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Written Professional Communications

Fall 2013 Assignments

Note: You may receive additional assignments during the semester.

WPC Assignment 1 – Report: How Professionals Utilize Writing in the Workplace

For your first assignment, report on the type, quantity and style of writing in a profession (which may include your targeted career field). The purpose of this assignment is to make you more aware of the writing typically performed in professional settings.

Identify and contact a professional in your choice of field. It may be a colleague, friend, relative, or someone you do not know. Please interview someone for whom writing is a reasonably frequent – and varied – workplace activity. Someone who answers only emails all day is not your target. Nor is a police officer who fills out reports only, or a dental hygienist who completes charts with notes. You will write about someone for whom writing is a varied and significant part of their day and workload. We will discuss interview strategies in class to help you complete this assignment successfully.

As you prepare, interview and write your report:

Identify the interview subject, their profession and title, and their role within their organization.

Also consider:

The type of writing they do on the job.

The amount of writing required.

Their concerns/considerations while writing, such as audience, messages, word choice, objectives, length, etc.

The range of rhetorical situations they address as part of their job. Do they sell? Are they advocates? Do they simply report or must they also persuade?

The nature of the writing process for them.

An evaluation of how writing contributes to their effectiveness, job performance and success.

For example, you might ask whether they must present material to colleagues, customers, prospects, etc., and how they go about the task of organizing information and preparing presentations (and, of course, if they write a speech or prefer to speak from notes, which method is more effective, and why).

Preplan your report. Outline the report to create a logical, flowing structure. Make sure that you understand the purpose of this assignment, your audience (your fellow students and me), and the scope of the information required.

Use information, including anecdotes, to illustrate and support assertions. And structure your report logically, with a beginning, middle and closing that make sense in terms of the writing and flow of information.

Length: No longer than 3-4 pages, double-spaced (and printed on one side of the page, only). Staple your work. Please note that “3-4 pages” is a guideline, not a requirement. Your assignment should be thorough and complete, without fluff that merely fills space (and will affect your grade adversely). Self-edit to produce a polished piece of writing.

Due: 9/4/2013

Assignment 2

Resume & Cover Letter

Your assignment: Create a polished, graphically organized resume and cover letter.

Most employers have too many applicants per job to interview each one personally. These employers sort through job application packages (resumes and cover letters) to decide which applicants warrant further consideration. Your first communication with your future employer is likely to be in writing and must persuade them to interview you as the next step in the employment process. Precision and style are essential, since resume screeners typically spend 20 seconds or less to determine if a candidate is qualified and the resume warrants further review. Any errors can mean sudden death.

Please edit and proofread your work carefully.

For this assignment, you will write:

A cover letter for a real job – one that you know is available. The letter should highlight different, relevant aspects of your qualifications that address the specific position’s requirements. Remember the parts of the letter (intro, body, closing) as discussed in class and keep in mind that your objective is persuading the employer to grant an interview. You also should ask directly for an interview.

A clean, polished resume. The resume should emphasize appropriate experience, achievement, skills, education, etc. for employment within the target organization. The format may be traditional or innovative, depending on

the audience and situation. Style and format should be appropriate for the employer.

A cover memo (one page, maximum, but should be less) addressed to me in which you give an overview of the job as well as what you know about the job requirements and the prospective employer. It should describe how you have adapted your letter and the resume to the specific rhetorical situation.

You may base your prospective job choice on listings you find in a newspaper, online, a trade journal, placement office/bureau, etc. Investigate the job and your audience by calling the personnel office or HR department, or by researching the company.

The job must be real. Also, do not recycle a past application – find an opportunity ad start from scratch. Tailor your application package to the type of employee (and skill level) you believe the employer seeks. Please be realistic. You should seek positions at or near entry level.

Due: 9/11/13

Assignment 3 Follow-up Letter

Create a follow-up letter.

In this scenario, you already completed an interview with your prospective employer from assignment 2. Use our in-class interview as a basis for the follow-up. You can use the examples as templates for your letter. Consider that you were asked to interview, so the prospective employer saw something on your resume that attracted them, and work forward from that fact. In your letter, think through the scenario, including praise and criticism you received from the class and from me, as well as any information about you or your experience that you neglected to provide and want the interviewer to have when considering your qualifications. For example, you can reiterate your work on a research project and provide additional details (and even note that you're attaching the executive summary or an abstract for review). Remember—this is more than a simple courtesy of thanking someone for an interview. You also are reaching out to the prospective employer to reiterate and reinforce positive messages about you. Finally, do not be afraid to tell them you will follow up again—if you interviewed, you likely were on a short list of only a handful of candidates, so they are not inundated with phone calls.

