

Professional Writing in the English Classroom

Professional Writing: What You Already Know

We are pleased to present the first installment of “Professional Writing in the English Classroom.” We should begin by answering the obvious question: What is professional writing? It isn’t remedial writing, and it involves much more than writing memos, business letters, and résumés (although it certainly includes those genres). Professional writing has many names—*technical communication*, *technical writing*, *business communication*, and others. Here, we use the term *professional writing* because it provides the most flexible definition of the concept: writing within professional contexts.

Some professional writing is done by full-time writers such as technical communicators, public relations specialists, journalists, and advertisers. But professional writing also encompasses the writing that occurs within other professions—the writing of teachers, lawyers, doctors, store managers, academics, salespeople, accountants, researchers, civil servants, and others—anyone in any profession who writes as a way to get work done. Professional writing includes complex genres such as proposals, multimedia presenta-

tions, and formal reports, but it also includes short documents such as notes to coworkers, directives, or email. When professional writing is done well, it takes into account the writer’s purposes, the needs and expectations of the audience, the conventions of genre, and the complexities of situation and context.

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Choices, Not Formulas

To explore this concept further, let’s examine a genre familiar to most of us: the “sub plan.” Like many teachers, we remember our early years in the classroom and how difficult it was to write good plans for substitute teachers. We received some advice from peers and guidance from administrators, but we learned quickly that the best way to know if our writing was successful was to read the notes left by the substitutes and compare them to the (sometimes overheard) comments of students and neighboring teachers. Experi-

ence taught us that good sub plans tend to include things such as

- Detailed lesson plans,
- Descriptions of classroom routines and policies,
- Class copies of handouts and worksheets,
- Seating charts, and
- “What to do if” lists with some possible classroom issues and responses.

But a sub plan is much more than a generic list of traits. It is also a representation of what we want to accomplish in our teaching, a depiction of our expectations for students, and an interpretation of our school culture. Furthermore, a sub plan reflects our concept of our audiences—our primary audience (the substitute teacher), along with tertiary audiences (our students, teaching colleagues, support staff, administrators, and others who might come in contact with the sub plan—or the results from it). Much as there are many ways to write a résumé, a memo, an editorial, or any other form of professional communication, there are also multiple ways to compose a sub plan. We can pay attention to form without being formulaic. Consider the two different examples here: one that takes the traditional form of a

FIGURE 1. Letter to a Substitute Teacher

November 17, 2010

Dear Substitute Teacher,

Thank you for taking my classes while I am at the NCTE Annual Convention. I really appreciate it! I explain my lesson plans below, and I have also attached a bell schedule and information about classroom rules, lunch, and what to do if there are problems with students or with the technology. Please take attendance for each class—seating charts are in the folder.

For English 9 (blocks 3 and 5 Thursday; block 8 Friday), we have been reading *Romeo and Juliet*, and students are working in small groups to collect or create the props necessary for our in-class performance of the play. For homework, students were to reread their assigned scene(s) and list the essential props, along with the line numbers from the play that state or imply that specific props are needed.

In class today, students should work in their assigned groups (see the attached list) to compare their notes and type one group chart. (One laptop per group from the cart.) There is an example chart on the board; please explain to students the three columns: (1) the props and whether they are essential or optional; (2) the corresponding quotes with line numbers from the play that state or imply the props are needed; and (3) notes about what group members need to do to bring the props to school by Wednesday, November 24. These notes should specify who will take the prop, or whom they will ask for permission to borrow it, or what materials they will need in order to make it.

- When groups finish making this chart, they need to print a copy for each group member and one to hand in. Please collect my copy from the groups.
- Those who finish early should start typing a form letter that they will use to request permission to borrow specific props. They will be able to finish this in class when I return.

letter (see fig. 1) and an alternative akin to what Leah has used in her classroom (see fig. 2).

Even though the content of the sub plan in Figure 1 is unique, the letter format is probably familiar. The date is in the conventional place; the greeting is standard for a letter; the opening note of thanks and the mention of classroom rules, attendance, and the like are conventional. Furthermore, the organization of ideas is also conventional. Information about what to teach is grouped by the different classes that the teacher is responsible for, and within the notes for each class, the reader can find details, listed chronologically, about what the teacher and students should do during the period

and about what students are assigned for homework. This is a rather typical example, definitely within the general purposes and constraints of the sub plan genre.

However, in professional writing, there isn't just one right way to write in a given situation. Writers make choices about which genres to use and how best to shape them. We consider our role in relation to the audience, context, and purpose, and then we decide the best way to approach the situation. For example, Figure 2 is a different version of the same sub plan—a take on the same situation, but with different ideas about audience, purpose, and context—and, ultimately, about the form and function of the genre.

When Leah used this type of sub plan, she wrote a short note to the substitute teacher, who was asked to distribute photocopies of the memo to students and ensure that they followed the instructions.

The letter and the memo both work to accomplish a well-structured and productive classroom in the teacher's absence. Note, however, that the writing is focused toward different audiences. In the memo, rather than directly addressing the teacher, Leah makes a direct rhetorical appeal to her students. In doing so, she approaches the same issue in different ways within the body of the text, using her professional writing knowledge as a teacher to guide her.

Were both examples effective? We would only know by assessing the real-world result: if the substitute teacher felt well-prepared and left the day with a good impression of the students and the class, if the students felt the day was productive, and if the teacher believed that the day's goals were accomplished. The key point is that both examples reflect the teacher's professional knowledge—a teacher's understanding of audience, purpose, situation, and a specific genre.

