prompt

a journal of academic writing assignments

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Editor's Note

Susanne E. Hall

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Issue 5.2 of *Prompt* is our largest issue ever, and it is overflowing with exciting pedagogical innovations. The issue contains two assignments that lead writers to explore specific existing genres in new ways and to unique ends. Another assignment calls on students to eschew a traditional genre, the lab report, and design their own writing assignment in its place. One contributor leads students through a version of a professional editing process, preparing them for careers in writing fields. And two authors offer different multimodal assignments for supporting student reflection.

Before I provide a more detailed introduction to this issue's bounty of essays and assignments, I want to announce that this issue of *Prompt* breaks ground in another way, as it inaugurates a new section in the journal: "Innovations." The Innovations section is an occasional, non-peer-reviewed part of the journal. Its goal is to connect our readers with excellent ideas about college writing assignments that do not fit into our traditional essay/assignment format. Authors should query editors (thepromptjournal@gmail.com) if they have an idea about submitting something to our "Innovations" section.

Our first Innovations piece is Laurie Edwards and Mya Poe's "Writing in Response to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic." Their work, at first glance, is not so unlike most of the pieces which appear in our journal. It presents rich, innovative writing assignments and includes a reflective essay by the authors who developed them. It differs from our peer-reviewed articles in a couple of important ways. Whereas articles in *Prompt* focus primarily on a single writing assignment, this piece covers a suite of assignments the authors developed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, though the assignments draw on prior instructional work the authors had done in their own classes, these assignments were developed as part of the Pandemic Teaching Initiative at the Northeastern University Humanities Center. Thus, the assignments were designed to be open-access—to be shared and then taken up by groups or individuals seeking ways to use writing to navigate the challenges of living through a pandemic. We hope that by sharing these assignments in our journal, we help spread the word of Edwards and Poe's excellent work, as well as that of other participants in the initiative. Further, we aim to offer the authors a platform to richly explain the nature and goals of the assignments to other writing instructors, as well as space to share what the work of creating and sharing the assignments through a unique initiative meant to them during a difficult time.

The first article in the issue is Matthew Kelly's "Writing for Players: Using Video Game Documentation to Explore the Role of Audience Agency in Technical Writing." It offers a technical writing assignment that leads students to think about audience in new ways. Students worked collaboratively to create documentation to help players navigate a Minecraft environment the students had designed. Kelly notes the way the project enriched students' understanding of technical communication, challenging their sense that such communication is somehow neutral or outside of readerly interpretation.

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Carol Hayes's "The Research Prospectus in First-Year Writing (and Beyond): Teaching Writing for Transfer" tackles a genre that is pivotal for researchers but often overlooked in the composition classroom. Her structured research prospectus assignment guides writers through intellectual activities that are key to the early phases of a major research process. Her focus on creating an assignment that is taught for transfer means that this assignment could be useful to students in many contexts.

Bryan Wang takes a creative approach to lab-based writing in "If They Build It: Student-Designed Assignments in a Molecular Biology Laboratory." The assignment calls on students to design their own final assignment through a carefully scaffolded process. Wang found that giving students in a lab freedom to write to non-experts in varied genres, they became engaged in the course materials in new ways and invested in the writing process itself to a greater extent than had been the case with more traditional assignments.

In "Multifaceted Editing and Reflection Project: The DEE-CR Project," Drew M. Loewe presents a thoughtful and thorough assignment that lets students explore the world of professional editing. Many instructors in professional writing programs will be interested in this comprehensive and well-designed assignment, and it would also be relevant to many kinds of composition courses where students are learning about various modes of revision.

In "Proleptic Autobiography: Envisioning a Future—and a Path to Get There," James Gilligan helps students training to be language arts teachers imagine their future professional selves. The assignment flips the orientation of more traditional reflection assignments, which look to the past, by asking students to compose a reflection about their futures. Even though the assignment is geared to an English education context, the fundamentals of this approach could be useful to instructors teaching courses that prepare students for a wide range of careers, in education and beyond.

While writing instructors often think carefully about supporting students' writing processes, some student writers may not have done much explicit reflection on how their actions in composing texts cohere into a process than can be critically studied. If they have been asked to do such reflections, it may have been in the form of a writer's memo or other short, linear, written format. Two assignments in this issue use multimodal approaches to exploring and expanding students' composing processes. Kory Ching's "Writing Process Photo Essay" assignment brings students' attention to their processes as writers using photography. By documenting that process in a multimodal essay, writers are led to reflect upon their work as writers in new and exciting ways. Rebecca Conklin's "A Cabinet of Curiosities, A Dwelling Place: Weekly Writing on Instagram as Multimodal Praxis" encourages innovation and experimentation. The low-stakes assignment calls on writers to post to Instagram three times a week during the term, aiming to encourage the generation of ideas, self-observation, and reflection.

I want to close by welcoming seven new members to the *Prompt* editorial team. Until now, the journal has had two associate editors with specializations in writing studies (the wonderful Aimee Mapes and Jaime White-Farnham). We have long recognized that as an multidisciplinary journal, we would benefit from having additional associate editors from across disciplines. Our new associate editors bring a wealth of disciplinary expertise that will improve our work as editors, as well as connections to networks that will help us grow the journal's reach. We warmly welcome these new members of our team:

Nancy Barr, Professor of Practice of Engineering Communication, Michigan Tech

Alex Halperin, Associate Professor of Math and Computer Science, Salisbury University

Leanne Havis, Professor of Criminal Justice, Neumann University

Eleni Pinnow, Professor of Psychology, University of Wisconsin, Superior

Dave Wessner, Professor of Biology, Davidson College

Ethan Youngerman, Senior Language Lecturer in Expository Writing, New York University

We also welcome a new member of our production team. Joseph Glover, a J.D. candidate at Texas A&M University School of Law, joins our team with this issue as associate production editor, sharing typesetting (LaTeX), bibliography-building, and design work with our production editor.

Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic

Laurie Edwards[1] and Mya Poe[2]

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Abstract

Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic is a public writing course that was developed in response to an institutional call for a Public Pandemic Teaching Initiative in Summer 2020, which asked faculty to consider how this moment of radical disruption might inform our teaching and deepen our understanding of the relationship between writing, resilience, and response. The course provides a set of complementary, public-facing modules that offer teachers, community partners, and writers the tools to both write about and respond to writing about trauma. The resources, writing prompts, and activities draw from activities we have used in our undergraduate and graduate writing classrooms as well as our interdisciplinary research interests. Together, they support participants in addressing trauma from three perspectives: composing personal healing narratives; framing their personal inquiries within a larger research context; and positioning themselves within the larger community response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Public writing courses, such as Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic, demonstrate how interdisciplinary collaboration and accessible platforms can provide meaningful institutional responses during times of public health crises.

March 2020. As our department scrambled to move 200 classes fully online, we found ourselves trying to answer questions about accessibility for international students, planning for faculty sick leave, and wondering if our university would survive the economic fall-out of the pandemic.

In our own classes, we struggled to read how our students were processing the pandemic. Mya was teaching Introduction to Writing Studies when the announcement came—March 11, 2020 at 12:00pm EST—that the university was sending all students home. That day, she had planned to coach her students on how they would finish the semester at a distance. As she talked, one student announced the university closure email while another student reported a World Health notice that we were officially in a global pandemic. As Mya talked about the logistics of the course going forward, she struggled to convey to her students how much she worried about them as their lives were suddenly uprooted with so much uncertainty. How would we all survive this?

Laurie was teaching Advanced Writing for Health Professions when the pandemic news and university closure happened. That week, her students were working through a public writing unit, analyzing public-facing news sources for credible, reliable translation. Within days, as students struggled to find safe ways to get home or secure alternative housing, the class-wide discussions they had already started to have about the novel coronavirus and public health information from an interested distance became all too real. As hard-hit Boston-area hospitals braced for the possibility of surge capacity in early spring, some of these undergraduates who were on cooperative hospital rotations or working per diem while taking the class online found themselves on floors that had been turned into COVID-19 units. How could she even begin to talk about writing assignments or deadlines, knowing this?

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Some of our colleagues jumped at the chance to teach about the pandemic. We were more reluctant. It seemed callous to invoke the coolly-distant academic approach in a world of trauma—of forced migration, mandatory quarantine, illness, and death. But we were buoyed by the response when our writing center's annual Writers' Week—a public outreach event with the neighboring community of Roxbury—was transitioned to a three-week online event in late April and early May 2020. Hundreds of people signed up for writers' workshops and for help with resumé writing. Witnessing this desire to learn and connect, even if it meant connecting on Zoom, helped us see there was a space for more engagement with community-based trauma writing.

So, in May 2020 when the Northeastern Humanities Center in the university's College of Social Sciences and Humanities announced the Pandemic Teaching Initiative—a library of publicly accessible educational modules that explore the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic—we were receptive to the idea of making public-facing materials for everyday writers. This reflective essay recounts our experiences in collaborating to build an online, open-access set of modules for the Pandemic Teaching Initiative on writing and trauma. Our article describes how we came to create public assignments—i.e., assignments meant to be taken up by teachers and students and everyday writers beyond our institution—and how our collaboration was shaped by our respective experiences. Like all our work in the COVID-19 pandemic, this set of modules is a work-in-progress in which we are still learning about the affordances and limitations of publicly accessible, free learning.

