

Reaching the Hidden Audience

Ten Rules for the Archaeological Writer

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Archaeology is different. As archaeologists, we all know that. And the differences go beyond our bizarre habit of digging holes in the ground under inhospitable conditions, spending countless months in laboratories carefully dissecting ancient coprolites, or torturing each other with technically impenetrable analyses of our current field projects at professional meetings.

In this case, the difference has to do with our relationship to an interested public made up of people who do not have our professional credentials but share our passion, commitment, and often expertise in the subject. Consider these questions:

- What other field has such an intensive level of lay participation in the production of specialized professional knowledge? The volunteer labor that fuels most archaeological projects is almost unique in the world of scholarship. Imagine political scientists hiring people off the street to conduct polling on political attitudes or astronomers using retired teachers to examine deep space.
- What other field has similarly significant lay interest in recent scholarly and professional developments worldwide? The general public does not read the latest interpretation of Piers Plowman or homoerotic deconstructions of *Apocalypse Now*. But they do follow in large numbers the latest reports of recent archaeological fieldwork.

- What other field harbors so many quacks producing fantastic theories that get general attention? Where else would a Piltdown scandal, Chariot of the Gods, or Kon Tiki hypothesis generate blaring newspaper headlines?

A consequence of these unique circumstances is that there is extensive and genuine popular interest in what archaeologists write. The audience for our work is larger than the few colleagues and their advanced students who want to know what we have found and what we make of it. Unlike the econometrician's models or the chemist's formulas, our work is supposed to be transparent: we are asked not to hide behind the technology and jargon of our specialized field but to make our evidence and our conclusions available to a much wider public. This has enormous implications as regards to whom we address what we write, how we write it, and how we distribute what we write. I will try to describe this public audience and offer ten simple suggestions to help improve archaeological writing intended for lay readers.

Who Are Our Readers?

We think we know how to communicate with our colleagues and our students. But who are the people in the lay audience who read our work?

The general reading public forms the vast bulk of those casually interested in archaeological information. Nine million readers (or page turners) of *National Geographic* are regularly bombarded with archaeological topics, a product of the fact that the National Geographic Society is one of the key supporters of archaeological fieldwork. Millions more are titillated by pseudo-archaeological reports of demon mummies and buried spaceships in the pages of the *Enquirer* or the *Star*. For a smaller but more serious segment of the general reading public, people's curiosity about the past is massaged by a steady flow of coffee table books about the mysterious Maya or the Dead Sea Scrolls or through programming on cable television channels.¹

In addition to this broad constituency of marginally interested readers, there is a yet smaller, committed core of archaeological readers. Members of this hidden audience for archaeology read much more seriously than the general public and follow archaeological debates and issues much as their children follow the fortunes of the local baseball team or TV superheroes. How do we characterize these people?

First, we can say that they are organized. Many belong to one of the almost 100 local chapters of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA).² Others comprise the avocational component of the state, urban, regional, or provincial archaeological societies that exist throughout North America.³ An enormous number can be identified as subscribers to archaeological magazines, as volunteers on archaeological projects, or as members of local museums. Unlike the general public, who might read casually on archaeological topics, these people *affiliate* with archaeology.

Second, they are numerous. While there is no scientific count available, we can look to popular magazines about archaeology for the dimensions of this audience. *Archaeology* magazine, the main publication for archaeological readers, boasts more than 200,000 subscribers. Its most recent readership survey (June 2000) suggests that 600,000 people actually read each issue of the magazine. Less than 2 percent of this readership is made up of professional archaeologists. Its Near Eastern archaeology counterpart, *Biblical Archaeology Review* (BAR), has an equally large subscription base.⁴ Newcomer *Scientific American Discovering Archaeology* garnered 60,000 subscribers in its first year. The several hundred local archaeological societies and AIA chapters can collectively claim combined membership in the tens of thousands. Using a rough estimate of 10,000 professional archaeologists in North America, the serious lay audience outnumbers professionals by at least fifty to one.⁵

Finally, from the standpoint of an academic author or publisher, members of the hidden audience are important because they spend money. Readership surveys of *Archaeology* magazine indicate that they are richer, better educated, more well-read, and more likely to have disposable income than the average American. BAR demographics are similar. While not all of this spending was on archaeology books, readers of both periodicals are regular purchasers and readers of books on the subject. Some other characteristics of these readers are included in table 23.1.

