

Scaffolding toward Self-Efficacy

Preparing Underrepresented Writers to Pitch as Freelance Authors

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Abstract

This article describes a Pitch Assignment, designed by two journalists turned faculty, to increase support and self-efficacy for writing majors enrolled at a minority-serving institution (MSI). Pedagogical theory to support pitching processes and development is substantially undertheorized. Much of the extant literature focuses on academic writing and editing for undergraduate research; this article extends that discussion by focusing on the needs of underrepresented students seeking careers in nonacademic fields. Those needs include opportunities for increasing confidence and skill for such nonacademic work as freelance writing for newspapers and magazines. For this assignment, students write a pitch for a preview or review feature they will write later in the course. This assignment scaffolds how to analyze, prepare, and successfully pitch to target publications of students' choosing while developing a sense of self-efficacy that will transfer into future professional writing contexts. The authors conclude by reflecting on how this assignment might be approached differently by other instructors and how support for diversity might be offered in other ways.

Exigency and Diversity

In 2010, sociologist Debra Osnowitz investigated the rise of freelance professionals in the American economy,¹ noting the sweeping “reconfigur[ations] of organizations and internal labor markets” that have “altered career trajectories” (p. 8) and created a paradigmatic shift in journalism and the professional writing workforce. Newsrooms, for example, have seen a 28% workforce reduction since 2008, according to the nonpartisan Pew Research Center (Walker, 2021), but there has also been a corresponding rise in freelance writers and editors whose work is entrepreneurial and flexible but often less financially rewarding (Salamon, 2020). Interestingly, running parallel to these trends is the significant increase in the number of undergraduate writing majors in the last two decades (Loewe, 2021; Phelps, 2019). Students must now learn to market their skills as free agents in a publishing industry that has become larger, more capitalistic, and more contingent than ever before. And yet, when it comes to research and theory on how instructors can support ready-to-graduate writing majors, much of what is available focuses on supporting undergraduate research projects aimed at careers in academia (Conference on College Composition & Communication, 2017; DelliCarpini et al., 2020; Miller & DeLoach, 2016) as opposed to careers in industry.

Likewise, available scholarship is frequently lacking in diverse perspectives or institutional contexts, although attention to the intersectional identities of all students is of critical importance at most American colleges and universities. As the American Council on Education reported in 2019, the number of undergraduate students who identify as people of color rose from 29% in 1996 to 45% in 2016 (Espinosa et al., 2019). Some scholars have taken the helm in discussing how social justice-informed pedagogical approaches have transformed their classrooms or assignments. In Haas and Eble's 2018 collection on teaching professional and technical com-

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munication in the twenty-first century, Jessica Edwards (2018) writes, “[I]f we do not consider race and racism in our field, we fall short in helping students to connect with the details associated with communicative processes that are realities in American society” (p. 269). Likewise, in a previous issue of *Prompt*, the guest editors asked authors to consider “their own social identities and the role those play in crafting assignments and teaching for justice” (Green et al., n.d.). We agree, while noting that continued discussion of assignments that “blend the conceptual with the practical” through scaffolding is needed (Loewe, 2021, p. 141), particularly for learners at minority-serving institutions (MSIs), who plan to enter the workforce soon. In this article, we take up the very helm we describe to share how we, as two white faculty and former journalists, co-designed and co-taught a senior-level course for English undergraduate majors wanting to transition into freelance journalism. For this course, we designed a pitch-writing assignment that offers more scaffolding than we received in our professional training. Pitches are often a first step in querying editors and securing freelance work. This task also prepares students for a larger (P)Review Assignment that asks them to compose a preview- or review-style feature. We offer a brief overview of our institutional and course context, key concepts, and assignment goals to acquaint our audience to the purpose and outcomes of the Pitch Assignment.

Institutional and Course Context

Texas Woman’s University (TWU) is an MSI growing in size and diversity each year. According to *U.S. News & World Report 2021 “Best Colleges”* rankings, TWU was ranked the most diverse campus in Texas and the fifth most diverse institution “nationally out of more than 1,500 regionally accredited schools evaluated” (Flores, 2020). Of the 19 students enrolled in our class, for example, approximately 48% identified as non-white (21% Hispanic, 11% Black or African American, 11% Asian, and 5% other). Furthermore, approximately half of our institution’s students are first-generation college students and 44% qualify for Pell Grants (TWU, Institutional Research & Data Management, 2019). We also anticipated a handful of journalism minors enrolling in our course of mostly English majors. At our current institution, undergraduate English majors can choose to pursue a minor in journalism from a neighboring institution, a partnership that allows our students to take courses at the only accredited journalism school in our state while still earning a Bachelor of Arts from TWU. Therefore, we decided early on that students needed to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy and improved facility in pitching on their own, outside of the classroom.

