

Writing for the Public (ENGCMP-0420): Composing a Campaign

Schedule	T, 6:00-8:30pm
Room	CL 349
Instructor	Dan Libertz
Email	DAL137@pitt.edu
Office	CL 617A
Office Hours	T, 4:30-5:30pm; by appt.

Course Description

Many organizations must engage with the public. They will have to spend a lot of time thinking about what the lay-person will read, comprehend, and act on. For instance, a collection of individuals working for a non-profit may want to write something attention-grabbing (e.g., a text equipped with statistics of food scarcity), understandable to their target audience (e.g., minimization of jargon and technical language), and containing elements that emphasize what the reader can do (e.g., utilizing white space and bold lettering, including a photograph that can attempt building some amount of empathy). Easy right? These are things an organization might *do*, but

how do you do it well? Not so easy. Perhaps the statistics used are too devoid of context, or even create a sense of defeatism. Maybe the “clear” language makes the problem sound too easy, insulting the intelligence of the reader. Or, perhaps the photograph comes across as either too distant from the concerns of the audience or maybe it comes across as “exploitative” for a large proportion of the audience.

In this course, we will focus on two integrating concerns: 1. What is the “public” and what does it mean to write for the “public interest”? 2. How do you do that well and do that ethically? To think through these questions, we will explore several readings, writing activities, and a course-long project where you will test out your developing theory of public writing as you go. In this project, you will collaborate with at least one other person to design a “campaign,” positioning yourselves as representing the government, a non-profit, or private citizens. This campaign is a plan of delivering rhetorical action, action consisting of several documents that you will create (ultimately independently completing two of such texts within your campaign), and a plan of delivery for these texts.



Course Goals for Writing for the Public

Writing for the Public is a writing-intensive course that focuses on helping students learn about and use specific forms of reading and writing that are common in the nonprofit and government sectors of American life. It is a core course in Pitt's Public and Professional Writing (PPW) Certificate Program. The course enables students to do the following:

Learn how persuasive writing functions in both nonprofit and government contexts. Students will learn about standards for writing and the range of genres that constitute writing in the public interest, and they will learn how to identify and research public issues.

Learn how to engage with the contexts and goals of writing in the public interest, including ways of satisfying the needs of their readers and what is at stake in writing a document that is published by an agency or nonprofit.

Compose sustained arguments supported by research (including interviewing) to persuade a particular audience to take a particular action. Students will choose a social issue or problem to research and write about and will narrow their focus to create a project that can be completed during the course.

Address the rhetorical and technical challenges of using images, captions, tables, charts, and other design elements to advance an argument and persuade an audience.

Craft language with attention to both style and precision. The course will allow students to better edit their own writing and to provide useful feedback on their colleagues' writing.

Course Website and Blackboard

On our [course website](#) you will find the course schedule (which I reserve the right to revise, so regularly check it!), a place to post blog entries in response to my periodic prompts, and a listing of useful resources. To post on the website, click "Register" and input a username and password if you wish to not have your posts connected back to you in the wider public, you should create a username that is not linked to your identity. We also have a Blackboard site where I will post readings that are not freely available online. Blackboard is also where you will submit assignments.



Required Texts

There are no required texts to purchase. We will read what I upload to Blackboard, what I link to online, and what is passed out in class. For the latter—and this is **important**—what you produce in this class will sometimes be the texts we wrestle with during class meetings. Any assignment you submit to me I may use for activities we do in class. Anything passed out in class will have your name removed, and I will be sure that the conversations will be respectful. Remember: what I choose to share with the class is chosen because I find something done well, but something that we may be able to continue to shape and improve together as a group. Additionally, we will also do some peer response in class, where you will exchange compositions with one another to offer feedback.

Things you will do this semester

Below you will find brief descriptions of the assignments you will complete for the semester. Rather than having a few large projects, there are several smaller pieces to write, to include collaborative pieces that you will compose along with a partner(s). As we start writing and working, I may provide more detailed accounts for any of the below assignments.

1. **Blog Posts. 500-750 words. Due three times during the semester by 10am Monday before.** These are brief posts responding to a prompt in relation to a topic and/or a reading due for the next class. You are responsible for submitting **three** blog posts during the term, with six opportunities to post a blog. Everyone will write the first blog post; after that, you will choose to post a blog for two of the remaining five opportunities. Because students not writing a blog post for that week will be commenting on your post, you will submit the post by 10am on the Monday when the reading is due to give them a chance to read. I will draw from your reactions in these posts during our class discussions. Remember, since you will have a relatively larger workload for the week you write blog posts, it would be a good practice to start your reading earlier than you would for weeks you do not write blog posts.