The Kairotic Moment of the Pandemic Teaching Initiative

The Pandemic Teaching Initiative (https://cssh.northeastern.edu/pandemic-teaching-initiative/) was funded with support from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities Office of the Dean, the Northeastern Humanities Center, the Ethics Institute, SPPUA, and the NULab, and it was designed "to provide a growing set of resources that can be shared widely and combined flexibly in a variety of curricular and public contexts" (Northeastern University College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 2020). The audience for the Pandemic Teaching Initiative included Northeastern faculty and students, colleagues and students at other institutions, and the public. Given the spirit of the initiative, faculty created week-long modules on topics that would be scholarly but also accessible, such as Why Markets Fail: The Economics of Covid-19; Religion in a Time of Corona; and Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Closed Borders: How the Covid-19 Pandemic is Impacting Displaced People. The content of the modules includes videos, lectures, panel discussions, interviews, or podcasts, background readings that are accessible to a non-specialist, and activities. To date, 25 modules have been created, and the module library is fully open for users to take the information as they wish. An analytics report on user traffic to the Pandemic Initiative website from October 1, 2020, to February 8, 2021, shows there have almost 7,000 page views with more than 5,000 unique page views. It remains to be seen if traffic remains consistent over time and which modules attract different kinds of audiences. Although there is a real need for open access information from universities and colleges, open-access learning initiatives remain uncommon outside MOOCs. The question remains which public audiences will be able to find the Pandemic Teaching Initiative. For our own module, we hoped teachers of writing would be a primary audience as well community members who might be writing in isolation.

In its call for proposals, the Humanities Center hoped this first-of-its-kind initiative would allow participants to use this moment of "radical disruption" to deepen and extend learning about relevant topics. From the start, we knew that we wanted our contribution to the Pandemic

Teaching Initiative to tackle the topic of trauma. As teachers of writing, teaching through the pandemic has necessitated that we ask how we can use writing and response to trauma writing to help our students process these collective and personal traumas. Writing about physical and mental adversity and trauma can be a powerful tool for healing, as demonstrated as early as the late 1980s (Pennebaker, 2018, p. 226). Recent research by John Evans and colleagues at Duke University suggests that expressive writing increases resilience and decreases perceived stress, depression, and rumination in study participants who experienced trauma (Glass et al., 2019, p. 246). The research consistently posits a powerful connection between expressive writing and healing, a connection that has informed how we teach writing students.

Over summer 2020, we developed a public writing course, Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic. The course is guided by the overarching question, "How can we transform the trauma we experience in the current COVID-19 pandemic into a reflective moment that inspires resilience?" Through complementary, linked modules we sought to design an accessible, public writing course that provides expressive, research, and community-based entry points. The three entry points were meant to give writers different ways of using writing to engage with their own questions about the pandemic. Some writers might want to write about their personal experiences. Some writers might want to learn about how to find research on COVID-19. And some writers might want to advocate for their own communities. As teachers of writing with experience in trauma-informed pedagogy and justice-based approaches to assessment, we marshalled readings and resources and paired them with activities to give writers multiple tools to write about trauma.

A Design for Multiple Entry Points

Our initial planning for Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic drew from Laurie's Writing to Heal class, an undergraduate writing course she created as part of an interdisciplinary Health, Humanities, and Society minor. In that class, Laurie had developed a series of scaffolded, informal writing prompts, larger healing narrative essay prompts, and creative/digital healing projects. She found that frequent, low-stakes writing opportunities were especially helpful to students who wanted to compose longer healing narratives. This foundation became the first of three distinct entry points in the modules, the *personal* entry point, and informed the subsequent entry points for *inquiry* and *community-based* writing.

The Personal Entry Point

The *personal* entry point is for writers who wish to wrestle directly and privately with trauma. A key distinction is the type of writing that is produced; DeSalvo (2000) defines expressive writing as concrete, detailed, and that pairs emotions with events (pp. 22-25). Specifically, the material in this module follows a structure closely aligned with how writers approach trauma writing in her classroom: first, grounding in the research behind expressive writing and improved outcomes and the technical elements of expressive writing itself; next, analysis and discussion of published healing narratives within those frameworks; then, ongoing low-stakes expressive writing prompts; sharing writing for feedback and revision; and finally, the composition of fully developed healing narratives.

The Inquiry Entry Point

After discussions about how Mya could contribute to the project, we added an inquiry module. The *inquiry* entry point provides prompts that guide participants through the research process, including finding an orientation to a topic, asking a research question, finding and evaluating

sources, and drawing insights from the research process. These activities help writers refine the analytic and translation skills necessary to bring self-generated research inquiries into the public sphere, whether for education, awareness, or call to action. The inquiry module drew on materials that Mya has produced in her Introduction to Writing Studies and scientific writing courses, especially around issues of self-reflexivity in the inquiry process and research ethics. She especially wanted to introduce writers to the topic of research ethics to give them a window into professional practice and underscore the importance of an ethical stance when pursuing COVID-19 inquiry projects.

The Community-Based Entry Point

We wanted to conclude Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic with a *community-based* entry point for writers who want to work with members of their own communities and provide a foundation for the skills, such as interviewing and writing advocacy-based genres, that are needed to engage in this type of community work. This entry point provided both of us ways to contribute and extend the work of the preceding inquiry module, so writers who had completed research inquiries could use this research in the public sphere. Here, we offered two paths. Laurie drew from her own experiences and national platform as a health and science writer to offer op-ed writing strategies and prompts. These activities also built off of an op-ed assignment her Advanced Writing in the Health Sciences students complete as a way of translating their research papers for a mainstream audience. Mya drew on her expertise as a qualitative researcher and complemented that expertise with research on interviewing trauma survivors to offer advice on interviewing for the purposes of oral history projects (Albarelli et al., 2020). For Mya, the oral history option came with the understanding that writers may well lose loved ones during the pandemic and capturing their words would provide a lasting tribute to family and community. Interviewing would be a way to stand witness to the effects of the pandemic.

A Design for Multiple Perspectives

Beyond multiple entry points, another key feature of our project is the emphasis on *responding* to writing about trauma. Here is where we departed from what we had already used in our writing classes and instead, focused on knowledge acquisition ourselves. Much of the research on writing and healing focuses on designing writing activities, often private writing. Few studies suggest how we should respond to writing in which writers are working through traumatic events in personal writing, inquiry-based writing, or community-based writing. Even fewer studies suggest how we should respond together when both writer and reader share traumatic experiences. In this part of the modules, we offer five considerations for using formative assessment methods to respond to writing about trauma—(1) degree or intensity of response, ranging from no response to critical feedback (Elbow, 1987, 1997); (2) focus of response, meaning that writers and readers negotiate the construct of trauma writing (DeSalvo, 2000; Prior & Looker, 2009); (3) medium of response, which invites us to consider what technologies we are using to respond to writing about trauma (Anson et al., 2016); (4) embracing self-reflexivity in responding to writers, especially when working with diverse populations (Anson, 2000; Haswell, 2006; LaFrance & Nichols, 2010) as well as inviting self-reflexivity on the part of peers, community-members, and writers themselves.

Moreover, we felt an online bibliography on trauma and writing was necessary. Because the writing and responding to trauma lessons are grounded in the research on trauma theory, expressive writing and trauma, and trauma-informed responses to student work, we wanted to

provide users with key insights from that literature. In addition to academic sources, we also provide popular resources (e.g., Teaching Tolerance; Poynter Institute; Health Story Collaborative; Health News Review; WHO and public health sites, etc.). We wanted to ensure writers had a variety of accessible resources available to them, resources that reflected the scope of content in the modules themselves.

Learning Through Interdisciplinary Collaboration

As we designed Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic, we worked to bring together our different expertise in ways that would build off each other's work. As such, the learning modules reflect our complementary backgrounds in health writing, public advocacy, empirical research methods, writing assessment, and social justice. Indeed, the scope of the modules themselves—from personal narrative writing prompts to research practices and interview strategies for oral histories to trauma-informed responses to writing—reflects these respective backgrounds. The work also made us reflect on our respective professional identities and the ways we needed to translate this project to university audiences.

For Mya, this project was an opportunity to apply research on writing assessment in programs and classrooms to community contexts. In doing so, it made her reflect on notions of justice—what does socially just writing assessment look like outside of the classroom? Outside of the classroom, writers may not have a community of writers with whom to share their work. Or they may work with readers who are eager to respond to their writing but are not quite sure how to respond to that writing. How do we honor the knowledge that community members bring as readers while also giving them language to talk about writing as more than grammar and form? Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic, also, gave Mya the chance to re-envision empirical research materials, such as interviewing techniques and research ethics, that she teaches in her undergraduate and graduate courses. It was exciting for her that she found ways to connect material from recent projects such as an interview by Sean Molloy with Marvina White on her experiences in the Search for Education, Elevation, & Knowledge (SEEK) program, a New York State higher education program offered at CUNY for students who need additional academic and financial support (White, 2015).

For Laurie, this project gave her the opportunity to apply what she had learned from teaching several semesters of Writing to Heal in a way that tried to meet the urgency of the pandemic moment. A public-facing iteration of Writing to Heal would hopefully give writers from a wide range of backgrounds and interests the narrative strategies and frameworks to use expressive writing to foster resilience, and she was particularly interested in writers from marginalized communities having access to these tools. Given the different types of writing courses she teaches, she wanted to learn how best to help writers who have processed trauma through writing position their experiences and inquiries in research and advocacy writing contexts.