Scaffolding and Self-Efficacy

As an essential part of any learning experience, self-efficacy is a contributing factor to successful writing practice and skill development (Mitchell et al., 2019; Pajares, 2003; Ragula, 2017; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Self-efficacy, as it is classically defined by Albert Bandura (1986), is a person’s judgments “of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” (p. 391). Unlike the concept of motivation, which deals specifically with an individual’s desire to achieve, self-efficacy pertains to an individual’s beliefs about their ability to achieve. It is well documented that instructional scaffolding increases student self-efficacy and performance across assignments, disciplines, and institutional contexts, but the benefits of scaffolding have not been studied as closely in industry circles (Grothérus et al., 2019; Valencia-Vallejo et al., 2018, 2019). In our classroom, we aimed to increase students’ feelings of self-efficacy through increased knowledge of and practice crafting effective pitches as well as feedback and experiential learning scenarios imitating real-world writing contexts.

In part because of the dearth of literature on pitching pedagogy and the lack of diversity

in writer bylines for such publications as newspapers and magazines, we turned to The Op-Ed Project as a model for addressing self-efficacy. This organization facilitates programming for public workshops, webinars, and fellowships to uplift “underrepresented expert voices, including women, and to accelerate solutions to the world’s biggest problems—problems that cannot be solved justly or sustainably without a diversity of voices, expertise, experience, and identity” (The OpEd Project, n.d.). The Op-Ed Project’s facilitators frequently cite one study from *The Washington Post*, which tracked the gender of writers submitting opinion editorials (or op-eds) across a five-month period, finding that 90% of submissions came from men, and as a result men claimed 88% of bylines. When men pitch more than women, they are published at almost the rate at which they pitch, leaving a gaping gender gap, one of note for teacher-scholars serving a predominantly female population. Other studies indicate that such trends persist, albeit with some improvement: according to the Women’s Media Center, men claim 65% of the bylines and women 34% (Walker, 2021). Intent on overcoming barriers for students, we decided to incorporate a Pitch Assignment into a bigger project; we designed this task to increase students’ sense of self-efficacy and chances of being published.

Assignment Goals and Sequencing

As an assignment-within-an-assignment, the Pitch Assignment was designed to teach students how to compose in common freelance genres, but none of those skills would transfer into real-world publishing success without self-advocacy for their work. That is, students needed to learn how to craft a pitch, which we define as a persuasive writing proposal often framed as a query and composed for an editorial audience. With this challenge in mind, we embedded the Pitch Assignment directions within our second major project, for which students were to compose a (P)Review feature. We also recognized the need to break down the Pitch Assignment into manageable steps that would support students’ work later in the sequence.

For these reasons, we tried to paint a course arc for students, from the first unit to the last. Scaffolding for writing pitches, for example, was layered into the first course unit, which asked students to analyze an article from a publication they hoped to compose a review or a preview for in the second unit (see [the assignment sheet](#) for details). That unit asked students to summarize their findings in a memorandum (see [Supplementary Materials](#)) and included a peer-review session—one of several incorporated into the course. Recent research in the journal of *Educational Technology* confirms that peer review leads to more sophisticated writing and increased self-efficacy, particularly in multimodal writing contexts (Liu et al., 2016). The Pitch Assignment bridged students into the (P)Review project. The culminating project was a professional portfolio showcasing the writing the students had developed throughout the class. Ultimately, our shared goal was to have students leave the course with deliverables and to believe that they were all capable of pitching and publishing, therefore making the pitch assignment essential.

Preparing to Pitch

After three weeks of laying the groundwork for pitching through extended analysis, discussion, and modeling, students moved into the second assignment’s genre-based study. On the first day, we offered students the chance to explore examples of our published work, which we hyperlinked on our assignment sheet. Next, we moved students into small groups based on their chosen texts and genres. They read these selections first, then discussed genre conventions. This activity took a little more than half of our 80-minute class period. We finished the class by responding to questions and discussing the guidance provided in The Pitch Assignment section

of Assignment II.

