My Research Project: Analyze a Target Publication

Analyzing a publication involves asking questions about its readers, the subject its articles address, its writing conventions, and its design. To locate a print publication, visit your library’s periodical room or consult a reference librarian. You can also search for information about the publication on the Web or in databases. To locate information about a digital publication, such as *Slate*, visit the publication’s Web site, conduct database searches, or consult a reference librarian.

In your research log, record your answers to the following questions about the publication to which you will submit your article.

**Readers.** Examine the publication as a whole to learn what you can about its readers.

* Can you find a letters to the editor section? If so, reading the letters and any responses from the editors might give you insights into who reads the publication and why they read it.
* If there are advertisements in the publication, do they tell you anything about the readers? Who advertises in the publication? What products or services do the advertisements offer, or what issues or problems do they address?
* What can you learn about the readers from the range of subjects or issues addressed in articles and other parts of the publication?
* Can you find any information about the publisher? Can you tell whether it is a commercial enterprise, a government agency, a nonprofit organization, a scholarly or professional organization, or an individual? Does the publication have a mission statement? Does the mission statement describe the publication’s purpose or goals, the audience it hopes to reach, or its origins? If so, what does this information tell you about the target audience?

**Subjects.** Look at recently published articles in the publication. You can often find them in tables of contents, indexes, and archives. Depending on the publication, you might also be able to search a full-text database or search the Web for archived articles.

* What issues and subjects are addressed in the articles?
* How long are the articles? What are the shortest articles? What are the longest ones? Where do they fall on average?
* What do you think is the purpose of the publication? Is its goal to inform, to advocate, to address problems? Or does it address a range of purposes?

**Writing Conventions.** Study the articles in the publication to learn about its writing conventions.

* How would you characterize the style and tone of the articles—generally formal, informal, or somewhere in between? Are contractions (*can’t*, *won’t*, *isn’t*) used? Are individuals identified by their full names and titles (for example, *Dr. Shaun Beaty*)?
* How are sources identified? Do the articles use an in-text citation system, such as MLA, APA, *Chicago*, or CSE (see Part V)? Do they use footnotes or endnotes? Do they link directly to the source? Do they informally identify the source?
* What do the authors of articles seem to assume about their readers? Do they use specialized language (or jargon)? Do they expect you to know a great deal about the subject? Do you think the authors expect that you have to be an expert in the field to understand their articles?

**Design.** To gain an understanding of your readers’ expectations about the design of your article, scan articles in the publication, read a few carefully, and take notes on each article.

* Would you characterize the article as heavy on text, or are images, tables, charts, figures, and other illustrations used? If the article is published in a digital format, does it include audio or video clips? Does it include other digital illustrations, such as animations or apps that a reader could work with?
* How is color used in the article, if at all? Does the article make use of borders, rules, and shading?
* Does the article use headings and subheadings? If so, how are they formatted? What kinds of fonts are used? Is there much variety in the fonts?
* How is the article laid out? Does it use columns? Sidebars? Block quotes?