While we each brought complementary expertise to the project, we also wanted to grow and learn through this project. For Mya, *Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic* was a chance to learn more about the research on writing and trauma. As she discovered, much of the research on writing and healing does not engage with responding to author's writing. Instead, writing is an end in and of itself. That "no-response approach" is valuable, but it does not translate very well into classroom contexts. Also, what about writers who want to channel their trauma into inquiry or public advocacy? Those writers need feedback on their writing, especially if they are speaking for an entire community. Additionally, how can we account for the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic is different for BIPOC writers and offer feedback that is attuned to those differences? This last question has become really important to Mya as she

advocates for the inclusion of trauma-informed insights in anti-racist writing assessment.

Like Mya, Laurie was also interested in learning more about the research on the response to trauma writing. She had established collaborative criteria based on Louise DeSalvo's 2000 qualities of effective healing narratives with her undergraduate students, specifically that these narratives: (1) Render our experience concretely, authentically, explicitly, and with a richness of detail; (2) link feelings to events, including feelings from the past versus feelings in the present; (3) tell a balanced narrative that uses negative words but also includes the positive and continues to evolve; (4) reveal the insights we've achieved from painful experiences; (5) tell a complete, complex, coherent story that can stand alone and can take multiple forms (pp. 57-62). But what might response look like beyond the collaborative undergraduate writing classroom?

These interdisciplinary connections also speak to our relative positions and expertise within the university. For Mya, a tenured professor and director of the writing program, Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic was a goodwill effort, driven by a desire to learn, collaborate with Laurie, and translate her research expertise for a public audience. For Mya, the labor is professionally recognizable so far as it is a grant-funded project, but the actual publication of the project on the Pandemic Teaching Initiative resides outside a peer-reviewed journal, meaning that it does not have the kind of professional recognition that a scholarly publication has.

For Laurie, a full-time, non-tenure-track Teaching Professor in the Writing Program, Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic allowed her to combine her writing and advocacy expertise in the public sphere with her work in the classroom in a visible way within the university. She researches and writes about pain, gender, and chronic disease, and often publishes in the same narrative nonfiction genres her students are writing, so this project blends her active publishing work and her teaching in a new way. It also captured the often-unseen labor that goes into work like building new classes and developing new curriculum and interdisciplinary initiatives. For Laurie, the publication of Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic on the Pandemic Teaching Initiative was another demonstration of her teaching excellence. The additional recognition of that work through this publication on *Prompt* is translatable in the university hierarchy because it is a publication about teaching.

Beyond the Pandemic

As we finished Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic, we reflected on the lasting trauma that has been felt by individuals as they, their families, and communities struggle during this historical time. While an immediate goal of the project was to make this content for writing about the pandemic public, the activities, prompts, and strategies contained in these modules offer utility beyond COVID-19. The resources here will be helpful as we transition into a larger vaccination phase and, eventually, a post-COVID landscape, whatever that may look like. In our writing classes and program workshops, we have seen writers use these methods for writing about physical and mental illness, relationship and family trauma, addiction, and other circumstances not strictly related to COVID-19 where the ability to write about events helps process them.

We have used many of these assignments and resources in our own undergraduate and graduate classes and know their suitability for students in this setting. We envision these public-facing modules as useful to students, teachers, and writers outside of higher education as well, from high school students to lifelong learners. Writers who wish to take the step to publish their work, whether a written or oral healing narrative, research inquiry, or community-based advocacy project, will have resources to do so. We also see these tools and skills as useful

to community partners, nonprofit organizations, and groups working with marginalized or underserved communities.

Mya's Fall 2020 graduate seminar Writing and Teaching Writing included materials on trauma-informed pedagogy. Her students found that material especially relevant as they developed sample syllabi for future writing classes. In spring 2021, Mya used the oral history materials from Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic in her Introduction to Writing Studies course. In spring 2020, her class began, as it usually does, with an archival research unit. Her spring 2021 students did not have access to the Northeastern University physical archives, but they did have access to the deep funds of memory from their own community members. As the pandemic continues to ravage communities and the death toll climbs higher, it feels especially critical to gather stories from people we love.

Laurie's Spring 2021 Writing to Heal included more focus on oral storytelling and health narratives, and she integrated the advocacy/op-ed writing assignment to the course as well. Students expressed interest in reading more of the research behind expressive writing and healing and have benefited from the online bibliography associated with this project. Some used those resources to connect their personal writing to research inquiries in their science-based classes. Eventually, Laurie hopes to develop a stand-alone advocacy writing course. With a fellow Northeastern colleague, she used these expressive writing strategies to run a second series of trauma writing workshops for teens at Boston's John D. O'Bryant School for Mathematics and Science in May 2021, in collaboration with literacy nonprofit 826 Boston. This type of community engagement and expansion of writing in the public sphere speaks to the overall aims of our curriculum.

Conclusion

More than a year after our university moved online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are still wrestling with what the pandemic means for us and our students. We struggled through fall 2020 and watched our students flag from fatigue, stress, and depression, and saw much of the same in our spring 2021 semester. In the Boston community, COVID-19 death is very real. As of May 24, 2021, there have been 70,529 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Boston and 1,382 deaths (Boston Public Health Commission, n.d.). The community next to Northeastern is Roxbury. Roxbury has one of the highest rates (11.8%) of current community positivity in the city (Boston Public Health Commission, n.d.). Understanding how to process the trauma that we are living through will be essential to healing for our students and the Boston community. Writing can be a way to process that trauma and heal. Research tells us this. As teachers, we have seen firsthand how using expressive writing—writing that is concrete, detailed, and links events with emotions—helps students develop as stronger writers and allows them to process traumatic experiences in productive, meaningful, and often, empowering ways. We have seen how inquiry-based projects that are driven by writers' own interests are some of the most meaningful writing that students do. And we have seen how community-based approaches can be a chance to give back to the communities from which we come.

Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic is an attempt to bring together what we know and what we teach so that writers across ages, experiences, and educational experiences can use personal experiences, research, and community-based responses to heal.

ASSIGNMENT

Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic

Laurie Edwards and Mya Poe

NOTE: The course materials published here are also available via the Northeastern University Pandemic Teaching Initiative at https://cssh.northeastern.edu/pandemic-teaching-initiative/writing-and-responding-to-trauma-in-a-time-of-pandemic/

About this Initiative

Living through the current pandemic is not only about the medical and financial fall-out of COV-SARS-2 and COVID-19 illness, but also about the lasting trauma that has been felt by individuals as they, their families, and communities struggle during this historical time. Storytelling is a means of healing from trauma. These modules give writers tools to compose personal healing narratives, to frame their personal inquiries within a larger research context, and to position themselves within the larger community response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, we draw upon research on trauma theory, research on expressive writing and healing, and research on responding to writing. Through this public teaching initiative, we ask "*How can we transform the trauma we experience in the current COVID-19 pandemic into a reflective moment that inspires resilience*?"

> trauma
>
> 1. any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., rape, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place.
>
> 2. any serious physical injury, such as a widespread burn or a blow to the head. —traumatic *adj.*

> All the modules in this series are based on the following four principles of trauma-informed care and teaching:
>
> Connectedness—valuing of relationships
>
> Protection—ensuring safety and trustworthiness
>
> Respect—promoting choice and collaboration
>
> Hope—Resilience and Change
>
> (Adapted from Hummer, Crosland, & Dollard, 2009)

Writing and Responding to Trauma in a Time of Pandemic includes the following components:

- Three complementary modules with sessions, resources, and activities that explore writing about trauma and responding to writing from multiple perspectives:
  - The **personal entry point** with personal written and oral healing narratives

  - The **inquiry entry point** for writers who want to pursue self-generated research inquiries related to COVID-19
  - The **community entry point**, which supports writers as they position themselves within larger community responses to COVID-19
- A comprehensive online bibliography on trauma, writing, and response

These modules were created as part of Northeastern University's College of Social Science and Humanities Pandemic Public Teaching Initiative. The Pandemic Teaching Initiative, which is supported by the CSSH Office of the Dean, the Northeastern Humanities Center, the Ethics Institute, the SPPUA and the NULab, seeks to create a library of publicly accessible modules that explore topics related to pandemics and their disruptions and impacts.

All of the prompts will generate material that will be shareable, if participants wish, during an open, online event series.

> ***Caution***
>
> We have attempted to limit traumatic content in the main text of this module, but the examples used in the following modules may be disturbing for some individuals. Examples include sexual violence, racism, COVID-19 illness and death.

Who We Are

Laurie Edwards is a Teaching Professor in the Writing Program and Online Pedagogy Coordinator for the English Department. She primarily teaches ENGW 3306, Advanced Writing for the Health Professions, and ENGL 2770, Writing to Heal. Her teaching and expertise in online learning have been recognized by the College of Social Sciences and Humanities Outstanding Teaching Award. She is an author of two books on chronic illness: *Life Disrupted* (Walker, 2008), a *Library Journal* Best Consumer Health Book, and *In the Kingdom of the Sick: A Social History of Chronic Illness in America* (Walker, 2013), a *Booklist* Editor's Choice for 2013. Her writing has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, NPR, and many other outlets, and she has appeared on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross and *The Today Show* with Maria Shriver to discuss gender and pain.

