

Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

Engaging Audiences Beyond the University: Writing
in and Reflecting on Non-Academic Rhetorical
Situations

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Engaging Audiences Beyond the University: Writing in and Reflecting on Non-Academic Rhetorical Situations

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Overview

This assignment invites students to identify academic knowledge that they value, and to share this knowledge with a new audience that is impacted by and/or can impact the topic. They are then tasked with analyzing their own writing in this “non-academic” rhetorical situation. Both components of this assignment respond to calls for more accessible academic knowledge and more equitable relationships between researchers and communities: the first half emphasizes audience engagement, and the second half reflects on the norms of writing in both academic and non-academic spaces.

In part 1, students present an academic source’s findings or theories on a topic of their choice, writing in a “non-academic” genre that seems engaging and appropriate for their new audience (500-750 words). Students aim to not only inform the audience, but also to engage them by acknowledging the audience’s experiences and expertise, and supporting the audience in effecting change or co-creating new knowledge. In part 2, students write a reflective essay (750-1000 words) that explains their rationale for choosing this rhetorical situation and analyzes the impact of their writing through the eyes of their audience. To close this self-analysis, students explain how their project reflects current or ideal relationships between their discipline and specific “publics.”

Because students choose the topics they will discuss, the audiences they will target, and the genres they will use, their projects often reflect their own memberships to multiple academic, professional, and personal communities. Their intersecting memberships often

motivate them, and conflicts between their memberships can grant them unique critical lenses on their discipline's practices (Johns). Students pursue forms of engagement that are both "relational," impacting relationships between scholars and communities and individuals who are impacted by and can impact their work, and "outcomes oriented," changing the terms of public debate, equipping readers to put their knowledge into practice, or increasing readers' agency in dialogue with or response to their discipline (Davies 695–699). Past projects have advocated for social change through posters at political demonstrations, sparked children's interest in fields like computer science, and shaped sustainable practices in communities near campus.

This is a variation of the popular "genre translation" assignment, and builds upon prior iterations developed by Writing Program faculty at UC Santa Barbara. One iteration, developed by Linda Adler-Kassner and program faculty, invites students to reshape the ideas from a scholarly journal article into a new genre. Another "writing about writing" version of this assignment, developed by Randi Browning, invites students to share something they have learned about writing with two new audiences.

Time Commitment

This assignment can be completed in three weeks.

Materials

Students will need access to a scholarly source that they have already read and reflected upon: a scholarly journal article for recent findings, or textbook chapter or lecture for more established theories. They will also need examples of valuable but accessible writing in non-academic genres, and guidance on accessing those sources in their own genres of choice. Finally, they will need digital or physical resources for writing realistically in non-academic formats.

Assignment or Activity Process

- Students begin by free-writing or reviewing course materials to reflect on what they have learned in their prior research that would be interesting and impactful for a new audience. In a class discussion, they share these lessons with each other, to practice clear explanation practices and sharing messages rather than topics.
- Next, students brainstorm audiences that can benefit from what they have learned or contribute their own knowledge and interest in the topic. At this stage, students follow Ashley J. Holmes' strategies in "Public Writing for Social Change": "make a list of at least 5 possible audiences you *could* address through public writing," and choosing one to pursue (Holmes 207). Students are encouraged to make this choice not only based on exigency (who requires a response today?), but also personal interests and shared goals (who is best equipped to act on their findings? who has been neglected in existing public writing?)
- Students then investigate genres that would be "fitting and persuasive" for the audience they have chosen (Holmes 207). This choice should be prompted by realism and engagement in equal measure; in other words, if they know that a genre like PowerPoint presentations or an Instagram carousel is frequently used but rarely impactful, they are encouraged to choose another or make measured modifications to the genre's conventions to improve its efficacy.
- At this stage, students write a proposal that states their message, audience, and genre of choice, and explains what motivates them to pursue this project. Feedback on this proposal focuses equally on how they explain their message (valuing active language, clarity, and engaging style), and how concretely they define their rhetorical situation (valuing

specificity and realism, and taking the student's knowledge of existing engagement with this audience.).

- Because students may be unfamiliar with writing in “non-academic” genres for an academic course, one class discussion compares writing practices in scholarly journal articles and non-academic genres. (For example, a biology journal article on gray whale migration and an interpretive board on the university campus that introduces this and other markers of gray whale behavior.) We also discuss the barriers and trade-offs inherent in any genre, and discuss strategies to mitigate those barriers to increase accessibility (such as alt text for image-heavy genres online, and writing in multiple languages to reach specific audiences.)
- After receiving proposal feedback, students draft their projects, starting with the text for public audiences and then writing the reflection based on the results. Peer review groups are formed to vary the genres and topics represented in each group, allowing peers to serve as readers who are closer to the public's perspective. (If the course is set up to grade multiple drafts or to assemble a final portfolio at the end, students can receive feedback at this stage that helps them better gauge the “formality” expected in these genres.)
- When editing or proofreading final drafts, students pair up and read their peer's piece aloud to them. This allows the author to notice what a new reader might find unfamiliar, and how their voice can be edited for increasing realism.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Choose and use genres that are realistic, engaging in the moment, and impactful in the long run beyond academic

contexts

- Recognize and describe genre conventions, and reflect on the impacts of these conventions in concrete rhetorical situations
- Think critically about how and with whom academic knowledge is circulated, how academic writing is defined, and how to engage non-academic audiences productively and responsibly

Learning Accommodations

- Students may share their academic findings in two shorter genres, or a series of short texts within a single genre, for a realistic end product and to make the process more approachable.
- Class discussion results should be recorded in a shared document, so that students can consult the list and compare any new ideas to what has been produced so far when drafting and revising.
- When editing, students may also read aloud to themselves, use text-to-speech software to listen to their piece, or otherwise modify the editing process to engage with the writing in a way that works best for them.

Works Cited

Davies, Sarah A. "Constituting Public Engagement: Meanings and Genealogies of PEST in Two UK Studies." *Science Communication* vol. 35 issue 6, 2013, pp. 687-707.

Holmes, Ashley J. "Public Writing for Social Change." *Writing Spaces* vol. 4, Parlor Press, 2021, pp. 199-216.

Johns, Ann M. "Discourse Communities and Communities of

Practice: Membership, Conflict, and Diversity.” *Writing About Writing*, edited by Elizabeth Wardle and Douglas Downs, 4th ed, 2019, pp. 560-583.

Further Reading

Donegan, Rachel. “The Rhetorical Possibilities of Accessibility.” *Writing Spaces* vol. 4, Parlor Press, 2021, pp. 110–123.

Iglesias, Charlisse. “Avoiding the Savior Complex in Community-Engaged Writing.” *Writing Spaces Assignment and Activity Archive* 2020.