About one week later, we revisited the art of writing effective pitches. Jackie shared with the class three different pitch emails she had submitted to former editors that resulted in published articles. Some example pitches were of a much higher quality than others (mostly due to Jackie's familiarity with the editors), which made for an engaging, spirited discussion about what to do and what not to do when composing a pitch. Margaret added the perspective of an editor accustomed to receiving and evaluating such pitches. We encouraged students to critique the pitches in terms of the genre conventions of pitch emails, which we outlined in an additional handout. As pedagogues interested in supporting social justice, we wanted to bring more transparency and vulnerability to our conversations on freelance writing, so we dedicated some time to talking with students about our writing processes in *medias res* and our challenges pitching to mostly white, male editorial audiences. For example, Margaret shared an experience pitching a weekly column focused on local environmental issues to her former publisher and news editor (both white men), who countered with suggestions involving locally known experts (also white men) who might be a better fit. Margaret persisted, with the gig eventually leading to full-time work that included managing a new, annual publication, *The Green Building Directory*. It would behoove all teachers to demystify the process of communicating with editors whose intersectional identities or values may differ from those held by our students.

Another point of support we scaffolded into the Pitch Assignment involved proposing to us what topic they, the students, would pitch and to where or to whom. Unlike the pitch, the initial proposal was set up as a preliminary, low-stakes step preceding the submission of the pitch, and for which students received a completion grade for submitting. To each proposal, we replied with feedback for further development or refinement of content for each individual student's intended editorial audience. In our assignment sheet, the proposal section details how we collected information via this scaffolding step. Anecdotally, most of the students approached the proposal stage with relative ease because their in-depth analysis conducted in the memorandum prepared them for this step. Other steps included: 1) proposing a topic they wanted to pitch on, 2) receiving feedback on their proposed pitch, 3) drafting their pitch, 4) addressing and submitting their pitch to us as if we were their editorial audience, 5) and including with their pitch their finalized preview or review feature as an attachment. Once topics were approved, students were provided with in-class work time, an additional peer-to-peer review session, and student-teacher conferences with individualized feedback from us.

Going to Press

Because we hoped to see some writing majors published prior to graduation, we approached the grading and feedback processes with an eye on revision for publication. What surprised us was that even through extensive preparation (analysis, discussion, peer review, proposing, and pitching), many students expressed hesitation when we suggested they send their pitches to editors. In reviewing the extant literature, we were heartened to know that Wilma Clark (1982) shared an experience like ours when encouraging advanced composition students to publish pieces written for her class in 1982. She neatly outlines the barriers students face in publishing particular genres (including critical reviews), saying, "My students' problem was not intellectual but rather psychological" (p. 29). Despite Clark's students' demonstrated proficiency in writing at an advanced level, the thought of writing for a public audience at times blocked their ability to pursue publication after the class had ended. We sense that little has changed over the years. In our course, despite encouragement and offers to meet with students to assist in pitching, they were reluctant to submit pitches to editors. Students reported worrying that their work was not good enough or that editors would not accept a pitch from an unpublished student-author.

With midterms looming, many of them also lacked the mental bandwidth to revise and submit. In the next unit, one that focused on digital publishing and/or blogging, we found a similar resistance to our supportive nudges. Despite many students enrolling in the class because they wanted to be published, few possessed enough self-efficacy (at the time) to follow through and send in their pitches.

Nevertheless, two students did successfully pitch and publish their work before the semester ended.² As a class, we celebrated their accomplishments but took special care to avoid other students feeling inadequate or lacking in self-efficacy. Rather, we emphasized that what was possible for these two students was possible for all students. We trust that this knowledge of pitching served or will serve all future students. Case in point, two years later one student (who had not published before the semester ended) wrote to Jackie requesting a letter of recommendation for graduate school, and in her email she credited our class for her success landing a gig freelancing online content for a law office. We attribute this student victory and others we have shared to the careful scaffolding of pitch writing that began in the first unit and was intentionally built into subsequent units. The pitch assignment provided the missing piece of writing pedagogy that many students need to transfer what they have learned in class into real-world writing contexts.

Reflections and Teaching Notes

If asked to teach this course again, there is much we would keep the same about the Pitch Assignment. For one, having students draft and submit “the proposal” was a critical first step toward their success in this unit. A few students struggled to differentiate between the proposal they were writing for us as opposed to the pitch they were composing for an actual editorial audience, but most students clearly understood the difference and purpose of each. We would once again require students to draft, peer review, then send us pitch emails promoting their writing and thought leadership to potential editors. Composing and sending a pitch to an editor can be intimidating to all writers, particularly undergraduate students lacking previous publication experience. By exploring with students every step of the writing for publication process—from the initial point of connection with editors all the way to the celebrations that come at the end—we were able to demystify the process of writing for publication and to witness some students’ self-efficacy grow as they achieved publication.

