York Times discovered that a 27-year-old staffer named Jayson Blair had fabricated dozens of stories ranging from news features to breaking news. In an extensive correction, the paper noted that it found problems in 36 of the 73 articles Blair had written.<sup>17</sup>

The New Republic magazine found that staff writer Stephen Glass had fabricated parts or all of 27 articles he wrote from 1995 to 1998. Glass had also freelanced for various magazines, including Harper's, which had to issue a retraction 18 years after the fact when Glass admitted to falsifying content for the piece he did for that magazine.<sup>18</sup> And the most famous example of fabrication came in the early 1980s, when Janet Cooke of the Washington Post told the story of Jimmy, an 8-year-old heroin addict. After Cooke admitted she had made up the child and his story, she ended up giving back the Pulitzer Prize the story had received.

The larger point here is that it doesn't take artificial intelligence to create fake content for your readers. AI just makes it much faster and easier to do so. With that in mind, it is extremely important that we take the ethical aspects of our job seriously to avoid misleading readers on crucial issues. You need to make sure that any use of AI is done under the watchful eye of human media practitioners, who knowingly apply it in an ethical fashion. In addition, when it is in the best interest of your readers, you must always disclose what the AI did and how it affected your work.

To do any less would be problematic and misleading.

### Practice Heavily Before Game Time

The concept of practice is a common one, in that the more often you repeat a task, the more likely you are to become good at that task. Furthermore, repetition turns certain actions into basic reflexes, as opposed to things you need to think a great deal about.

Think about how hard it was to learn how to dribble a basketball, ride a bicycle or play a musical instrument. If you took on any of these tasks, the first few attempts likely required a great deal of attention and a significant amount of hard work. As you did it more often, the ball seemed less difficult to control, the bike seemed more fluid as you pedaled along and your fingers

seemed to find the right spots on the instrument almost by themselves. The benefit of all this practice is that once you needed to play in a game, take a long ride on your bike or perform on stage, you were more than capable of putting your best foot forward.

In shifting that thought process to AI, you want to practice heavily before you use it on a crucial piece of written work. The best time to learn how AI works is when it isn't important that you succeed right off the bat. If you can make your mistakes during practice time, and then learn how to avoid those mistakes in the future, you'll be better off when the chips are down.

### Know What AI Is and Isn't Good At

In "Prompting Originality," the authors provide a solid look at how humans and bots differ. On the bot side of the equation, the book lists things like "replicated reactions" and "regurgitated learned information." On the human side, the book notes that people have "real emotions," "lived experiences" and "the ability to feel." What both sides have is the ability to create, but clearly that ability comes from vastly different points of view. Understanding this can give you an edge on which tasks you want AI to tackle and which ones you should probably take care of on your own.

AI's lack of true emotion makes it incapable of knowing when it should be more direct or more cautious in its language. It doesn't know about the nuance of language: where certain words may be less problematic when interchanged and others might create an awful faux pas. For example, a human might exchange the phrase "Grandpa died" with "Grandpa passed away." However, an AI might take the phrase "Grandpa is dead" and change it to "Grandpa is useless," a situation that once happened when AI wrote an obituary for a former professional athlete.<sup>19</sup>

It also doesn't understand how language will land for a particular audience. It can differentiate how to explain something terrible to a small child as opposed to a grown adult, but it can't distinguish among psychographic elements that might make it easier or harder for various groups of adults to get some bad news. In the end, it doesn't know and it doesn't care, because it can't. Understanding these limitations and applying the basic humanity that comes with common sense can prevent AI from getting you into trouble.

## THE BIG THREE

Here are the three key things you should take away from this chapter:

1. **AI is a tool for your toolbox:** The most important thing this book is trying to do is give you a collection of important tools that will make you an effective writer across all media. In that regard, artificial intelligence can play an important role in improving your writing, conducting basic research and getting your brain unstuck throughout the process. As you will see with the remaining tools we discuss in this book, you need to use the right tool for the right job and make sure you use it appropriately.
2. **The human touch still matters:** As Norty Cohen and Delaney Ehrhardt noted, artificial intelligence requires human input as well as human creativity to fully realize its potential. In most cases, your emotions and your curiosity will matter a great deal if you want AI to produce anything worthwhile. In addition, it behooves you not to fully trust that AI is right all the time or that it even produced a quality response to your inquiry. Just because you can use AI for certain tasks, it doesn't mean you can go on autopilot.

- 3. Practice makes perfect:** You need to make sure that you learn how and when artificial intelligence can help you and how and when it can hurt you. Like all other tools, it is neutral and will simply respond to the actions of the user. To make sure you aren't putting yourself in harm's way when it counts the most, you will want to practice with AI tools and platforms repeatedly to test their reliability and value. The more quality practice you put into using AI, the better your work will be when a critical need for your work arises.

### KEY TERMS

artificial intelligence

big data

black-box phenomenon

generative artificial intelligence

hallucinations

writer's block

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. To what level have you experimented with generative artificial intelligence? Were you satisfied or dissatisfied with the results? What do you think could have been better, even if you were generally happy with the output?
2. When it comes to media writing, which tasks do you feel most comfortable letting AI do for you? Which ones are potentially problematic or downright dangerous in your mind? Why?
3. What kinds of limits do you think are necessary to impose so people can coexist with AI? How would you go about enforcing them within the confines of the laws of the land as they stand now?
4. What ethical standards do you think people should apply when using AI in media writing? How much of the content needs to be "human" for it to be acceptable to pass along to an audience? Do you think disclosing the use of AI in your work is helpful or harmful to your reputation?

### GIVE IT A TRY

1. Write down a series of facts you know to be true and then input statements about that topic into a generative AI program. How accurate are the responses based on the statements you gave the AI? See if follow-up statements make those responses more or less accurate.
2. Take an essay assignment you have already completed for another class and enter the assignment's prompt into a generative AI program. See what the AI comes up with and how similar to and different from your answer it is. If you did well on that assignment, see if the professor who provided it will compare your work with that of the AI to determine who would get the better grade.

**WRITE NOW!**

1. Look back at some of the other “early innovator” elements associated with media (Napster, Friendster, AskJeeves etc.) and see how each of them either started a revolution or fizzled out. What kind of pattern do you see for artificial intelligence programs like ChatGPT and others mentioned in the chapter based on these previous efforts? Write a short essay on your findings.
2. Review the section in the chapter that discusses specific concerns related to the use of artificial intelligence. Put those concerns into two groups: the issues that worry you and those that don’t worry you. Write a short essay in which you explain how and why you placed each of those concerns into the group you chose for it. Also, write a concluding paragraph that analyzes your general feelings about using AI in media writing as they relate to these concerns.