Please edit and proofread your work carefully. Find and solve issues like passive voice and awkward grammatical constructions.

In the real world, the finished letter will be a maximum of a single page, and will be single-spaced. ***However, I need you to double-space it to allow room for edits, corrections and comments.*** Once you have a final draft and are satisfied with your writing, ***DOUBLE-SPACE*** the letter so I have space to edit, which will result in it being two pages in length. Follow the guidelines discussed in class and format it so it observes both convention and your ultimate purpose, reaching out to maintain contact and provide any additional, important information that might sway the contact's opinion of you in your favor.

Thank them for their time and reiterate your interest in the job.
Address/clarify any issues you think were raised during the interview.
Add any important information you forgot to provide during the interview.
Emphasize your qualifications and confidence in your abilities.
Close by asking for additional contact or follow-up.

NOTE: Please remember to follow AP Style re numbers, titles, percentages, etc. As of this assignment, I will deduct for AP Style errors/omissions.

Assignment 4 Written Instructions

The assignment: Write a rationale for your approach to completing a specific action, along with concise, clear, step-by-step written instructions for completing the task. Write for your choice of an internal or external audience (let me know which one), which will determine appropriate length, level of detail, etc. Avoid assumptions about your audience that might lead you to gloss over important detail or leave out steps.

Finished length should be appropriate for the task and enable the reader to complete it successfully and efficiently.

The steps should include:

Topic selection. Focus on tasks that you are familiar with and can complete successfully. You should begin with a brief, one-paragraph description of the task and your goals for the reader, which will help determine how well your instructions work.

Identify your audience. Are they fellow employees, customers or web site visitors, for example?

Select a format. The instructions can be in a memo to your audience, a letter or written as an instruction sheet.

Determine what, if any, messages should be part of the document. For example, if you are writing about returning a recalled product, this is a chance to reinforce customer service messages and defuse a potentially negative customer reaction.

Go through the action yourself and jot down step-by-step instructions. See where you might encounter difficulty or where special attention to detail might make a difference. Ask someone else to use and critique the instructions. Watch them use your instructions and note where you can make improvements.

If photos will help and you have the resources, incorporate them within the instructions so they supplement (but do not replace) the written steps.

Review your draft to determine if it is comprehensive and clear.

Edit for clarity and proper flow. Remember that unclear, ambiguous writing will confuse your reader.

Utilize specific techniques such as commands, and use straightforward grammatical constructions to help avoid confusion. Stay in active voice.

NOTE: You cannot submit recipes, software/IT instructions such as clearing your web browser or other tasks easily copied from the Internet, or overly simplistic tasks like how to use a washing machine, make a PB&J or cook a cheeseburger, or take a shower (yes, someone always tries that one), etc. I expect (and, in fact, demand) original thought and work from you.

Assignment 5 Presentation

The assignment: Turn your instructions into a 3-5 minute (maximum) oral presentation. Utilizing a written script, PowerPoint slides, prompts, or a combination, bring your instructions to life for the audience. Incorporate visuals including diagrams, screen captures, still photography, video, props, etc. to help illustrate key points.

The presentation should include:

An opening that includes the rationale for your instructions – tell us why they're important to master.

Discussion of any required tools, equipment or prep work.

A list of required products, if applicable. Add commentary as needed.

Step-by-step instructions.

Remember that the spoken word differs from the written word. And most writing that reads well rarely if ever sounds right when recited verbatim. Use a conversational tone and present-tense, active voice. Devices like contractions or sentence fragments used for emphasis are okay. Slang is not.

Finally, practice your presentation prior to delivering it in class. The last thing we want is to watch you stand there and read from a sheet of paper, or watch your back as you read the screen. Know the material so you're comfortable with it and can bring it to life.

Assignment 6

Internal Communication

The assignment: Communicate in writing (memo/announcement/briefing, etc.) to an internal audience about an event/development.

For this assignment, you have two options:

Use one of the scenarios discussed in class to create a written communication to employees, colleagues in your department, or another internal audience. Provide a brief, one-paragraph description of your scenario so I understand the situation and the target of your communication.

Create a scenario of your own—for example, pretend that you completed a report and are summarizing the results and its implications, or use a research project from another class and communicate the results to your audience (acting as if the report took place in a business setting). Or, perhaps, you are announcing layoffs and their implications for your company. Provide a one-paragraph description of your scenario so I understand the situation and the target of your communication. If you use this scenario, you also must develop appropriate messaging along the same lines as the messaging we'll discuss in class for the first scenario.

When completing this assignment, remember:

Develop broad, over-arching messages reflecting the situation and your communications objectives. Then use the messages in your communication.