Learning to Make Choices in Context

The types of professional writing we teachers do are as varied as our classrooms, schools, and communities. For our students, we write syllabi, classroom rules, assignment instructions, responses to papers, Web pages, and report card comments. For audiences beyond our classrooms, we write newsletters, permission slips, dis-

FIGURE 2. Memo to Students

To: English 9 students
From: Ms. Zuidema
CC: Substitute teacher
Date: November 17
Re: Agenda and homework

Below is your to-do list for the November 18/19 class period. Please follow it, and if you have questions, check with the substitute teacher. Work hard, and enjoy!

1. Gather the following materials and meet your group at your usual spot in the classroom:
 - your copy of *Romeo and Juliet*,
 - the list of props and line numbers you completed for today's homework, and
 - if you are the group secretary today, a laptop from the cart.
2. As a group, study the example chart on the board so that you will know how to make a similar chart. Notice as you read each row from left to right:
 - **Column 1** lists the **prop needed** and whether it is **essential or optional**;
 - **Column 2** contains the **quotation with line numbers** from the play that states or implies that the prop is needed;
 - **Column 3** specifies what **action** your group will need to take to have the prop to school by Wednesday, November 24. Tell either **who will take the prop**, or **whom you will ask** for permission to borrow it, or **what materials** your group will need in order to make it.
3. Create one chart as a group; your secretary will type it on the laptop and print copies for all group members, plus one for me. Follow the example on the board, and use the lists you wrote as homework for today to help you decide together what to include.

[And so on . . .]

ciplinary notices, emails, conference papers, grant proposals, letters of recommendation, workshop materials, professional articles, PowerPoint presentations, and peer evaluations. Whatever we write, we make choices within an authentic context.

We don't go to work in the morning intent on writing emails and assignment instructions "just because," as if our jobs were about composing a set number of documents in a set number of genres each day. Rather, we see problems to solve and opportunities for progress, and we use writing to accomplish this work. Our professional writing requires us to write from what we know—to work

from an understanding of teaching, of composing, and of the professional context. Therefore, it makes sense that many of us as teachers learn professional writing not only through the advice we receive but also through models, experience, and practice.

There are important parallels here to how our students can best learn professional writing. Students may not be ready to learn the writing that is particular to a specific profession, but they can learn about types of writing that are commonly used across a range of professions. However, students are no more interested than we are in a checklist of "Genres I Will Write Today, Just Because." Students rightly

question the relevance of rote exercises that require them to follow forms and formulas without thinking about who they are writing to, or why, or in what capacity. Like us, student writers need to learn to make contextualized choices, to pay attention to rhetorical GAPS (Genre, Audience, Purpose, and Situation). They need to experience the satisfaction of making challenging decisions within complex situations.

We can create authentic professional writing contexts for students in our English classrooms. When we do so and then guide students as they make writerly decisions about genre, audience, and purpose, we can help them to understand writing as the complex, important (and fun!) task that it can be. For example, during their study of *Romeo and Juliet*, Leah's ninth-grade students worked through several situations by writing in various professional genres. Some of the writings were brief; others were more complex. Students wrote individual status reports to Leah (who wore the hat of project supervisor alongside her usual teaching role) to update her

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about their progress on their props project. They wrote instructions to classmates about when and how particular props were to be used. They wrote incident reports to Leah when their groups experienced difficulty, and they documented the logic of their problem-solving process in a collaboratively written

informal report. Finally, as the project drew to a close, students wrote confidential memos to Leah in which they assessed the results of their project and their own performance within the group.

Students who write within authentic contexts such as these are immersed in meaningful composing. They are also engaged in higher-order thinking, decision making, and genre learning. They are creating complex products using the same processes that professionals do. They are not simply reiterating forms and templates; they are creating their own idea of what the genre is, based on their understanding of the audience, situation, and purpose of the task. These are professional-level concepts that can help them problem solve—and write—at a higher level.


Powerful Possibilities

We are enthused by the possibilities that professional writing presents for our classrooms. We are excited that it allows us to emphasize cultural contexts and introduce practical genres, to engage young writers in authentic decisions and processes, and to provide them

with opportunities for reaching real audiences and addressing problems in their schools and communities. Additionally, we are excited that professional writing can be integrated seamlessly into classrooms in ways that enhance projects in literature, composition, and language study. We hope that you, too, can imagine how professional writing can build community among students, create opportunities for social justice teaching, and provide occasions to address issues of audience, context, and genre so that students can understand the complexities and joys of writing as an art and a craft.

These goals probably sound familiar, since they align with the ideals our profession holds close. If your students are already writing to make changes in their communities, schools, and society, you are thinking like a professional writer, and this column is for you. If you are guiding students through the creation of nontraditional genres such as brochures, newsletters, proposals, and presentations, then you are already teaching professional writing, and this column is for you. If you haven't done these things yet but they sound interesting, then this column is definitely for you.

We strongly believe in the power of professional writing. We also believe that it can be integrated by teachers in all areas of the English language arts classroom. In future columns, we will introduce *EJ* readers to core ideas of professional writing; highlight teachers who use professional writing in their high school and middle school classrooms; examine key concepts that can enrich and enhance the teaching you already do; and, hopefully, help to spark your imagination about some entirely new projects. We look forward to sharing and to bringing out the voices of teachers and scholars who use professional writing in their classrooms.

Finally, if you include elements of professional writing in your classroom, or see reflections of your own work in what we wrote about in this column, we would love to hear from you. We invite you to visit with us at our session at the NCTE Annual Convention (“Professional Writing in the English Classroom” on Friday, November 19, at 4:00–5:15 p.m.), or you are welcome to drop us a line: Leah Zuidema (lzuidema@dordt.edu) and Jonathan Bush (jbush@wmich.edu). 

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