Mya Poe is an Associate Professor in the English Department and Director of the Writing Program. Her research focuses on writing assessment and writing development with particular attention to equity and fairness. She is the co-author of *Learning to Communicate in Science and Engineering* (CCCC Advancement of Knowledge Award, 2012), co-editor of *Race and Writing Assessment* (CCCC Outstanding Book of the Year, 2014), and co-editor of *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity* (2019). Her scholarship has appeared in journals such as *College Composition and Communication*, *The Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, *The Journal of Writing Assessment*, and *Assessing Writing*. She has also guest-edited special issues of *Research in the Teaching of English and College English* dedicated to issues of social justice, diversity, and writing assessment. She is series co-editor of the *Oxford Brief Guides to Writing in the Disciplines.* Her teaching and service have been recognized with the Northeastern University Teaching Excellence Award, the Northeastern College of Social Sciences and Humanities Outstanding Teaching Award, and the MIT Infinite Mile Award for Continued Outstanding Service and Innovative Teaching. She is a board member of the *Journal of Writing Analytics, Assessing Writing, Written Communication, Journal of Writing Assessment*, and *Research in the Teaching of English.*

Module 1: The Personal Entry Point
Expressive Writing and Healing Narratives

> I think of narrative as storytelling: that is, as a way of ordering events and thoughts in a coherent sequence that makes them interesting to listen to. It therefore has a strong oral heritage. The sequence doesn't have to be strictly chronological, though it can be; it can include digressions and flashbacks and foreshadowings, just as a story recounted around a campfire can. But because narrative is powered by events, its goal is not essentially analytical or critical — though, like many stories (especially in traditional genres — folktales, fairy tales, fables), it can contain substantial moral lessons.
>
> —Memoirist, essayist, and editor Anne Fadiman,
> as interviewed by Chip Scanlan for Poynter's What is Narrative, Anyway?

Module Overview

This module offers an overview of expressive writing and storytelling as a means of healing. This module follows four steps:

1. Identify the basic research supporting expressive writing and identify core elements of it.
2. Identify narrative strategies and discuss examples of types of healing narratives to help you better understand the narrative techniques and strategies you will incorporate.
3. Complete informal writing prompts that offer you the opportunity to begin applying these strategies to your own writing.
4. Use informal writing prompts to build towards a full-length healing narrative and recognize elements of effective feedback.

Session 1.1 What is Expressive Writing?

This session offers an overview of expressive writing, which is writing that pairs emotions with events and action with reflection. It also offers some of the research into writing about trauma as a means of healing, as well as examples of published written and oral healing narratives. This basic grounding in the literature of expressive writing and healing will support the specific narrative entry points for writers that appear in subsequent modules.

Expressive writing is a specific type of narrative writing that combines experiences with reflection and insight. Often, we're more familiar with straight journaling or chronicling events in a diary, but it is the interplay between emotions and events and the ability to distinguish feelings from the past and the present in expressive writing that distinguishes it.

Expressive Writing

- Does more than simply record events
- Does more than simply vent feelings
- Includes action *and* reflection
- Includes descriptive and/or figurative language

As defined by Louise DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing*, 2000, Chapter 2.

Video

James Pennebaker, The Expressive Writing Method

Instructor Video

What Does Expressive Writing Look Like?

Readings/Resources

- Glass, et al. "Expressive writing to improve resilience to trauma: A clinical feasibility trial."
- *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice,* vol 34, 2019, pages 240-246.
- Pennebaker, James. "Expressive Writing in Psychological Science." *Perspectives on Psychological Science,* vol 13, no. 2, 2018, pages 226–229.
- Kimberly Mack, "Johnny Rotten, My Mom, and Me"
- Tracy Strauss, "Writing Trauma: Notes of Transcendence"
- Ann Wallace, "A Life Less Terrifying"
- Sean Manning, "My Brain Explosion" (audio story)

> "….when people transform their feelings and thoughts about personally upsetting experiences into language, their physical and mental health often improve."
>
> "…having people write about emotional upheavals can result in healthy improvements in social, psychological, behavioral, and biological functioning."
>
> "Most writing groups are asked to write about assigned topics for 1–5 consecutive days, for 15–30 minutes each day. Writing is generally done in the laboratory, with no feedback given."
>
> —Pennebaker, J.W. & Chung, C. (2011). Expressive Writing: Connections to Physical and Mental Health. *The Oxford Handbook of Health Psychology*

- This kind of writing does seem to work best for people who find themselves thinking about, obsessing about, worrying about, dreaming about emotional upheavals that have occurred in the past.
- If it's been a major traumatic experience that's happened in the last few days, maybe even weeks, writing may not be good for you . . . We don't have sufficient defenses immediately after a trauma.
- The people who benefit the most are the ones who on the first day of writing often have almost a stream of consciousness or almost a random series of events, and over the course of the writing, they start putting it together, constructing a story out of it.

—Moran., M.H. (2013). Writing and Healing from Trauma: An Interview with James Pennebaker, *composition forum*, 28

Caution:

"The notion that not all psychotherapeutic interventions are equally efficacious across cultural groups has been articulated for decades (Sue & Zane, 2006). However, a review of cultural competency in psychotherapeutic interventions noted that little is known about whether individuals from a given ethnic community would respond poorly to certain evidence-based approaches, and thus little consensus exists as to when to use cultural interventions (Sue, Zane, Hall, & Berger, 2009).

—Gallagher, M.W., et al. (2018). The unexpected impact of expressive writing on posttraumatic stress and growth in Chinese American breast cancer survivors. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 74, p. 1673–1686

Discussion

Once you've read the essays and articles and watched the two videos that accompany this session, think about how expressive writing is different from other types of writing you may have done (journaling, expository writing, etc.). What do you see as the biggest opportunities and challenges of this type of writing?

Session 1.2 Narrative Strategies and Types of Healing Narratives

In this session, you will learn about three specific types of wounded body/healing narratives as classified by Louise DeSalvo: the chaos narrative, the restitution narrative, and the quest narrative. The suggested readings offer elements of these types of healing narratives. In addition, the Strauss piece offers a useful frame for how to pair emotion with reflection/insight in expressive writing, which you will be able to apply to your own writing in the next session.

Readings/Resources

- Dr. Alison Rosalie Brookes, "Love and Death in the Time of Quarantine"
- Nina Collins, "Graduation"
- Tracy Strauss, "Notes of Transcendence #4: The Situation and the Story"
- Jennifer Stitt, "Will Covid-19 Strengthen Our Bonds?"
- Adina Talve-Goodman, "I Must Have Been That Man"
- Jesmyn Ward, "On Witness and Respair: A Personal Tragedy Followed By a Pandemic"

"One reason, then, to write as we face these critical junctures in our lives is that illness and disability necessitate that we think differently about ourselves, about everything. Writing gives us back the voices we seem to lose when our bodies become ill or disabled…writing helps us assert our individuality, our authority, our own particular style…"

—Louise DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing*, 182-183.

"People who write about their loved ones' deaths are paradoxically engaged in a search for the meaning of their loved ones' lives. They want to make a record; they want to describe their loss and grief. But they want to discover, too, an overarching meaning for this death…"

—Louise DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing*, 191.

Types of Healing Narratives/Wounded Body Narratives

Louise DeSalvo, *Writing as Means of Healing*, Chapter 10

Chaos Narrative

- There is no coherence or sequence; scenes are consciously disjointed
- There is an immediacy to events as they unfold in real-time without processing
- These narratives can be difficult to read and write and threatening to readers because there are no happy endings

Restitution Narrative

- We welcome them because they tell of recovery, of adversity that has been overcome
- They imply that bodies and lives can be restored to what they were before a trauma
- Many assume the genre to ultimately critique the culture of recovery/fighting the good fight that we expect

Quest Narrative

- They represent a search for something to be gained through the experience or journey of illness or trauma
- They assert that everything is always changing and we can still live meaningful lives in the face of trauma and adversity
- They strive for accuracy and unflinching detail
- They can put experience to good use and for greater advocacy/activism

Often, healing narratives have elements of more than one of these frameworks—for example, particular passages in a quest narrative may take on the immediacy and visceral feel of a chaos narrative. You will likely identify elements from more than one of these frameworks in the published essays in this session.

Discussion

Once you've read the essays, think about which types of healing narratives (chaos, restitution, and quest) you would characterize them. Which sample essay or essays resonate the most with you, and which narrative elements/strategies account for that—can you point to specific moments or language in the text?

1.3 Getting Started: Generative Writing Activities

In this session, you can apply what you've learned about different types of healing narratives and from the sample published essays to formative writing activities. Please choose as many of these short, informal writing exercises as you would like, keeping in mind the fundamentals of expressive writing, i.e., linking emotions with events. Start with 15 minutes on a prompt and see how far you get.

Activities

- As Ann Wallace asks in "A Life Less Terrifying," *write a journal entry* about a time when you were denied some kind of essential or fundamental human need—love, compassion, respect, dignity, shelter, the possibilities are many. If you'd like, you can focus this within the context of COVID-19 and your experiences living through it.
- Thinking about a time you were denied a fundamental need, now try *writing a letter* to someone as a means of telling this story. Think about the differences in your story that arise when you address this towards an intended reader.
- *Draw a map of a meaningful landscape* from your COVID-19 experience (e.g., where you've spent the most time) including as many details as possible. Think about 2-3 specific memories/events that have taken place in that space, and make a list of as many sensory details as possible—what sounds, smells, touch, images, etc. do you associate with this place and these memories? Use this sensory list to start writing about your experiences during COVID-19.

- What family story or generational tale do you wish had a different ending? What would it look like? Alternatively, what COVID-19 story would you re-write if you could?