Support the messaging with facts, and use these facts where appropriate to convey the messages.

If appropriate, make sure your audience understands the implications of the scenario and the effect of events on them, their jobs, their businesses, etc.

Write clearly and concisely to convey information.

Use formatting as a way to isolate and emphasize information. For example, a bulleted list of facts about a product recall calls attention to them in the document, and makes them easier to find, read and understand (this document is an example of how bullet points can work to improve readability and understanding).

Remember, this is directed at an internal audience. If, for example, your topic is a product recall, content should reflect facts, issues and messages that are relevant – and written for – an audience of peers, co-workers, employees, etc. Proofread your work carefully, and use AP Style for numbers, percentages, job titles, datelines (look it up), etc. Remember, proper styling affects to your grade.

Double-space your work. I will not grade a submission that isn't formatted properly.

Assignment 7

External Communication

The assignment: Convert the previous assignment into an externally directed document that communicates with an audiences(s) outside the company, such as customers, business partners, etc.

For this assignment, you have the same two options:

Use one of the scenarios discussed in class to create a written communication to an external audience. Provide a brief, one-paragraph description of your scenario and audience so I have context for reviewing your work..

Create a scenario of your own—for example, pretend that you completed a report and are summarizing the results and its implications, or use a research project from another class and communicate the results to your audience (acting as if the report took place in a business setting). Or, perhaps, you are announcing layoffs and their implications for your company. Provide a one-paragraph description of your scenario so I understand the situation and audience. If you use this scenario, you also must develop appropriate messaging along the same lines as the messaging we'll discuss in class for the first scenario.

When completing this assignment, remember:

Develop broad, over-arching messages reflecting the situation and your communications objectives. Then use the messages in your communication. They may (probably should) differ from those developed for your internal audience.

Support the messaging with facts, and use these facts where appropriate to convey the messages. If appropriate, make sure your audience understands the implications of the scenario and the effect of events on them, their comfort or convenience, their businesses, etc. Convey supporting information clearly and concisely, so it supports messaging. Use formatting as a way to isolate and emphasize information. For example, a bulleted list of facts about a product recall calls attention to them in the document, and makes them easier to find, read and understand (this document is an example of how bullet points can work to improve readability and understanding).

Remember, this is directed at an external audience. If, for example, your topic is a product recall, content should reflect facts, issues and messages that are relevant – and written for – an audience of product owners, retailers, the media, etc. Proofread your work carefully, and use AP Style for numbers, percentages, job titles, datelines (look it up), etc. Remember, proper styling affects to your grade.

Double-space your work or it will be returned to you ungraded and will be considered a late submission.

Assignment 8

Personal Biography

The assignment: Write a four- to five-paragraph (maximum) personal biography for business use—for example, on a corporate Web site or in a new business proposal.

Finished length should be no longer than one page, single-spaced. **However, double-space this assignment to allow room for corrections and comments.**

As you develop and draft your biography, keep the following in mind:
The purpose and audience, which will dictate the content.

The messaging in this context. For example, you should include information such as your title and responsibilities. However, if your “company” is Google or another firm that espouses a fun or casual work environment, it’s permissible to take a more light-hearted tone where appropriate, such as writing about your approach to work or your outside interests. However, you still must convey enough information that the reader knows what you do at work and how well you do it, and the bio fulfills its business communications purpose. There is no set format for a biography. It must be readable – so it should be in active voice, organized logically, and include relevant information in descending order of importance. Refer to the examples.

One possible format might be:

Graph 1: Your name and title, and your responsibilities.

Graph 2: A general statement about your skills/talents, which introduces recent job experience, and/or experience relevant to the bio’s purpose. If, for example, the bio is for a proposal, list information that shows you have the skills and background the prospect covets.

Graph 3: More distant experience, if necessary or available. This would be a “John began his career as a . . . “ paragraph. They don’t need to know you were a lifeguard in high school unless it is relevant within the bio’s context.

Graph 4: The education paragraph. Write this as if you now hold a degree(s) that you intend to seek. Mention any honors briefly (“John is a magna cum laude graduate of the University of Pittsburgh with a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering, and an MBA from the Katz Graduate School of Business at Pitt (“Pitt” is permissible on the second reference).

Graph 5: Where appropriate, some personal information: “John spends his free time playing the guitar, clog dancing and training for long-distance bicycle races. Over the past 6 years, he raised more than \$25,000 for local food banks.”

Proofread your work carefully, and use AP Style for numbers, percentages, titles, etc. Remember, proper styling and, of course, proper grammar and punctuation contribute to your grade. As always, double-space your work.

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