2. **Blog Comments. At least 200 words. Due four times by 4pm day of class.** Here are my guidelines for commenting: Engage with one of the blog posts that was written for Monday. You should use the writer's own words to extend their thinking further. You might agree or disagree with the writer, but you must use sound reasoning from the reading to either extend or refute something at play in the writer's post. In both blog posts and comments, these are spaces to try things out, and worry less about having The Right Answer. When a blog post is assigned for the week, but it is not your week to write a blog post, you will instead comment on one of the blog posts. The exception is the first blog post, in which everyone will write a blog and everyone will make one comment on a classmate's blog post.

3. **Collaborative Campaign Proposal. 300-500 words.** You and your partner(s) have been speaking about a common issue to build a campaign around over the last week. Now, you'll collaborate on a short proposal for your campaign. This assignment is simply a first step (of several more steps) to get started. What do you want to focus on? Why that issue? What is the goal of the campaign as you see it now? What are some initial ideas on some campaign pieces you will create? How might you deliver those documents? How will you both contribute to this work? I want to hear some initial thoughts early so I can get you some advice if I might have any. By the end of the term, you will each create two "campaign pieces" and collaborate on a campaign plan document that will explain how these documents will be delivered in order for you to rhetorically intervene in your issue.

4. **Letter to Classmate on Public Interest. 1000-1250 words.** This is an independent assignment. In class, we talked about writing privately, to one's self, compared to varying degrees of writing outward, to other readers. In this assignment, we will have a concrete audience (one classmate) that you will write to. You'll write them a letter about the topic you will be building a campaign for. You can take this in a number of directions, but the essential items in this letter are these:
 - a. Describing the problem (what exists), and supporting that with the work of experts on that problem (make sure that your reader has a way to look into those sources either by some kind of citation or hyperlink). Having at least 4 sources would make sense here.
 - b. What should be done ideally to address this issue (what is good). Feel free to be honest here. You can be uncertain, but start to talk about what you think would be best.
 - c. What can be done (what is possible)? Based on your sense of what can realistically be done, start to work through some possibilities of what different actors (e.g., organized citizens, government agencies) can do to remedy the situation.

At the end of the semester, after you've had time to think more about your issue, you'll return to this letter and try to revise it into something that can be designed for a wider public than that of your classmate. The goal is to think about longer-form alphanumeric writing and its potential usefulness to persuade and inform wider publics. In my feedback to you on this, I'll press you on how to take the letter outward toward a larger public.

5. **First Draft of Collaborative Campaign Plan. 500-750 words.** In this assignment, you'll have to think about what your stance is for this problem, you'll have to think about what evidence warrants this stance, what "public" you are addressing, you'll have to begin to map out what rhetorical moves you can make to insert your (supported) stance into your selected public's consciousness. With your letter completed, you can use what you learned from that to work through this assignment. Think of this as another "draft" of your proposal, only instead of trying to prove the merit of your issue, you are focusing much more on the merit of your *decisions* you have sketched out so far. These are the sorts of questions worth asking to help you write your campaign plan¹:

-What attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, behaviors would you like to change or encourage?

-Who do you hope to reach? Why is this audience key to addressing your topic?

-What kinds of documents will your group be producing?

-Multiple media and compositions are typically used to address modern issues. What media will you use? -What modes (e.g., sound, static image, video, alphanumeric writing)?

-How will your documents reach your target audience? How will they see it, how will it get to them? In other words, how will you attempt to circulate these documents?

-What "themes" might bleed over across documents and how will you make that happen?

-Have a rationale. Why did you choose this kind of writing and media? For instance, why did you decide that your audience would respond better to a poster rather than a video? Why deliver this document at this time? Why these documents in this order? Why that document in that medium? Why do you believe your strategies for circulating your writing are effective?

-What have other people and organizations produced about this issue? What genres of writing? What sorts of audiences have they targeted? What media was used? What modes (sound, image, video, alphanumeric writing, etc.)? How might you adapt/build on what others have done? Or, how might you do something very different?