One challenge of teaching this assignment was that we were having to constantly remind ourselves that we were teaching an assignment-within-an-assignment, in a genre connected to two other genres. Assignment II, the (P)Review, is a contemporary, corollary version of the more well-known review genre, but the two are still distinct enough to merit separate discussions and scaffolding activities in and out of class. We decided that teaching these two genres in tandem did not feel too daunting, but there were also two of us to respond to students’ questions and to provide feedback. Giving students the preview-or-review option might not be the best choice for every instructor, especially those wanting to build students’ sense of self-efficacy at an MSI where students may require extra support and scaffolding to empower them to publish. However, our individual experiences writing in both genres made us feel comfortable switching between pitching vs. (p)reviewing genre discussions. In hindsight, we wonder if students might have benefited from the Pitch Assignment being made even more distinct from the (P)Review. We also would have developed two separate rubrics—one for the pitch and one for the (P)Review. In the assignment sheet provided, we have updated the rubric to reflect how we would assess the pitch differently now.

As a final note, if we teach this course again, we will try to identify a more diverse group of writers and editors to talk with students about their pitching processes. This outreach could

reveal different approaches for navigating the still predominantly white power dynamic that determines who is supported in pitching and who is not. We would also advocate for guest speakers to be paid an honorarium so that their time and labor are compensated fairly. In hindsight, this is an essential step in supporting students that we did not think to take. We had three guest speakers visit with students in the middle of the semester, but none of these guests were writers or editors of color. We encourage other instructors teaching such a course to consider how guest speakers we invite from our networks might misrepresent the pitching processes students will encounter, especially for students of color, neurodivergent students, or other writers inadequately represented in mainstream media.

Having shared all that we have about our Pitch Assignment and the most relevant points of scaffolding that informed this assignment, we hope that readers will take up the helm we described earlier in this piece. In light of recent economic crises, fluctuating labor markets, and protests calling attention to racial inequity in the United States, we feel an incredible sense of responsibility to equip writing majors with the skills they need to be successful in publishing. And to help them achieve their professional goals, we must scaffold in ways that increase self-efficacy for all students, especially those underrepresented in the freelance publishing market.³

ASSIGNMENT

Prompt: Writing a (P)Review + a Pitch

For this assignment, you will compose and pitch a **review** or **preview**. These genres represent two common opportunities for freelancers—both as entry-level work and as sustainable niches in the industry. Reviews and previews also offer writers a chance to demonstrate analytical skills, strong ethics, creativity, and a “critic’s” voice.

Reviews cover events, performances, a new product, or a particular media (a book or books, a film, a song or album, a video game, a YouTube video, and so forth). Restaurant reviews fall in this category, too. There’s also a market for **previews** of upcoming events and performances (a book reading, a festival, a live band, a concert, a conference). Both previews and reviews sometimes include a profile of a key person (a performer, author, and so forth), often based on an interview.

The Proposal Assignment

This assignment also requires you to **pitch** your idea to the editor. A good pitch requires **research**, which you will summarize in an email proposal that includes the following:

First, identify a publication you’re interested in submitting your work to (such as the publication you reviewed for Assignment 1). **Second**, examine the submission guidelines. What’s the process—email an editor, fill out an online form or ...? Do the guidelines identify what types of submissions the publication accepts or is looking for? **Third**, how well does your idea fit the publication and how timely or otherwise relevant is your idea? In other words, put yourself in the editor’s shoes and consider the publication’s target audience. **Then** summarize this research as a proposal via email to Drs. Hoermann-Elliott and Williams by the end of week 4. This email should contain the following:

- Publication name
- Owner of publication (company or individual)
- Interesting historical or contemporary info on the publication (briefly)
- Editor(s’) name(s) (hint: find the right editor for your idea)

- Genre of your proposed submission
- Focus of submission (briefly)
- Anticipated word count
- How you'll appeal to the editors
- Questions you have regarding the publication or pitch process

The Pitch Assignment

As noted above, your **pitch** should be a separate attachment. Here are a few suggestions for developing short, effective pitches:

- Craft a compelling, interesting, and appropriate **subject line**.
- Use appropriate **salutations**.
- **Introduce** yourself (briefly).
- **Connect** with the editor—either by referencing a past encounter or noting something she or he wrote that you enjoyed.
- Explain any relevant **expertise** on the subject matter.
- Get to **the point** quickly. Keep the email short.
- Place other contact information in the **email signature** line.