Looking for additional short prompts specific to COVID-19? Check out The Pandemic Project, directed by James Pennebaker.

Revision activity

Have a response to a writing prompt you want to deepen? Consider using Strauss's Situation and Story essay for the following activity: Make a two-column chart where you identify the actions/plot points in your narrative (the situation) and a column where you reflect on the emotions of the event (the story). This will help highlight places where the pairing of emotions with events and action with reflection could be developed.

1.4 Writing a Full-Length Healing Narrative and Receiving Feedback

We've discussed the different kinds of healing narrative classifications (the chaos narrative, the restitution narrative, and the quest narrative), and have read a variety of narratives that deal with trauma, loss, illness, etc. To draft your own healing narrative, take these three frameworks and the formative writing you've done in Session 1.3 surrounding this denial of a fundamental need as a foundation for a longer essay where you explore a seminal event or trauma in your own life. If you would like to focus this writing on events related to COVID-19 you may, but you are not limited to that. As you write, think about the qualities of healing narratives DeSalvo mentions, and the characteristics/criteria for successful healing narratives included in this session. Above all, healing narratives pair emotions/feelings with events.

Once you've drafted your healing narrative using the prompt above, we recommend getting feedback on it so you can continue to deepen and order the draft.

Getting feedback on your healing narrative

You might find that you want to share your narrative with someone you trust or even present your narrative in a public forum. Before you share your work, however, you want to think about the feedback you may receive.

Because most readers are not familiar with healing narratives, it's useful to give them some guidance on how to respond to your writing. Two tips are helpful here:

1. ***Content-based response.*** Based on the research and work of Louise DeSalvo, ask readers to focus on the following characteristics of effective healing narratives.

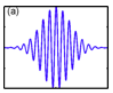
Elements of a Healing Narrative

- ❑ Renders our experience concretely, authentically, explicitly, and with a richness of detail.
- ❑ Links feelings to events, including feelings from the past versus feelings in the present.
- ❑ Is a balanced narrative that uses negative words but also includes the positive and that continues to evolve.
- ❑ Reveals the insights we've achieved from painful experiences.
- ❑ Tells a complete, complex, coherent story that can stand alone (and can take multiple forms).

Writing as a way of healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives, Louise DeSalvo

2. ***Intensity of response.*** Rather than having readers give you *critical response* or *diagnosis*, readers might offer *supportive response* to help you build on what you are already doing well.

Response methods of varying intensity



Zero response
Most students come to appreciate the chance to write with the knowledge that they will be heard but will not have to deal with my response.

Minimal, nonverbal, noncritical response
We can note effective or strong or correct passages by simply putting a straight line underneath particular words or phrases or alongside longer sections…To find strong points, even in weak writing, is a skill that will help us improve student learning and writing.

Supportive response—no criticism
…we are most likely to cause learning and least likely to do harm if the message of our response is, in effect, "Please do more of this thing you are already doing here."

Descriptive or observational response
One of the hardest things for student writers is simply to see their own text, to understand the logical and rhetorical strategies they have used. Neutral and noncritical observations can be very effective because students don't need to resist them.

Minimal, nonverbal, critical response
It's remarkable what a strong sense of our readerly presence and response we can give to students when we note five or six phrases or passages per page with straight and wiggly lines: they get a felt sense of what is working and not working for us.

Critical response, diagnosis, advice
This is our meat and potatoes—what we tend to assume is our main job. . . But my premise here is that the higher we go on the continuum, the more we need to ask the crucial pragmatic questions: Is this comment worth it? How much response do I need? How much criticism will be useful? What is the likelihood of my effort doing good or harm?

"High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing"
Peter Elbow

Module 2: The Inquiry Entry Point
Generating and Sustaining COVID-19 Research Projects

> "African Americans are at much higher risk of contracting COVID-19 than the rest of the population, and they are much more likely than white people to die from the virus."
>
> —Michael Ollove & Christine Vestal, "COVID-19 Is Crushing Black Communities. Some States Are Paying Attention"

Module Overview

While individuals find it therapeutic to write stories or narratives about their personal experiences related to COVID-19, other individuals find it helpful to learn more about the disease and its implications. Inquiry-based writing is a powerful way of harnessing the potential of research to answer the questions that most interest you.

This module will offer participants who want to process the implications of the pandemic through research. Activities in this module guide writers through the research process. These activities help writers refine the skills necessary to bring self-generated research inquiries into the public sphere, whether for education, awareness, or call to action. This module follows four steps:

1. Identify what inquiry is and types of inquiry-based writing.
2. Generate and evaluate inquiry questions.
3. Find and evaluate scholarly and popular sources on COVID-19.
4. Translate health/science information accurately and responsibly into an essay, report, or presentation.

2.1 What is Inquiry? What is inquiry-based writing?

Like the first module on narrative writing, inquiry-based writing starts with your values, your experiences, and your goals and interests, and that is what you will focus on in this module. This first session will cover the basic considerations of inquiry-based writing, before we move into generating questions and drafting your own research inquires.

Inquiry is the process of asking questions to solve a problem. In education, inquiry-based learning is a way for students to generate research questions for further study and, thus, model the work of professional researchers. In this way, teachers become guides for students, rather than assigning research topics.

> "With inquiry-based learning, teachers present problems for students to work on before students are taught the key ideas that will help them solve the problems. Learners draw on previous knowledge to deduce the principles at play. They use their own language to describe what's going on before being given academic terms."
>
> —Anne-Marie Womack, Director of Writing at Tulane University

Inquiry-based writing instruction has been shown to provide more meaningful learning for students and keep students engaged. In inquiry-based writing, students can draw on personal connections in their writing and research (Eodice, Geller & Lerner, 2016; Eodice, Geller, & Lerner, 2019). When combined with clear expectations for writing and the opportunity for support-

ive feedback from a peer, such activities lead to deeper learning and personal development (Anderson et al., 2016).

Inquiry-based writing can be a potentially positive way to address trauma because it gets writers to focus on action. It is a way to build resilience.

> Too often it is assumed that someone who has been sexually abused can only write about it as a purely emotional, psychically traumatic experience....While some survivors may only feel comfortable writing about their abuse within a class focused on personal essays, they are not necessarily 'deterred,' as it were, from addressing these issues in a class focused on academic, critical, nonpersonal genres. ..In fact, [students want to write] about their abuse in a researched essay, [structuring] their texts to move, either implicitly or explicitly, from often hauntingly detailed or powerful understated narratives of the abuse to analyses of how it has affected their relationships with others and themselves, as well as generalizations about what such abuse suggests to them about families, American culture, genre, and power relations"
>
> —Michelle Payne, "A Strange Unaccountable Something; Historizing Sexual Abuse Essays"

Readings/Resources

- Dr. Louise Aronson, "Story as Evidence, Evidence as Story"
- National Library of Medicine, "Responsible Science: Ensuring the Integrity of the Research Process"
- Carl Zimmer, "How to Read Coronavirus Studies, or Any Science Paper"

Sample research essays

- Lily Rubin-Miller, Christopher Alban, Samantha Artiga and Sean Sullivan, "COVID-19 Racial Disparities in Testing, Infection, Hospitalization, and Death: Analysis of Epic Patient Data"
- Ed Yong, "The Core Lesson of the COVID-19 Heart Debate"
- Deli O'Hara, "Sport psychologists grapple with worried athletes during COVID-19"

2.2 The Inquiry Process

Inquiry-based research is driven by the ongoing relationship between asking questions, seeking information, and refining the questions based on what you find. In this session, you will find resources and activities to help you frame your questions. From there, you can work on activities related to data gathering and data analysis.

Inquiry-based research typically includes four phases: (1) orientation, (2) conceptualization, (3) investigation, and (4) conclusion. Discussion happens throughout the process.

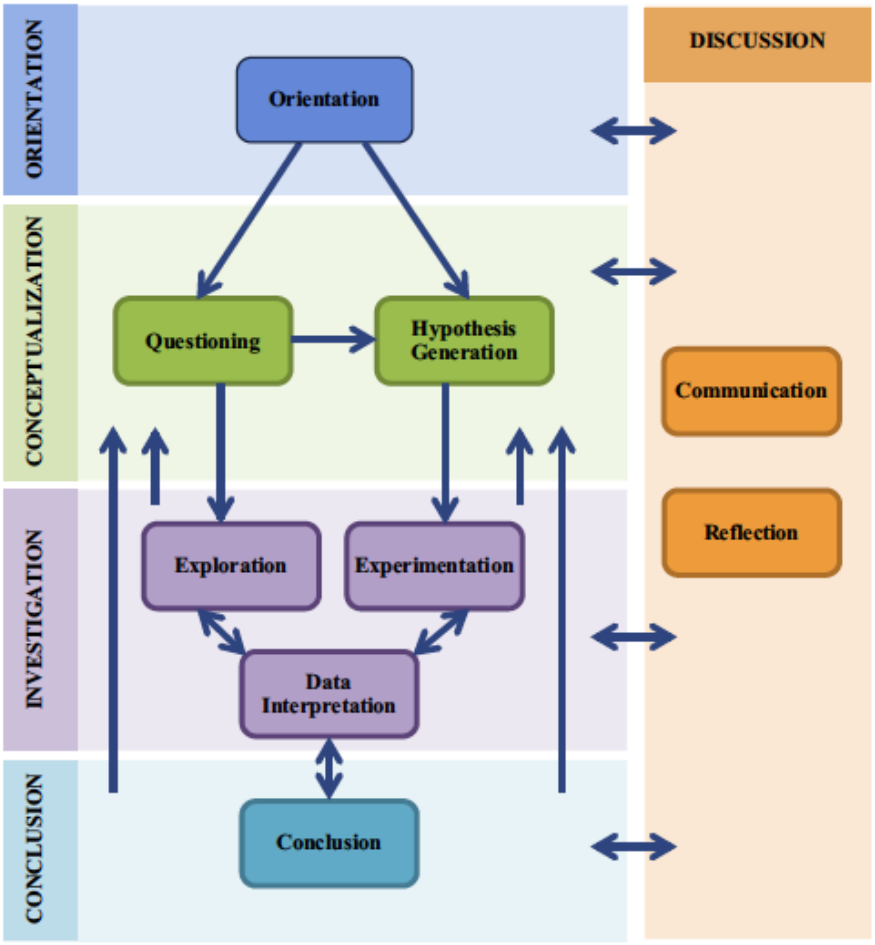


Fig. 3. Inquiry-based learning framework (general phases, sub-phases, and their relations).