Remember, this is a first draft— a first attempt at working through some initial ideas.

6. **Draft of a Campaign Piece.** Word requirement to be negotiated depending on genre, media, and mode(s), but it should be equivalent to about 1000-1250 words of "work," if that is helpful. After some reflecting, feedback, workshopping, and peer response on work thus far, you will begin composition of a document for your campaign. This will be a first draft of this document that you will submit. You will submit a final draft at the end of the term for one of your two campaign pieces. You must coordinate with your partner(s) on how your campaign piece would work with the pieces they are composing for integration into the larger campaign plan. **IMPORTANT:** Finally, since one of the course objectives for Writing for the Public requires using interviews, one of your campaign pieces should use some

¹ Questions adapted from Appendix A of *Available Means of Persuasion: Mapping A Theory and Pedagogy of Multimodal Public Rhetoric* by David M. Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel.

element of the interview that you and your partner(s) conducted earlier in the semester—you will have recorded the interview so that you can either use part or all of the interview for an aural campaign piece or a multimodal campaign piece, OR you can transcribe part or all of the interview to use as text in some part of your campaign piece.

7. **Draft of a Campaign Piece—a different one!** Word requirement to be negotiated depending on genre, media, and mode(s), but it should be equivalent to about 1000-1250 words of “work,” if that is helpful. After some reflecting, feedback, workshopping, and peer response on work thus far, you will begin composition of a document for your campaign. This will be a first draft of this document that you will submit. You will submit a final draft at the end of the term for one of your two campaign pieces. You must coordinate with your partner(s) on how your campaign piece would work with the pieces they are composing for integration into the larger campaign plan. **IMPORTANT:** Finally, since one of the course objectives for Writing for the Public requires using interviews, one of your campaign pieces should use some element of the interview that you and your partner(s) conducted earlier in the semester—you will have recorded the interview so that you can either use part or all of the interview for an aural campaign piece or a multimodal campaign piece, OR you can transcribe part or all of the interview to use as text in some part of your campaign piece.
8. **Collaborative Campaign Plan Presentation. About 5-7 minutes.** This is an informal presentation to solicit feedback from the class on your campaign pieces and plan. To the rest of the class you will: Summarize what your campaign plan is so far, what has changed since your first draft, what challenges you are facing on how to create and deliver your campaign pieces, and some questions (say, two or three) you have for the class about how to revise your final campaign plan or one (or more) of your campaign pieces.
9. **Pedagogical Object Proposal. About 250 words.** How can you position yourself as both an expert who has walked out of class with some gained knowledge but also as, simultaneously, a novice—that is, still one who can learn more? As a capstone to the course, you will (either independently or collaboratively) create a “pedagogical object” that incorporates your own writing from the semester. This object “teaches,” that is, it will illustrate key principles in public writing through activities and examples to someone else who wants to know more about public writing. You will first list out independently or come to a consensus as a group about key elements of public writing that you value. In this proposal, you will write to me about these values and your rationale on how you came to them Next, you will briefly get into some ideas you have brainstormed on how you would teach these aspects of public writing. For instance, you might make a “mini-textbook” with activities or assignments as well as examples from your own writing. Or, you could create a website that explained the key values with video and games. Maybe you produce an instructional video or record a podcast. Be as creative as you want. I’ll offer feedback to get you from what you value to how to *teach it*. **IMPORTANT:** the only rigid requirement for the final pedagogical object is that you must incorporate your own writing (e.g., white paper, campaign piece, writing done in class, blog posts) into the pedagogical object in some way.
10. **Final Draft of Collaborative Campaign Plan. 1250-1500 words.** Throughout the semester you have been thinking about your campaign plan. Return to the questions in prompt for the first draft, to the first draft that you produced, to the questions of your presentation, and

to the feedback on your presentation and first draft. Consider what you want to change to make the plan more effective, crisp, and most importantly, how you will integrate all campaign pieces given what you have learned up to this point in the semester. You should be adding examples, “prototypes,” and polishing a solid argument on the rationale for this plan.

