



IDEAL READER

Who is your book for? It's not enough to have a vague sense of your reader, because your reader is looking for something very specific. It might be solace or wisdom, entertainment or escape – but no matter what it is, they are desperate. Why else would they spend hours and hours alone with your work?

It's your job to know who your target reader is and what they need, and to give it to them. Writing just because the topic interests you, or because you are a world-renowned expert in a topic, or because you have spent a lifetime honing your knowledge doesn't matter unless you know why your reader cares.

Who Is Your Book For?

The first step is to ask yourself, "Who am I writing this for?" In other words, who do you envision picking up your book at the local bookstore? What kinds of people are they? Can you categorize them?

Beginning writers tend to answer this question by saying something broad, like "moms," or "women," or the dreaded "everyone." Suffice it to say that if you think your book will appeal to everyone, it's going to end up appealing to no one.

Agents and editors want to know that you know exactly who your audience is, since this is the first step you need to take in learning how to reach them.

Take a book like *Harry Potter*, which does, in fact appeal to (almost) everyone. Eight-year-old boys love it and 50-year-old moms love it, and 65-year-old guys who play beach volleyball love it. But J.K. Rowling did not start out by saying, "I'm going to write a fantasy series that moms and volleyball players and boys are going to love." She started out by writing a story about a boy wizard that was haunting her. It was a story rooted in the English boarding school tradition – a story for young teens. She sold it to Scholastic, a publisher that specializes in books for school-age children. The fact that adults all over the world came to adore *Harry Potter* was a happy accident.

The lesson here is that while you can hope that everyone will love your book, you must start out with a much smaller, narrowly defined group of readers who have certain needs and desires. If you can speak knowingly about your audience to agents and editors, they will know you are a pro who has thought about the marketplace. Knowing who you are speaking to NOW, while you are writing, will make your book that much more powerful.

Ask yourself the following questions about your ideal reader. The more specific you can be about your answers, the better book you will write. Some people like to picture an actual

individual as their ideal reader – their Aunt Sally, or their friend from the gym, or their son. If such a person comes to mind, use that person:

1. How old is she?
2. Where does she live?
3. What kind of gal is she? Easy going? High strung?
4. What keeps her up at night?*
5. What does she want more than anything in the world?*
6. What can your book do to help her get it?*

*These three questions are the big ones. Why? Because of this:

The world is asking only one question: 'Can you help me where I hurt?'
—Pastor Orval C. Butcher

So if nothing else, know where your reader hurts and how you can help her. And remember, pain can be helped by entertainment, humor, and escape, as well as it can be helped by insight, inspiration, and instruction.

Take Action

Answer the questions above about your ideal reader.

What Kinds of Books Does Your Ideal Reader Love?

Now that you know something about your ideal reader, think about what your ideal reader loves to read. (Note that this is the beginning of the work we do when writing the Competitive Titles section of a book proposal, so save your answers for when you're ready to pitch.)

What specific books does your ideal reader love? You will try to answer these questions about your book by doing a bit of research.

1. What other books has your ideal reader read that are like yours?
2. Which is her favorite?
3. Why does she love it?
4. What will your book add to the conversation?
5. What would your ideal reader say after finishing your book? What would she say if she were recommending it to a friend?

Why do all this work now before you've even written anything? You always want to remember that you are writing to be read, and thinking of the reader now is a great way to start.

I can't write without a reader. It's precisely like a kiss – you can't do it alone.
—John Cheever

Take Action

What specific books does your ideal reader love? Look within your genre and answer the following questions for about five books:

1. What other books has your ideal reader read that are like yours?
2. Which is her favorite?
3. Why does she love it?
4. What will your book add to the conversation? Pretend that the books that sit together on the shelf are having a conversation. One is saying one thing and the other is saying, "Yes, but...." or "No, but..." They are agreeing, arguing, debating, joining together in a chorus. Where in all that noise does your book fit?
5. What would your ideal reader say after finishing your book? What would she say if she were recommending it to a friend?

What Else Does Your Ideal Reader Love?

To hone in on who your reader is and what they need, think about how they spend their time.

- Which magazines do they read?
- Which blogs do they subscribe to?
- Which social media do they use most often?

Look for the big players in your space by looking for their readership or followers, and begin to build a list of publications and sites.

Take Action

Choose one blog or publication from your list. We're going to look more closely at how your book might fit into the conversation that is already happening there.

- Find the submission guidelines for writers on the blog or magazine site. You can usually find them in the top navigation menu, but sometimes they appear in the footer.
 - Review the [Woman's submission guidelines](#)
 - Review the [Living Better After 50 submission guidelines](#)
 - Review the [Huffington Post submission guidelines](#)

- Select one section of a publication you might write an article for, or one way you could contribute to the blog. Think about breaking your big idea into smaller bits. Can you pull out a quiz or a list (5 Ways to..., 10 Reasons Why.....) or a short article or interview?
- Write the headline for your article or guest blog.
- Imagine your article or guest blog on the site. Write a comment your ideal reader might write in response to your piece.