

10 KEY QUESTIONS TO DEFINE YOUR IDEAL READER

Adapted from Jennie Nash's *Blueprint for a Book and Blueprint for a Nonfiction Book*

You probably have a vague idea about your ideal reader—but a vague idea is not good enough. A book is a commercial product that you want people (agents and publishers) to invest in and consumers (readers) to buy. Just like any other commercial product, you have to be clear about who it's for and why they might care.

Is your parenting book for soccer moms? There are soccer moms who want their first grader to play because the kid spends too much time playing video games and soccer moms who are banking on their high school junior getting a college scholarship. Which reader are you speaking to?

Is your career coaching book for people changing careers in midlife? There are workers changing careers because they have realized that the field of medicine or law is no longer for them and there are workers changing careers because they're ready to strike out on their own and start a business. Which reader is your ideal reader?

You have to choose. A book that has the potential of appealing to everyone ends up appealing to no one. The more specific you can be, the more impact your book can have.

This is as true of fiction as it is for nonfiction. You have to know who your ideal reader is and why they might care about your book.

I find it helpful to think in terms of what the reader needs—what kind of pain they are in. Fiction absolutely has the power to help people who are in all kinds of pain. A novel can alleviate problems such as boredom, loneliness, yearning, confusion, isolation, curiosity, anger, and discontent.

So let's say that you're writing a novel about a laid-off restaurant employee who invested his last dollars to open a taco stand during the pandemic using recipes from his Mexican mother (a real story I recently read about in my local newspaper—the kind of story that could inspire a novel). Your ideal reader might be a mom in her 40s who lives in Oregon, loves food, and listens to start-up podcasts as she commutes to her corporate job as an HR professional. Her pain is that she doesn't have time to make the kinds of healthy, soulful food she wants to share with her kids, and she fears she is not being a good enough mom because she's always pulled in too many directions. She dreams of leaving her job and starting a business that would allow her to express her creativity and control her schedule and think about food all the time, but she can never figure out what exactly she would do or how she would find the courage.

Knowing her story makes it easier to see why she would connect to your story.



WHO ARE YOU WRITING FOR?

DEMOGRAPHICS

It helps to envision your ideal reader as specifically as possible. Start with these general questions:

1. How old are they?
2. Where do they live?
3. How do they spend their days?

(Are they a toddler mom, 7th-grade student, 7th-grade teacher, first-generation college student, puppy owner, European traveler, truck driver, C-suite executive, entrepreneur, Senator?)

4. What is their income level?
5. What is their education level?
6. Do they have a specific race or ethnic origin or gender?

PSYCHOGRAPHICS

Now dig deeper. Think about why they would buy a book, what they would hope to get from it?

7. What keeps them up at night? What do they worry about, care about, wonder about?
8. What do they want more than anything in the world?
9. What can your book do to help them get it?

SUMMARY

In his acknowledgments to his middle-grade novel, *Ghost* – a book that is literally about track running but is also about running to and from the hard things in life – Jason Reynolds wrote: "to all the young people who are running...may this book be breath." This is a powerful summary of his ideal reader.

10. Using all of the above information, can you write a few snappy lines about your ideal reader?