This audience in the hundreds of thousands offers a unique opportunity for archaeological writers to address a much wider public than is available to almost any other group of scholars. In an age of declining resources, challenges to the legitimacy of the historical enterprise, and uncertainty about public policies related to excavation, preservation, and conservation, it could not hurt to have more than half a million people on your side—and not merely to make sure your books sell well.

Table 23.1. Some characteristics of readers of *Archaeology* magazine

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- Median household income is \$70,000.
 - Most heavily concentrated in northeastern and western states.
 - 37 percent have a postgraduate degree.
 - 58 percent work in professional/managerial jobs.
 - Approximately equally divided between men and women.
 - 90 percent read books as a leisure activity.
 - Subscribership has increased from approximately 115,000 in 1989 to 217,000 today.
 - Twice as many computer owners and software purchasers as the U.S. average.
 - 91 percent read the last four issues received and 62 percent saved them.
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Writing for the Hidden Audience

Knowing that this audience exists requires some changes in the way archaeologists communicate in print. In most of our professional work, we write for our “worst nightmare critic,” the one scholar (real or imagined) who will take our ideas and dismantle them sentence by sentence before our assembled colleagues. The worst nightmare critic is the person for whom we write so obscurely, tentatively, and defensively, so as to offer this monster as little ammunition as possible for dismembering our fragile ideas. For the sake of mollifying this one person—who will not be denied vituperation, no matter how cleverly we arrange our language—we tend to shut out the rest of the world. Why not ignore this person completely and focus our attention on the larger audience wanting to hear what we have to say?

What I suggest here are ten simple modifications in the way we write—ten changes that will help us include the hidden audience as part of our reading public while not sacrificing either the complexity of our ideas or the necessary ambiguity of our research findings (table 23.2). These changes apply equally to regional syntheses, site reports, cultural resource management reports, and theoretical treatises. Unlike many of the ideas proposed in this volume, the ten changes I suggest are not difficult. They can be implemented by the average archaeological writer the very next time the Mac or PC is fired up. But they will make all the difference to the serious avocational reader.

Table 23.2. Rules from AltaMira Press for archaeological writers

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1. Find a hook!
 2. Tell a story.
 3. Include yourself.
 4. Write in plain English (or Spanish or Hopi).
 5. Talk to a single reader.
 6. Create memorable identifiers.
 7. Use only the data you need.
 8. Present data visually.
 9. Emphasize theory and method.
 10. Always think of your audience.
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1. *Find a hook!* Tell your reader what is important about your finds *before* offering the gory details. Most scholarly writing is done in the reverse way: first comes the literature review, then follow the research design, findings, and discussion, and only at the end does one learn the conclusions and their implications. For nonprofessional readers (and probably professional ones as well), it makes more sense to start with the highlights to give the reader incentive to keep reading.

2. *Tell a story.* The fact that most people organize their understanding of the world through narrative has only recently been rediscovered in the social sciences (Riessmann 1993). Whether they be horror stories told around campfires or theoretical treatises written in ivory towers, we all want to be led through engaging tales. Archaeological work fits this storytelling mode nicely. Many off-the-shelf literary conventions used by master storytellers are available to the archaeological writer—the quest, solving the mystery, the puzzling paradox, the mundane object that leads to a larger truth. Use these techniques; they work. The master of this technique is evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould, who uses the extinction of the .400 baseball hitter to explain to the lay reader the evolutionary pattern of marine invertebrates and quotes baseball manager Casey Stengel on why we cannot see extraterrestrials (Gould 1985).

3. *Include yourself.* Another recent discovery in social science writing is that the researcher need not be absent from the tale for the narrative to be valid (Ellis and Flaherty 1992). Include yourself in the story. Be uncertain, be perplexed, be *human*. Use the vertical pronoun. Say “We don’t know.” The character of the archaeologist as the Great Wizard of Oz, impressively exuding smoke and lightning while manipulating his kingdom, is a feature

of past narratives, not the player in today’s archaeological writing. Honest, engaged dialogue is far more compelling than an omnipotent wizard’s tricks.

4. *Write in plain English* (or Spanish or Hopi). Use of simple, active language without jargon makes reading more of a pleasure and less of a chore—not just for the lay public but for your colleagues as well. Use examples from research or from the everyday world to explain your points. Writing in the passive voice will not improve the quality of the writing, nor does it endear you to readers.

5. *Talk to a single reader.* To find the right level for your writing, imagine a specific person whom you know, part of this hidden audience, and write for him or her. Provide the contextual background this person would need to follow your argument. Use language you would use with this person. If the written word is viewed as a conversation between you and your readers, it is easier to find the right tone when you have a specific listener in mind.