(Pedaste et al., 2015)

(1) **Orientation.** As shown in the figure above, inquiry-based research starts with orienting yourself toward a topic. In other words, you want to find a topic to write about.

Orientation questions:

Using some of the COVID-19 healing narratives you composed in Module 1, or using your personal experiences living through the pandemic thus far, consider if there are potential research topics you can extract from these personal narratives.

- What are some COVID-19 topics that interest you?
- Why are you interested in those topics?
- Why are they relevant to your personal and/or professional experiences?
- What is your ultimate goal? Do you want to write an op-ed, give a public talk, write a research article, or something else?

At this early stage in the research process, we ask about your ultimate goal. That's because no professional researcher waits until the end to think about writing. In fact, what we want to write often shapes how we go about conducting research, including how much research we do and what kinds of sources we use. For example, if we want to write an op-ed, we might only need 5-8 good sources. On the other hand, if we want to write a research article, we might need 20 or more sources.

Discussion: Often it is helpful at the beginning of a project to discuss your ideas with someone else. Talking to someone else can help you identify what really interests you. You can even brainstorm new ideas with a friend.

After orienting yourself to a topic, take a step back. When working on trauma-informed inquiry, we recommend some introspection before proceeding with your research. Professional researchers call the process of examining our own values, goals, and beliefs in relation to our research and teaching "**reflexivity**."

> "No longer is it acceptable to be the omniscient, distanced qualitative writer… How we write is a reflection of our own interpretation based on the cultural, social gender, class, and personal politics that we bring to research…All researchers shape the writing that emerges"
>
> 
>
> (Cresswell, 2007, p. 178-179)

Besides being helpful in understanding your values, goals, and beliefs in relation to your research, self-reflexive exercises can also help you think about the impact of your search on readers.

Self-reflexive questions:

- Why do I find this topic personally interesting?
- How does my identity impact my research interest and the ways I might answer my research questions?
- What potential harm might I do to myself by conducting this research? Are there triggers that I should consider before starting?
- What do I hope will come of my research? What will I do if I do not get the response that I hope for?
- Who might be helped by my research? Who might be harmed by my research?
- Who do I want to read my research? Why them? What do I hope will be their reaction?

Tip: Keep a research journal that includes the personal story of your research along with information about sources and data.

(2) **Conceptualization**. Conceptualization is a complicated way of saying "asking questions" and generating some ideas (or hypotheses) about what you might find through your research. The trick to making inquiry-based research "good" is in asking good questions. **A good research question is personally meaningful, accessible, and answerable.** See Table 1.

Asking questions activities

Using the research topics you generated in **(1) Orientation**, begin to generate some research questions.

When you begin to generate research questions, don't worry about good grammar or logic. Instead, try to think of as many questions as you can. Here are some to get you started:

Table 1. Conceptualization

Criterion	Question	Explanation
Personally Meaningful	Does this research result in something that you care about?	Research is time intensive. For that reason, you want to ask a question that you find personally compelling. A personally compelling question will give you the impetus to pursue your project over time.
Accessible	Is the question the right scope? Can you actually accomplish what you set out to do?	A good research question is one you can pursue with the time and resources you have available. All of us have limitations on our time and access to information. When we ask research questions, we want to try to make our inquiries successful by. understanding those time and material limits. That often means scaling back our research questions to something more modest.
Answerable	Can you find sources to answer your research question?	There is a lot of research out there. Often it is a matter of learning how to find that information. See (3) Investigation for research tips. Not all research questions are answerable. That's OK. In fact, some researchers have started to talk about "missing data sets." Consider this: A good research question allows you to determine if research exists or not to answer your question.

- What topic is it that you want to learn?
- What is known about this topic?
- Who does this topic affect?
- What are some of the issues of conflict surrounding this topic?
- What are some aspects of your topic that are unknown right now?
- What might be some outcomes or uses of your inquiry?
- Using the fake news/fact-checking sites and the resources on how to find scholarly sources, briefly, how is the topic being discussed in popular and academic circles right now?

> **Example**: If you are a parent, you might want to learn more about the effects of COVID-19 on children. Your original question might be:
>
> *What do I need to know about COVID-19 and children?*
>
> With such a broad question, you might find yourself overwhelmed. To narrow your topic, consider a narrower question, such as:
>
> *What are the symptoms of COVID-19 in children?*
>
> *How are infants affected by COVID-19?*
>
> *How are school age children affected by COVID_19?*
>
> *What are COVID-19 infection rates among children?*
>
> *How are infants who test positive for COVID-19 cared for?*

After you generate a list of potential research questions, ask yourself:

- How passionate do I feel about this topic? Who am I accountable to in doing this

research? Am I doing this research for myself or someone else?
- Can I narrow my topic by age, time, geography, or some other way? What keywords are central to my research? For example, can I change generic words like "people" to specific words like "infants" or "senior citizens"?
- What sources might I be interested in reviewing to answer my question? What do I expect to find?

With the questions above as a frame, write a brief paragraph in which you narrow the focus and specify your inquiry issue/topic.

> **Tip**: You will likely find you need to continue to narrow your focus, so a willingness to evolve with an idea is an important characteristic to keep in mind. It's also helpful to think about what you might find as an answer to your research question. Thinking about the kinds of evidence you might find will help you revise your research question. For example, a question about infection rates will likely generate quantitative evidence—that is, lots of numbers. On the other hand, a question about how medical school students are training during the COVID-19 pandemic might result in stories. In fact, professional researchers often do a little research to see what kinds of sources are available on a topic and then go back and revise their research questions.

(3) **Investigation**. Now that you have a working research question, it's time to start finding research. Adding research to your writing is a way to provide more context for your discussion and build your ethos as a writer. And it's a great way to learn. "Sources" can include everything from newspapers and online forums to peer-reviewed scientific articles. Academic research, such as scientific articles, are published in "journals," such as *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

> Academic sources = *books published by academic presses, peer-reviewed journals*
>
> General sources = *newspapers, magazines, blogs, television, and radio* (LaVaque-Manty & LaVaque-Manty, 2016, p. 153)

Collecting sources.

While a Google search will certainly generate a lot of information, it may not be the best information to answer your research question. Google searches take you to all kinds of websites, ranging from reputable research sources to idiosyncratic blogs. Google Scholar is a bit better but can often produce results that are difficult to filter and sort. Professional researchers use academic databases to locate "peer-reviewed" research.

> Peer-reviewed research is research that has been evaluated by other professionals in a field. Often, reviews are done anonymously so researchers are not influenced by the identity of the research team submitting their work for review. Likewise, authors typically do not know the names of their viewers. This process is known as double-blind peer-review" and professional researchers believe that such a review process leads to more objective analysis of articles to be published in journals.

The Northeastern University librarians have put together a video series on how to find academic sources. For example, in this series, they discuss how to use a search

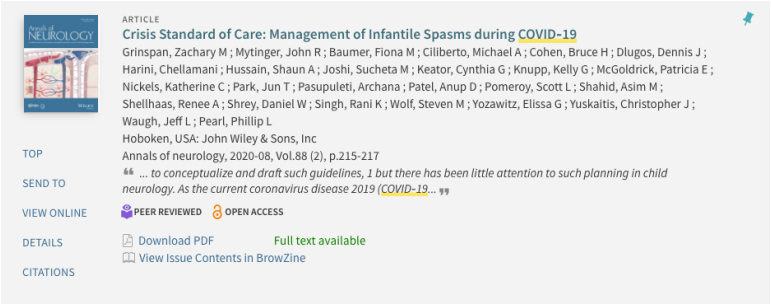
engine called Scholar OneSearch to find academic research articles. In this series, they explain how to improve your search strategies and find ebooks.

Beyond academic sources, government sources are really valuable in finding public health information (Note: government websites always end in .gov). In fact, many professional researchers regularly use websites like the Centers for Disease Control website to find information about disease rates. In addition to federal websites, states often have local information available on their websites. For example, this website has Massachusetts-specific information.