The Key Features

- 1) **Audience awareness, appropriateness & expectations:** Meet the needs and expectations of your target audience and publication (for example, *Rolling Stone* magazine doesn't publish reviews of classical opera). Also, include relevant information about the subject, such as its genre, media, and performers (if applicable); scheduling/ticketing information; publishing & citation information; and so forth. What does this audience want from your review/preview? A recommendation? New and/or interesting info? A fresh and/or creative perspective?
- 2) **Review criteria/evidence:** Support conclusions and recommendations with clear criteria and evidence—in other words, provide details that back up your key points.
- 3) **Critic's voice, style, and mechanics:** Demonstrate knowledge about what's being reviewed and why it's timely. Write in a style suitable for your target audience/publication—and minimize errors in grammar and other mechanics.
- 4) Follow the **genre and ethics conventions** of the rhetorical situation. For example, good movie reviewers avoid giving spoilers about the plot; and scholarly versus pop-culture book reviews follow significantly different genre conventions.
- 5) Craft an engaging **title** and lede that **hooks** your audience with an interesting, creative, and/or engaging angle; and finish with a good **ending**.

The Samples

"A Reviving Mural" (art review); "Earthly celebrations" (event preview); "Twelfth Night Shakes Gender Order" (theater review); "Just down the road" (food-scene review); "Blue Texas" (book review); "Finding Mañanaland" (art-gallery review); "Asheville's 12 Bones launches comfort-food cookbook" (book/food review); "White Christmas: Winter Wonderland" (theater review)

The Final Submission

By the end of week 6, complete a **draft** of your review/preview, as well as your **pitch**, and bring them to class for that day's peer review session. Bring your notes, too. The target word range for this assignment is **800-1,200 words**. You will be given a follow-up **work day** for this assignment,

and you'll have additional **conference time** to ask questions related to this piece.

By the tentative due date for this assignment (the end of week 7), email your **final submission** to Drs. Hoermann-Elliott and Williams with the **pitch as a separate attachment**. Please use the email submission as a **cover letter** in which you will describe:

- 1) Any peculiarities of the publication or submission guidelines that influenced your creation of the piece (links are helpful).
- 2) What you found most rewarding about this assignment.
- 3) What you found most challenging about this assignment.
- 4) If or how you plan to submit this piece for formal publication.

Rubric: Writing a (P)Review + a Pitch (15%)

Aside from organization/formatting, each of the categories below is explained in the assignment sheet. For a **“Better”** rating, the writer will have exceeded expectations or been so thorough or impressive in another way so as to suggest mastery in that area. A rating of **“Good”** indicates that the writer did an overall good job; however, a few oversights or errors may be present or detracting from the quality of the piece. An **“Unsatisfactory”** indicates that an aspect of the piece is substantially lacking in terms of quality, readability and/or attention to detail.

[Editors' note: The following lists of criteria appear in tabular form in [the original assignment artifact](#).]

The Proposal

- Cover Letter
- Title, Hook & Ending
- Audience Awareness, Appropriateness, Expectations
- Review Criteria, Details & Support
- Organization and/or Format
- “Critic’s” Voice, Style & Grammar
- Genre Conventions

The Pitch

- Proposal Submitted
- Subject Line
- Salutations
- Introduction
- Editorial Connection
- Relevant Expertise
- Brevity/ Efficiency
- Email Signature

The writer will receive a check mark for completion of each of the following or an X for missing, inadequate or incomplete items.

- Word Count
- All Necessary Documents Submitted
- Peer Review Participation

Notes

¹Freelance professionals—also known as contract professionals, contractors, or freelancers — are “mobile workers hired temporarily to apply specific knowledge and skills. Rather than salaries, they receive hourly wages or, less often, project fees” (Osnowitz, 2010, p. 4).

²One of the students published a book-tour preview about one of her favorite authors in our local newspaper. A few days later, we learned that another student published an article focused on supporting parents of special-needs children.

³If you'd like to dialogue with us further about this assignment, please feel free to email Jackie at jhelliott@twu.edu and Margaret at mwilliams54@twu.edu.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit <https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v7i1.105>.

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