

Professional writing at work

ENGL 306 ~ Dilger ~ Fall 2015 ~ updated 2015-1030

Summary: Research the writing life of a working professional. Create a website which describes your methods, offers findings from your interviews and observations, and connects findings to course concepts. Write a proposal and progress report. Draft your web site; revise it based on feedback.

We've read quite a bit of research about the ways writing works. Now it's time to investigate on our own: how do networks, rhetoric, genre, and other concepts shape professional writing?

Collaborate with an individual at Purdue, in (West) Lafayette, the surrounding area, or your home town who is willing to help you learn about the roles writing plays in their work. This person need not be a writer, but they need to write at work.

You aren't doing a full-blown study like Spinuzzi, nor are you looking for problems to solve, but you will need to do some of the things he suggests — interviews, observations, analysis of documents, etc. Along the way, you'll check in with me through a series of milestones identified below. Of course, you'll also need to prepare written materials which support this work: an elevator pitch, documents which describe your study, interview questions, etc. Though we aren't publishing research, we'll attend to ethics with care. I will be able to help you with any step of the process, and we'll spend a considerable amount of class time working on projects.

Your core audience is your classmates: people interested in writing, though not necessarily interested in the professional field your partner works in.

Milestones and schedule

Please note I've changed the schedule from the one published on the original syllabus. The detailed course schedule will be correct.

For first two milestones, please create and share a Google Doc titled "Lastname 306 Proposal and Progress Report." Upload the text to this document as you turn it in. Both the proposal and progress report (skip the attachments) can be uploaded into the same document.

Project proposal (Tue 10/27, 100 points)

Write a comprehensive proposal which describes your project from start to finish: who you're working with, why you selected them, etc. While you don't need complete research methods at this time, you should develop a plan which provides a starting point. At the minimum, you should include:

1. a research question;
2. a brief description of, and full contact information for, your professional partner;
3. your plans for contacting your professional partner;
4. at least one alternate professional partner;
5. attention to ethical research practices;
6. a work plan which includes secondary research, data collection, data processing, data analysis, web site production, revision, and all of the milestones listed here.

Print your proposal and bring it to class on the due date.

Assessment criteria: Completeness of proposal; soundness and feasibility of plans; format, coherence, and professional writing style.

My feedback will include substantive suggestions about your schedule and research methods.

Optional proposal revision (announced Thu 10/29; this section added 10/30)

I assigned proposal grades on Thu 10/29. You are welcome to revise and resubmit your proposal, though I don't recommend that for anyone who earned a grade above B+. I will replace the original grade with the new one.

The five most common ways proposals could be improved in revision:

1. Sharing and showing work which was completed such as elevator pitches, interview questions, or other materials. Short things can be integrated; longer ones can be attached with a reference.
2. Be specific and detailed, and write in a manner which provides context which will (a) help all readers what's happening; (b) ensure understanding.
3. Include a calendar or schedule, however tentative, and consider workload issues.
4. Respect the proposal genre: while lists are okay, a list by itself is not a proposal. Get a tech comm book or find examples to use. Sell your project with your research and sound design.
5. Include tentative research methods which deploy the key concepts we're using to study professional writing.

Please complete this revision no later than Thu 11/05 unless you consult with me about it. If you revise your proposal, plan to submit your progress report on Thu 11/12.

Progress report (Thu 11/05, 50 points)

Evaluate your work to date: what have you completed? What's left? What has gone well? What do you need help with? Do you need to make changes from your original proposal? Explain and justify any requests for changes in research methods, time frame, etc.

I can offer the most help to you if I to turn this around very quickly. So keep the report itself brief. Share relevant documents (interview protocols, transcripts, etc) by email attachment or using Google Docs.

Print your progress report and bring it to class on the due date.

Assessment criteria: Completeness and thoroughness of information provided.

In-progress web site (Thu 11/19, 100 points)

Draft as much of your site as you can. You are better off developing all of the site at some level, even if incomplete, than finishing one or two parts of a multiple-page site.

On the due date, write a *short* memo of transmittal which explains what work is done and what's left. Email it to me with the address of the web site.

You will also be paired with a classmate to write a peer review using a separate review framework. This will be worth 15 of the 100 points.

Assessment criteria: Successful execution of plans developed in proposal; quality of data collection and analysis; design and writing style which follows in the manner Redish suggests; respect for participants. Some leeway in writing style is acceptable given this is work in progress. (See below for more.)

Final web site (Thu 12/10, 250 points)

Finish your work, revising as needed, and working with me as needed too.

On or before the due date, email me the address of your project to let me know you're done. Reflection will be integrated into our take-home final exam.

Assessment: Same as the in-progress web site, though I will have higher expectations overall, and much higher for the quality of the writing.

Web site

Your site should provide an in-depth look into your interview project and the writing life of your participant, using Redish's methods for writing for the web (bite-snack-meal, encouraging conversation, content divisions which make sense, well-written sentences, stylistic consistency, etc.). Use visuals (photographs, scans of documents, diagrams, etc.) when appropriate. Link pages together meaningfully.

Given that this class focuses on writing, our focus for the web will be writing, not design: how you mobilize what Redish offers about writing, content strategy, and facilitating conversations. That can and should include visuals when appropriate.

Use whatever method you like to build your web site. I suggest using WordPress.com: it's not complicated, I'll demonstrate it in class, I'm familiar with it so I can help, your data is easily exported, and the site can be made private very easily if you choose. The free version is fine: I don't expect you to pay for the upgrades which enable full control over design. Steer clear of Wix or Weebly: neither prioritize accessibility.

I believe you can also install a full version of WordPress on a Purdue server, but I haven't tried it. (If you know more about this, please educate me.)

Suggestions

- This assignment is on the brief side. Spinuzzi's *Topsight* does a lot of the heavy lifting here. Please refer to it early and often.
- I welcome students who want to work in small teams, but you'll need to define your individual roles in your proposal. *Please consult with me immediately if you want to work in a team.*
- If you need some more time for any milestone, just ask — but ahead of time, in writing, and with suitable explanation (as would be the case in a work situation).
- As I've said before, a technical communication book can help you with any of the genres here (progress report, transmittal memo, etc.).
- Interviewing a close friend or family member is not a good idea—in addition to ethical concerns, you should use this opportunity to build your professional network.
- On the Purdue campus, staff are a far better target than faculty since they have more regular schedules.
- Dress professionally. Past students who have completed this assignment have used it as a stepping stone to earning an internship—valuable in today's competitive job market.
- Make sure to write a thank-you note to the professional you're working with!
- If you develop your site with WordPress.com, I strongly suggest making it private. Go to Settings, Reading, Site Visibility, and pick "I would like my site to be private. . . ." Share with WordPress.com user "cbdilger."

Errata and updates

10/30: Added section on revising proposal.

10/22: Added "Print your progress report and bring it to class on the due date" for progress report.

10/22: Added "On or before the due date, email me the address of your project to let me know you're done. Reflection will be integrated into our take-home final exam" for final web site.