11. **Pedagogical Object Presentation. 5-7 minutes for presentation.** will present it to the rest of the class on the last day. The presentations will be informal. This will function as a “work-in-progress” presentation, as was the case with the campaign plan presentations.
12. **Informal Report on Writing to a Public (actually doing it). About 5 minutes for group presentation.** As a group, you will decide on delivering a campaign piece to an actual public. Since you can’t realistically execute your entire campaign, choose one piece that you think could be delivered in an isolated fashion (or easily adapted for that purpose) and find a way to get it to a target audience. If no pieces seem suitable, try to design a smaller piece (e.g., flyer, Tweet) that can circulate. After doing this, reflect on the following: what did it feel like to write it? To deliver it? How did you do it? Why did you do it that way? Did you get any responses? What would you do differently if you do it again?
13. **Pedagogical Object. The pedagogical object will be negotiated in regard to “length” or “amount of work.”** As stated in the prompt for the proposal, you will come to a consensus about what you value in public writing and then you will figure out ways to teach those values/principles of public writing. You need to make an object that allows the student to experience the value and really “do” it in a scaffolded way. What I mean by “scaffolded” is that it is a good practice to allow the student to do a little bit at a time, to be guided through a process of thinking about your public writing values/principles. You will submit the object on CourseWeb (if in a group, just one of you has to submit). **IMPORTANT:** the only rigid requirement I have is that you must incorporate your own writing (e.g., campaign piece, other public writing done in class, blog posts) into the pedagogical object in some way.
14. **Final Draft of One of your Two Campaign Pieces.** At the end of the term, you will revise one of your campaign pieces to turn in. We will talk more about this in the second half of the semester.
15. **Revision of “Letter to Classmate on Public Interest.” About 1250 words.** Your task is to revisit your letter to a classmate and revise it into something that is neither for yourself nor for one other person, but for a public audience. Take what you have learned about public writing and about your campaign topic to transform this text into something that is well researched, convincing, and responding to a rhetorical situation relevant to your campaign—I want you to take transform this letter into something that can reach your targeted audience (e.g., white paper, feature, substantive pamphlet), revising based on what you have learned and thought about since you first wrote it. This new text need not be part of your group’s campaign, but it can be.
16. **Reflection on Work, to include Self-Assessment for Collaborative Work. About 500 words.** I want to give you a chance to think back on the work you did and to connect it to what you learned. How are the moves you made in your writing reflective of important

aspects of public and/or professional writing? Why did you make the sorts of revisions you did? Also, I want to make sure you have an opportunity to explain how you and your partner(s) worked together on collaborative assignments throughout the term. Be clear on what roles you played together. I will check in often throughout the term to make sure everyone is doing their equal part, but I wanted to allow a formal way for each of you to explain how you did your work when collaborating.

Grades

This is a portfolio course. That means that I will not assign grades on individual assignments, but will consider all your assignments holistically, measured against the course goals. This allows you to take some risks in your writing, since early projects are meant to test what is possible, get feedback, and then return to the work. This is also why you will be doing some reflective writing in the course—to take a moment to know your knowledge and to think about your thinking, in order to know what you are doing and why you are doing it. As you get closer to the end of the term, you will be in a good position to apply what you have come to know about public writing to the final assignments for the course. For blog posts and comments, I am mostly grading for completion, but I will grade upward for writing that exceptionally thinks deeply about using the topic to work through a given issue in public writing and I will mark you down if I the work you do here is hasty and surface-level thinking. If I suspect some of your work here approaches such hastiness and surface-level work, I will be in contact with you about that to help you take the time and intellectual effort to make those posts useful for your growth in this course. Same goes for other low-stakes writing assignments. Participation considers taking the time in class to share during discussion and in-class work. Finally, working hard on low-stakes writing, and working hard on drafts. At midterm, I will give you a **provisional** grade. I realize not having a grade until the end of the semester can be stressful, so to help with that, I am giving you what grade I would give you if the course ended at midterm according to the course goals. “Provisional” means the grade is not formal, but just a way to let you know how you’re doing.

Final grades will be based on the following proportions:

Participation: 10%
Low-Stakes Writing: 10% (Blog Posts/Comments/Proposals/Final Reflection/Drafts)
Campaign Plan: 15%
Campaign Piece Revision and Public Interest Letter Revision: 50%
Pedagogical Object: 15%

Here is how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade (Note that “meritorious” means commendable or praiseworthy: a “B,” in other words, is earned for work that is above average):

A = superior attainment
 B = meritorious attainment
 C = adequate attainment

D = minimal attainment
 F = failure



Classroom Climate²

While I encourage frank and free debate on any number of topics in my classes, we will refrain in our discussions from personal attacks and abusive language generally. We will not make disparaging comments about another's appearance, gender, race, ethnicity, or sexuality. We will try, as best we can, to abide by the following practices of ethical argumentation:

Honesty. We will make arguments based on what we understand to be the truth of the case, consistent with our experience of it, and we will avoid deliberate deception, distortion, and equivocation.

