

How to write with the reader in mind, literally

Picture the Person: Visualising and Understanding Your Reader

See the human. Shape the message. Strengthen the connection.

By Graham Roberts-Phelps, from the training course “Better Business Writing”

Why This Module Matters

Before you write a single word, you need a person in mind—not a crowd. Community communication becomes clearer, warmer, and more trustworthy when you consciously “picture the person” you are writing for. When readers feel *seen*, they relax. When they don’t, they resist.

Module Two pushes you deeper into audience understanding. You will learn to humanise your communication by imagining the reader’s world: their age, interests, experiences, hopes, worries, and habits. This creates writing that feels relevant rather than generic.

Think of this as switching on a spotlight. The clearer the person in the light, the sharper your message becomes.

1. Step into the Reader’s Shoes

Effective writing begins with a simple discipline: stop thinking like the writer and start thinking like the reader.

Ask yourself:

- What is happening in their day when this message lands?
- What do they want from me right now?
- How much time do they have to understand this?

Example:

A parent juggling school pick-up reads your message differently to a retired neighbour reading it over tea. The facts may be identical, but the framing must serve each reader’s real-life moment.

2. Visualise Their Age, Perspective, Interests, and Priorities

Strong communicators create a mental image of their intended reader. This is not stereotyping—it is focusing.

Consider:

- **Age and life stage** (e.g., students, parents, retirees)
- **Interests** (safety, convenience, cleanliness, fairness, cost)
- **Daily routine** (commuting, shift work, childcare, limited mobility)
- **Practical priorities** (noise, parking, access, time impact)

Example:

A 25-year-old renter may prioritise disruption to sleep and parking.

A 75-year-old homeowner may prioritise safety and respectful tone.

Different person, different pressure points.

3. Emotional Responses: Reassurance, Curiosity, Concern

Every message evokes an emotional reaction—often within seconds.

Three emotions dominate community responses:

Reassurance

“Is this safe, under control, and fair?”

Curiosity

“Why is this happening? Who decided this?”

Concern

“How will this affect my day, my child, my safety, my habits?”

Understanding these emotional triggers allows you to shape a message that calms rather than aggravates.

4. Use Stories, Imagery, and Relatable Examples

Humanise your writing by grounding it in real life.

Examples:

- “This short upgrade will make the footpath safer for evening walkers.”
- “We know parents will want clear timings so evening routines aren’t disrupted.”

- “Many residents told us they worried about dim lighting, so the new lamps will help everyone feel more secure.”

Small touches of lived experience create connection.

5. Check Assumptions and Biases

Writers often fall into two traps:

- **Assuming the reader knows as much as you do**
- **Assuming all people think or feel the same way**

To avoid these traps:

- Use plain English.
- Spell out the “why”.
- Clarify what the reader needs to do.
- Never use tone or phrasing that could feel dismissive or superior.

Ask: Would this message make sense and feel respectful to someone outside my world?

Activity: Build a Reader Persona and Test Your Message

Objective

Create a clear “reader persona” and use it to strengthen a real message.

Step One: Build Your Persona

Create a brief persona for a typical reader of your community messages. Include:

1. **Name (fictional)**
2. **Age and life stage**
3. **Living situation**
4. **Daily routine**
5. **Primary concerns**
6. **Communication habits**
7. **What they value most in community communication**

Example Persona – “Anne, 68”

Lives alone on a quiet street. Enjoys community newsletters. Concerned about safety at night. Reads notices slowly and carefully. Values respect and clarity.

Step Two: Draft a Short Message

Use any real or hypothetical community announcement, such as:

- street works
- service changes
- community events
- safety advice

Write it in your natural style—don’t overthink it yet.

Step Three: Test Your Message Against the Persona

Ask:

- Does this message speak directly to Anne’s needs and concerns?
- Would she understand it on first reading?
- Does the tone feel appropriate for her age and expectations?
- Have you inadvertently made assumptions she may not share?

Revise your message accordingly.

Step Four: Share and Review

Swap your persona and message with a partner.

Invite them to challenge:

- Assumptions
- Tone
- Clarity
- Emotional impact

Refine again based on feedback.