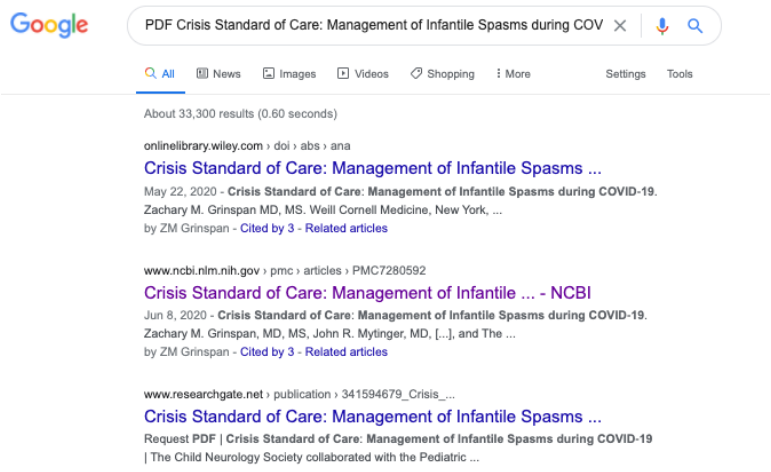
Tip: Academic databases can tell us what research has been published but they don't always give us access to the articles.

- If you are a Northeastern student, you can access many articles directly from the Scholar OneSearch page.
  If you are not a Northeastern student, you can use Scholar OneSearch to find articles. You can then perform a Google search to find the original article.

For example, in our research on the care of infants who test positive for COVID-19, we found the article below by using Scholar OneSearch. As a Northeastern student, we can simply click on the link that says "Download PDF." As a non-Northeastern student, we have a slightly different path to find the article.



By copying the name of the article and entering it into Google, we can see various links to the article. The second link, which comes from the National Institutes of Health, actually has a free download of the article.



Before the COVID19 pandemic, many academic articles were behind a "firewall," meaning you had to pay to get access to the article. However, many academic journals have now provided free access to COVID-19 research in an attempt to help

the public learn more about the disease.

Analyzing sources. How do you know whether a source is reliable or not? In general, academic sources are better than non-academic sources when you are conducting research. Professional researchers evaluate the quality of sources by looking at a few key markers:

- Type of source
- Author expertise
- Publication date
- Publication venue
- Research quality

The Northeastern library has excellent guides on how to evaluate sources, including data and statistics.

> **Fake News and Fact-Checking COVID-19 Sites**
>
> You can find a lot of incorrect information on COVID-19 on the internet. Below are some resources to help assess your sources.
>
> Facts in the Time of Covid-19
> Fake or Real? How to Self-Check the News and Get the Facts
> False, Misleading, Clickbait-y, and/or Satirical "News" Sources
> How To Avoid Misinformation About Covid-19
> Poynter International Covid-19 Fact Checking Site
> WHO Covid-19 Myth Busters

Investigation activities:

Now that you have collected some sources on your topic, it's time to review them critically before writing up your research. What kinds of sources has your search yielded? What information is provided in those sources? What information do you still need?

For each source, ask the following questions:

- What is this source—for example, a blog, scientific study, op-ed, or government report? Is it relevant? What genre is it? Is this source based on opinion or facts?
- Who is the author? What expertise do they possess?
- When was the article published? Does it contain timely information?
- Where was the source published? Is that a reputable journal or impartial news source? If it is a scholarly source, does the journal have an impact factor—that is, an indicator that other researchers cite research from the journal? Has the article been cited? Was it peer reviewed?
- How was the research conducted? Where was the research conducted?

After reflecting on the results of your research and what that research has yielded, you may decide to go back and do some more research. Try finding new sources if you cannot answer the questions above. Also, it's not uncommon to find gaps in your research at this stage. You may need to go do more research, if you haven't found exactly what you need to answer your research question.

> **Discussion**: At this point in a research project, it's very helpful to talk to someone about your research. By explaining what you are researching and what you have found, you are synthesizing your

research findings into chunks of information. That chunking will help you both process what you have learned and help you consider what else you might want to know.

(4) **Conclusion**. After you have found and analyzed sources to answer your research question, you need to figure out what to say. Professional researchers sometimes call this a "story," and many professional researchers talk about the "story" of their research. A good research project reads like a story—there is a question, a search for answers, and …. ANSWERS!

> In her *JAMA* commentary, Dr. Louise Aronson writes, "With a frequency and consistency that should make those who question the role of anecdotes in medicine and science rethink their position, a single, well-told story of human suffering trumps the most eloquent explanation of a large-scale trial...Mounting data, and the entire historical record across cultures and continents, suggest that human beings are uniquely wired for stories and that stories, with their linking of the cognitive with the emotive, are often both more memorable and more persuasive than other sorts of information" (1694-5).

So, how do you tell a good story with all the information you have found?

One way is to use a storyboard. There is no one right way to make a storyboard. It can be as simple as bullet points, a traditional outline, or a series of images. A storyboard also helps you figure out where you need research in your story. Afterall, no one wants to read a series of research summaries. Readers want a presentation, essay, or report that is punctuated with research findings.

Storyboards are used in film-making and other creative arts to provide a high-level visual roadmap.

Once you figure out where you want to add research in your presentation, essay, or report, you need to decide how you will use that research. There are three main ways that writers include research: summary, paraphrase, and direct quotation.

Summary	• A compressed version of someone else's idea or argument • Shorter than the original
Paraphrase	• A restatement of someone else's idea in your own words • May be shorter, longer, or the same length as the original
Direct quotation	• Someone else's exact words, set off with quotation marks

(LaVaque-Manty & LaVaque-Manty, 2016, p. 155)

How to Summarize

Summarizing involves a specific process of converting what you have read into a much shorter version. The process can generally be handled in four steps:

1. Identify the main claim and write it in your own words. Often, you will find

it easiest to write this if you read the abstract, introduction, and conclusion of an article. The main claim is usually most developed in these sections. If someone were to ask you, "What is this about?" this statement would be your answer.

2. Explain the main arguments that support this claim. You can omit aspects that are not central to supporting the claim, such as specific details or examples.

3. Include necessary context. Sometimes a small amount of context, such as the circumstances of the research, can be helpful to understanding the claim or conclusions.

4. Avoid personal opinion or interpretation of the original. This point holds true for students working on summary assignments for school but may be "bent" in professional writing, depending on the purpose and audience. (Irish, 2015, p. 209-210)

Make sure that if you are summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting someone else's ideas or words that you cite your source. Usually a citation includes an in-text reference and an entry in a References page. The Northeastern University guide to citing sources is a good resource for learning the different ways of using sources.

Tip

Professional researchers typically avoid sweeping statements like, "No research exists on the effects of COVID-19 on patients with thyroid conditions." Why? Because there is so much research published every year that it is impossible to know *every* study that has been completed. Instead, researchers tend to "hedge" by saying something like, "Little research exists on the effects of COVID-19 on patients with thyroid conditions" or something even more honest like, "Our research yielded no current studies on the effects of COVID-19 on patients with thyroid conditions."

Caution

The desire to tell a good story with data, however, sometimes leads researchers to commit research misconduct. Lessons from the scientific world on research misconduct can be helpful guides for anyone conducting research.

Definition of Research Misconduct:

Research misconduct means fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results.

1. Fabrication is making up data or results and recording or reporting them.
2. Falsification is manipulating research materials, equipment, or processes, or changing or omitting data or results such that the research is not accurately represented in the research record.
3. Plagiarism is the appropriation of another person's ideas, processes, results, or words without giving appropriate credit.
4. Research misconduct does not include honest error or differences of opinion.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Research Integrity

Conclusion activities:

Now that you have found good sources that help you answer your research question, it's useful to take a step back before writing up your findings. At this moment, you are "close" to your work, which means that you may not see gaps or strengths in your research process. Talking to a friend can help you get some perspective. The following questions can also help you self-assess your work:

1. What are the main themes, ideas, or findings that I find most compelling from my research?
2. What assertions can I support with the sources I have found? Do multiple sources support those assertions?
3. Have I answered my research question? If not, do I need to change my original research question?
4. How do I feel about this research? Have I learned something? How has that new knowledge changed me?
5. What might happen based on my research? What might be a positive effect? A negative effect?

2.3 Writing Up Your Research and Getting Feedback

In this session, you will take the results of your initial inquiry activities and research analysis from the first two sessions and produce a piece of accessible research writing.

Now that you know how to ask a research question, conduct research, and analyze your findings such that you can make a storyboard or outline, it's time to finish drafting your presentation, report, or essay.

While many writers compose narratives chronologically, research writers tend to compose their texts in chunks. They might write a short introduction to frame the main idea of their report or presentation, but then move to the center of the report or presentation to work on a key idea. By using a storyboard or outline, you can easily move around in your report or essay to different sections and not lose the overall coherence of your work. This nonlinear composing process also helps with fatigue when working with complex research.

Getting feedback on your inquiry-based writing: Inquiry-based writing can be as emotionally felt as healing narratives. For that reason, you might want to revisit the advice on intensity of response from Module 1.

While inquiry-based writing can take many forms, there are some key elements in all research writing. So, while you may or may not have a friend who can evaluate the technical content of your inquiry-based writing, you can still have a friend give you some feedback on the following:

1. What is the research question?
2. Why is that an interesting research question? If you can't tell, offer some suggestions.
3. What data did the writer collect to answer that question(s)?
4. Do you feel that the writer has enough data to answer their research question? Why or why not? Do you feel that the researcher has the right kind of data to answer their research question? Why or why not?
5. What is the biggest surprise in the findings? What seems to be the most important finding?
6. What remains unclear to you after reading the draft?

