

Writing for the Public (ENGCMP-0420): Saying/Writing/Doing

Schedule	M/W, 6:00-9:15pm
Room	CL 202
Instructor	Dan Libertz
Email	DAL137@pitt.edu
Office	CL 617A
Office Hours	W, 3:00-4:30pm

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., avoidance 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 who are you writing to specifically? 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 position yourself (representing the government, a non-profit, or yourself as a private citizen) and design a “campaign” of intervention, consisting of several texts that you will create (ultimately completing two of such texts within your campaign—which can consist of as many elements as you wish), 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 Box Site

On our course website—linked [here](#)—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 (see “Assignments” in the syllabus for more information), a listing of resources (e.g., websites that contain public domain images and sound recordings), and where I will house any files for readings or handouts. To post on the website, you will have to register [here](#) (click “Register” and input a username and password—importantly, make the username anonymous and identifiable to you).

On our pitt.box site—linked [here](#)—you will submit all assignments for my review. Only I can download files uploaded to Box, so do not worry about other classmates reading anything.



Required Texts

All readings will be available through our course website or handed out by me 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.

Assignments

Below you will find brief descriptions of the assignments you will complete for the semester. As we start writing and working, I may provide more detailed accounts for any or even all of the below assignments.

1. **Weekly Posts/Comments.** 300-500 words. On days when assignments are not due, you will submit a brief post responding to a prompt in relation to a topic we are discussing in class at that time, usually also related to a reading to be read for that class meeting. I will draw from your reactions in these posts during our class discussions. Additionally, after class, you will have to post one comment to a fellow student's post of at least 150 words (I plan on using class time for you to do some of this work). The idea here is that, after discussion, you would have had more time to think about the topic, and writing about it a second time—in conversation with another student—will help in your learning and reflecting. Moreover, this will be public writing: the site you post to is available for anyone to see. However—and we should definitely explore the implications of this—you will have anonymous usernames to post under to encourage not worrying about employers linking writing about complex and possibly political subjects to *you*. The course schedule will show when each post and comment is due.

2. **A Review and Campaign Proposal.** 1000-1250 words. Review some public writing that you can find on your chosen topic. What have others said, and how have they said it? This cannot be exhaustive, but you should spend a good amount of time finding 6-10 other pieces across different genres and modes responding to the same issue that you want to work on. The “review” part of the assignment is essentially asking you to do two things: 1. What is the conversation around your topic? 2. How have people written about it (e.g., style, mode, genre, to what audience)?

In the “campaign proposal” part of this assignment, you want to map out an initial idea for what you might *do* to intervene in this conversation—the campaign you will draw up consisting of several documents you (and others) might produce (NOTE: this semester, you will only create two documents, but feel free to be imaginative and craft a campaign that can be as large and lofty or localized and realistic as you wish). 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, and—since you are writing a proposal—you should write this document toward an organization or group of people (implicitly or explicitly) to get feedback. Like any genre of writing for school, you are obviously actually writing to either your teacher or fellow students, but consider this practice for writing various proposals in your future—for grants, for graduate school, for contract work for clients, etc. You will complete another version of this document—potentially with a partner or two—due at the end of the semester.

- a. **Questions to consider¹:**

- i. What attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, behaviors would you like to change or encourage?
- ii. Who do you hope to reach? Why is this audience key to addressing your topic?
- iii. Multiple media and compositions are typically used to address modern issues. What media will you use? What genres of writing? What modes (e.g., sound, static image, video, alphanumeric writing)?
- iv. 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?
- v. 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 do you believe your strategies for circulating your writing are effective?

3. **Campaign Piece Reflections.** 300-500 words. On days when campaign piece drafts are due, you will also turn in a brief reflective note on how the assignment went and how it contributes to a sense of a theory of public writing—these need only be brief gestures toward what you find important in public writing, what is meant by “public,” what is meant by “writing,” but not necessarily all of these in a comprehensive fashion. Instead, I want you to make initial moves toward what will be your final reflection of the semester on your developing theory of public writing. In a way, these pieces are mostly arguments where you are making claims about your own writing

¹ 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.

and your theory of public writing; you provide evidence to support these claims, and you deftly use warrants to connect your claims to your evidence. We will practice this kind of writing in class a bit after you turn in the Review and Campaign Proposal, but then you will write two of these along with turning in your campaign pieces: one after Campaign Piece 1 and one after Campaign Piece 2.

4. **Draft of First Campaign Piece.** Word requirement to be negotiated depending on genre, media, and mode(s). After some reflecting, feedback, workshopping, and peer response of your Review and Campaign Proposal, 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. If you have decided to collaborate with a partner (or more) for your Final Campaign Plan, you should coordinate with your partner(s) on how your campaign piece would work with the pieces they are composing.
5. **Draft of Second Campaign Piece.** Word requirement to be negotiated depending on genre, media, and mode(s). After some reflecting, feedback, workshopping, and peer response of your Review and Campaign Proposal, you will begin composition of another 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. If you have decided to collaborate with a partner (or more) for your Final Campaign Plan, you should coordinate with your partner(s) on how your campaign piece would work with the pieces they are composing.
6. **Final Drafts of Two Campaign Pieces.** At the end of the term, you will revise both campaign pieces to turn them in.
7. **Final Campaign Plan.** 1450-2000 words. In the first assignment, the Review and Campaign Proposal, you sketched out an initial plan for rhetorical intervention into your topic. Consider this plan a revision of that assignment, but more focused on how you (or you and your partner) might structure and deliver your campaign of rhetorical interventions. You should return to the “questions to consider” from the Review and Campaign Proposal. Think of this as a more robust proposal, with “prototypes” (e.g., your final drafts of your campaign pieces). Imagine an organization you are writing to that would use your services as a public rhetor, or, you may be a private citizen working with a select few collaborators to set forth your message and stance regarding your topic.
8. **Final Assignment Reflection.** 500-1000 words. For your final assignment reflection, I want to ask you to not only reflect on the final drafts and final campaign plan, but also to reflect on your own theory of public writing. In each reflection prior to this, I asked you to put your reflection of your assignment in conversation with your own developing theory of public writing—of what is important when it comes to public writing, what you mean by “public,” what you mean by “writing.” Do that again here, but this is a final draft, so to speak.
9. **Informal Assignments.** I also reserve the right to assign small tasks (e.g., email of topic you are considering for Review and Campaign Proposal) in addition to what is above.

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 a lot of 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 reflections, 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. Finally, participation considers taking the time in class to share during discussion, working hard on informal writing, and working hard on drafts.

Final grades will be based on the following proportions:

Participation: 10%
Weekly Posts/Comments: 10%
Assignment Reflections: 5%
Final Drafts of Two Campaign Pieces: 40%
Final Campaign Plan: 20%
Final Assignment Reflection: 15%

Here is how the University of Pittsburgh defines each grade:

A = superior attainment
B = meritorious attainment
C = adequate attainment
D = minimal attainment
F = failure

Note that “meritorious” means commendable or praiseworthy: a “B,” in other words, is earned for work that is above average.



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.

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>

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

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. The summer session moves very quickly.