6. *Create memorable identifiers.* The proper *bon mot* has often made the difference between a convincing argument and a forgotten one. It is hard for the reader to embrace the designation “Mycenean IIIc1b pottery” people. While it may not be as precise historically, calling these people the “Philistines” will certainly resonate better with your audience. Look for typesites, geographic names, other cultural names more popularly known, or even a memorable neologism to describe your sites, cultures, or classes of artifacts. Certainly try to avoid computer-babble such as AGRISYS or PRECLASC; these work well as labels for your computer runs but not for general reading.

7. *Use only the data you need.* A book is not a trash can in which to dump all of your field notes. Take heed from other social sciences—sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists do not include their raw survey responses in their books. They present relevant research highlights with summaries and analyses. Leave the bulk of the data for journal articles or for your website, or keep it on a disk to send to the few colleagues who actually want the whole story. Focus on the analysis, the synthesis, providing in the general volume only the data you need to support your arguments. With the increasing availability of online data sources, alternatives are becoming ever more readily available for the reader who truly needs more.

8. *Present data visually.* Good graphics make a difference in archaeological writing. A table is not as easily readable as a chart or graph. A de-

scription works better with a photograph. A good orienting map is worth its weight in gold. Lists can be scanned more readily than can a long paragraph. Make sure your reader has the visual context to understand your arguments. After all, archaeologists study material objects, and that materiality is what grounds our work for the average reader.

9. *Emphasize theory and method.* The difference between you and Erik Von Daniken is the use of well-argued theories developed from sound field and analytic methods. As a professional archaeologist you need to teach the reader how archaeological theories and methods differ from crackpot ideas. While explaining basic philosophy of science and research methodology in every publication may seem redundant, it does serve to distinguish your work from the sensational pyramid-power book the reader can find in the local bookstore. You cannot emphasize too often the difference between what the professional archaeologist does and what others who appropriate the term *archaeology* do.

10. *Always think of your audience.* If there is no reader, why write the book? Take the single reader you have identified as a sympathetic, interested supporter of your ideas and imagine that person multiplied into many. Imagine the new avenues of communication we open up when we decide to write for the large number of people who want to hear our ideas, who will buy our books, support our fieldwork, even write to their elected representatives on cultural resource issues. It almost seems worth a little extra effort, doesn't it?

The Publisher's Role

Publishers also have an important role in this outreach to the hidden audience for archaeology. We need to find good writers and encourage their work. We need to break the traditional boundaries that separate the popular trade publisher, the textbook house, and the specialized professional and scholarly publisher (not one of the three is geared toward servicing this audience) and find ways into the intermediate niche where the hidden audience lies. We need to work with new media and other ways of presenting archaeological information such that the medium and the message match more closely than at present. Then we need to package the information better and reach out aggressively to potential audiences, telling them we have something of interest to them.

All this means taking risks, but the alternative—ignoring the great majority of those who support our work—is even riskier.

Notes

1. On several archaeological electronic bulletin boards (such as <<http://web.idirect.com/~atrium/>>), David Meadows offers a weekly list of archaeological (and sometimes pseudo-archaeological) shows on cable channels. The average week's menu includes half a dozen different programs, about ten hours of weekly programming in all.

2. While the Archaeological Institute of America lists ninety-three local chapters, it does not have separate membership records on these chapters, nor does it keep records on what percentage of its national membership is professional and what percentage is avocational.

3. Data on these societies are difficult to obtain. An annual e-mail Directory of Archaeological Societies and Journals, <<http://archaeology.about.com/blsmokedir.htm>>, compiled by Michael A. Pfeiffer of the U.S. Forest Service from a variety of other sources lists over a hundred archaeological societies in almost all U.S. states and Canadian provinces at the regional, state or province, county, or city level. A spot check of several of these organizations indicated that they rarely know their percentage of avocational archaeologists, as opposed to academic, student, CRM, or government members.

4. Information provided by *Archaeology* magazine is based upon its Audit Bureau of Circulation statement of June 30, 2000, and upon a 2000 subscriber study by MediaMark Research; it is included here with permission of *Archaeology* magazine.

5. Combined membership in the major professional societies such as the Society for American Archaeology, Archaeological Institute of America, American Schools for Oriental Research, Society for Historical Archaeology, and American Anthropological Association Archaeology Division totals about 20,000. When one eliminates individuals who belong to more than one of these organizations and the lay membership, the total number of professionals is about 10,000.

References

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