Accountability. We will support our claims with good reasons, the best evidence available to us.

Intellectual Generosity. We will listen carefully, thoughtfully, and respectfully to the other side in arguments. We will endeavor to understand others' views before arguing against them.

Intellectual Humility. We will acknowledge the possibility that in any argument we might be wrong. If we find we are wrong, we will readily acknowledge it.

Intellectual Courage. We will speak clearly and forcefully, when necessary, for ideas or persons that may be unpopular. We will try to find the courage to speak for the weak before the strong, the outsider before the insider, the just before the unjust, the afflicted before the comfortable.

Judgment. We will work to develop the wisdom to know which ethical practices of argument apply in which situations, and how to apply these practices in ways that contribute to the common good.

² Adapted from John Duffy, University Writing Program, University of Notre Dame.

Another way to think of ethical discussion and argumentation is (I think) effectively demonstrated in this cartoon from *The Oatmeal*, with the aid of neuroscience research: <http://theoatmeal.com/comics/believe>

Attendance Policy

Writing courses depend upon doing work in class just as much as doing work outside of class. Therefore, missing a class means that it will be difficult if not impossible to make up for what you missed. Absences are highly discouraged unless you have a good reason for it, and I will mark you down your participation grade for missed classes without sufficient reason. Life happens, and I understand that. The key is to communicate with me.

The Writing Center

Located on the third floor of the O'Hara Student Center, the Writing Center offers events, courses, and one-on-one tutorials for undergraduate students. Although consultants do not correct, edit, or proofread papers, they can teach you strategies for organizing, editing, and revising your writing. You can meet with a consultant once or regularly over the course of the semester. In some cases, your teacher may send you to the Writing Center for help on a particular problem; otherwise, you can seek assistance on your own. Their services are free. You can browse the services they offer or make an appointment by visiting www.writingcenter.pitt.edu.

Plagiarism

It is important that the work you submit is your own work, that you acknowledge your sources where appropriate, whether quoted or paraphrased, and thank anyone who has helped you with your drafts. We'll talk about responsible use of sources, but you should consult your handbook for guidelines on proper paraphrase, quotation, and citation. You can get additional help at the Writing Center, as well as at hackerhandbooks.com/pocket. The English Department defines plagiarism by a student as:

*when a student presents as his/her own, for academic evaluation, the ideas, representations, or works of another person or persons without customary and proper acknowledgement of sources.

*when a student submits work of another person in a manner which represents the work to be his/her own.

Instances of plagiarism will result in a loss of credit for the assignment and a report to the dean.

Severe cases may result in failure of Writing for the Public.

For the University's full policy on Academic Integrity and the adjudication process for infringements, including plagiarism, go to <http://www.pitt.edu/~provost/ail.html>.

Accommodations

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me and the Office of Disability Resources and Services, 216 William Pitt Union, 412-648-7890/412-383-7355 (TTY), as early as possible in the term. Disability Resources and Services will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

Email Communication Policy Statement

Each student is issued a University e-mail address (username@pitt.edu) upon admittance. Students are expected to read e-mail sent to this account on a regular basis. You will need to use this email address to access Course Web for this class. For the full E-mail Communication Policy, go to www.bc.pitt.edu/policies/policy/09/09-10-01.html.

Like you, I am also expected to check my email on a regular basis. Please know that I review my email fairly regularly from about 8:30am to about 5:00pm, Mondays to Fridays. However, you cannot expect that I work on the same schedule that you do (e.g., if you do most of your work at night). If you email me after 5:00pm, it is very likely that I will not respond to you until the next morning. Furthermore, on weekends, I may only check my email once per day. Please also know that there may be some days where I have meetings or other obligations that prevent me from responding to you within the day you send the email.

Schedule

The schedule will be on our [course website](#), not here. As the term progresses, it may be changed to best suit our needs. I will email you when any such change may take place, but be sure to check the schedule to stay on top of work, generally speaking.