Module 3. The Community Entry Point
Developing Advocacy Writing and Oral History Projects

> "The literal meaning of advocacy is 'mouthpiece.' So I think of advocacy as using my voice to help people find theirs. This has involved public speaking, writing, teaching writing, and guiding performances. But it's primarily meant being present with someone: carrying a piece of "it", whatever "it" is for her or him. A memory, crisis, trauma, an achievement, a milestone… Advocacy requires trust, suspended judgment, and partnership. I listen to stories, and I reciprocate by sharing mine. There's no room for "experts"—it's a co-navigating of life's difficulties and redemptions."
>
> —Christy Birch, interviewed for *Ploughshares* by Tasha Golden in "Where Your Writing Can Go: Storytelling as Advocacy" (CW: sexual violence)

Module overview

Now that you have a firm grounding in your self-generated research projects, the community entry point activities that follow in this module help you position yourselves within larger community responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Community-based prompts are for writers who want to advocate for a particular position and work with members of their own communities. These activities also provide a foundation for the skills, such as interviewing.

In this module, we offer participants two ways of using writing for community-based projects: op-eds and oral histories. Op-ed advice is targeted for participants who want to take their self-generated research inquiries and use their findings as means to advocate for particular positions, interventions, or recommendations. Oral history advice is for participants who want a more intimate way of using writing to advocate for community awareness by capturing the stories of community members. Activities in this module guide writers through the writing process for both of these activities. This module follows three steps:

1. Identify common types of community-based writing.
2. Generate op-ed pitches and trauma-informed interview questions to support public-facing narratives and oral histories.
3. Draft an op-ed or transcribe an oral history interview.

3.1 What is community-based writing?

Community-based writing values the perspectives of individuals outside the academy. That means, community members' ideas guide the research and final product. For example, op-eds are often meant to give voice to individuals who are not professional journalists but who may have particular expertise in a topic or lived experiences that offer readers valuable perspectives. Other community-based writing projects, such as oral history projects, are meant to document people in specific locations at specific times in history.

Op-Eds

- Provide a non-journalistic perspective on a current event
- Include opinion and research to support claims
- Offer readers awareness of an issue, a solution to a problem, or a call to action

Oral Histories

- Value the perspectives and words of community members

- Capture individual opinions and experiences
- Can be used for historical and/or educational purposes
- Not the same as therapy

In this session, you will gain exposure to these common types of community-based writing, including strategies for developing your ideas as well as reading published examples.

Readings/Resources

Published Op-Ed models:

- Reann Gibson, "Communities of Color Hit Hardest by Heat Waves"
- David Lat, "People Ask Me If I've Recovered From Covid-19. That's Not an Easy Question to Answer"
- Sabrina Strings, "It's Not Obesity. It's Slavery"

Op-Ed resources:

- Indivisble's Writing Op-Eds That Make a Difference
- Kristine Maloney, "Op-Ed Writing Tips to Consider During the Covid-19 Pandemic"
- The Op-Ed Project's Op-Ed Writing Tips and Tricks

Published oral history models:

- *Journal of the Plague Year's* Covid-19 Oral History Project
- Columbia University, *NYC Covid-19 Oral History, Narrative and Memory Archive*

Trauma-informed interviewing resources:

- Jo Healey, "Reporting on Coronavirus: Handling Sensitive Remote Interviews"
- Jina Moore, Covering Trauma: A Training Guide
- Jina Moore, "Five Ideas on Meaningful Consent in Trauma Journalism"
- Katherine Porterfield, Trauma-Informed Interviewing: Techniques from a Clinician's Toolkit **(video)**
- Aras et al. Documenting and Interpreting Conflict through Oral History: A WORKING GUIDE
- Columbia University, Resources for Covid-19 Interviewing

3.2 Getting Started: Pre-Writing, Framing , and Interviewing

In this session, you will apply the strategies from the previous section to your own writing process, clarifying your stance and audience through drafting a pitch for op-ed projects and generating interview questions for oral histories and similar narrative projects.

Use the following questions to help draft your brief pitch and begin framing your draft:

Preparing for the Op-Ed

1. **Why write an op-ed? Clarify your purpose:**
    a. Inform (make aware of)
    b. Educate (going a little deeper)
    c. Persuade
    d. Inspire
    e. Advocate/offer call to action
    f. Relate
2. **Basic questions to draft a pitch:**
    a. What's your issue? What is the "hook" or current event that frames this piece?

b. Why right now?
c. What's your unique perspective/recommendation within this issue? What is the counter view to this?
d. Why should *you* be the one to write it? (credentials, relevant life experiences, etc.)
e. Where should you pitch it? (local or national publication)

3. **The argument: How are you making your case?**
   a. Anecdotal evidence—the personal, contextual details that engage the reader (potentially from Module 1)
   b. Research—the evidence to support your recommendation or position (from Module 2)
   c. Testimony—the words of others to help you make your case (from oral histories)
4. **The writing:**
   a. Be as concise as possible (typically around 750 words)
   b. Use active voice
   c. Avoid clichés
   d. Use specific examples
   e. Have a consistent voice
   f. Know your audience

Preparing to interview community members for oral histories

1. **What are the goals and purpose for collecting these oral histories?**
   a. "To provide a historic record of what has happened and its multiple impact on individuals and within communities.
   b. To share the results of these findings with professionals who make humanitarian interventions in the aftermath, and to record the success and failures of those programs if resources permit.
   c. To support those who give testimony in creating narratives that through their very expressivity and creativity can help rebuild communities and reconstruct identity in the wake of the catastrophe." (Albarelli et al., 2020, p. 13)
2. **Define the frame of the project:**
   a. Place. Currently, most interviews should be conducted remotely.
   b. Time. You must decide if you will interview someone while an event is happening, immediately after an event, or after some period of time has passed since the event.
   c. People. The people you interview are called "narrators."
   d. Technology. Decide what technology you will use to conduct the interview.
   e. Legal issues. Read the claim rights, if you are using professional software for interviewing.
3. **Select the focus of the interviews:**
   a. Will you focus on a specific moment in time or an expanse of time?
   b. Will you use the same questions for each narrator, same themes but varied questions, or freeform format?
   c. How long will you interview a narrator?
   d. Will you be seeking a second interview?
   e. Will you give narrators the opportunity to listen to their interviews?

4. **Develop a plan for listening and publishing interviews**
    a. How will you listen for accuracy of meaning?
    b. How will you address awkward passages or inaudible passages in the interviews? Will you remove filler words like "uh" and "um" from the transcripts?
    c. Will you trace themes across interviews and provide an analysis or build compelling profiles of individual narrators?
    d. Will you select the most interesting quotes or allow the interview to be published in its entirety?
    e. What will you do about interviews that did not go well?
    f. How will you understand the way your perspectives might shape how you interpret the interview?
    g. How might the interviews be used for unintended purposes? How might you safeguard against that happening?
5. **Develop a plan for storing the interview files**
    a. Who owns the rights to the interviews?
    b. Where can the audio or video files be stored safely so as to ensure the confidentiality of you and the narrators?
    c. If you need to access the audio or video files in the future, can you do that easily?
    d. If you plan on destroying unused material, how can you ensure that the information has actually been destroyed or erased?

Interviewing Community Members: Interviewing Tips

Interviewing community members who have undergone traumatic experiences requires patience, empathy, and resilience. Interviewing requires that we become witnesses to events. When those events are catastrophic or traumatic events, then we are emotionally and physically implicated in those events. Moreover, because of the difficult nature of interviewing community members who have undergone traumatic experiences, it is critical to set-out the framework for your interview before you begin asking questions.

> "While there are many talented interviewers who are attracted to oral history, there are special qualities that define an oral historian who can become a *second witness*. If you are directing an oral history of catastrophic events you will need to think carefully about those qualities, as they will define the emotional and professional character of the project as a whole." (Albarelli et al., 2020, p. 24-25).

> ***Caution***
>
> If you are an academic researcher, you must get IRB approval before you can begin your interviews.

When contacting potential community members:

- Explain the purpose of the interview and ensure that you explain the interview is voluntary. You may never coerce someone into an interview.
- Explain how the interview will happen—for example, do you plan on recording the interview? Respect narrators wishes if they do not want to be recorded or videotaped. All narrators may stop an interview at any time, if they wish.
- Explain who you are. (See self-reflexivity in Module 2)

- Explain how the interview material will be used. Will the interview be made public or kept private?
- Explain how you will ensure the safety and privacy of participants being interviewed. Will narrators' real names be used or will they be given pseudonyms?
- Confirm the day, time, length, and format of the interview in advance.
- Explain any compensation or other benefits from the interview.
- Provide your contact information.

> "Oral history is a complex and multi-vocal genre (Portelli) in which multiple perspectives, ideologies, and narratives create a mosaic of memory that reveals the tensions within the remembered past as well as the enduring conflicts of our times. The interview, based on knowledge and earned trust, takes different forms in different cultural settings but is characterized by several core characteristics:
>
> 1. The quality of the relationship between the interviewer and narrator, which is characterized by openness, equality, and a joint interest in the creation of stories. Oral history is an encounter, an exchange of ideas, values, and meaning, made richer by the length and quality of the relationship over time.
>
> 2. The movement of stories through time, resulting in the creation of rich historical narratives that reveal the transformations of the past into the present and the present into the future.
>
> 3. The crystallization of memories into narratives with distinctive forms—whether told, written, or performed—that transmits meaning, or reveals the loss of meaning, over time.
>
> 4.The creation and re-creation of narratives, rich in explanatory power, that stimulate new historical consciousness and understanding across lines of social and cultural difference, locally as well as globally. These narratives require analysis and interpretation, and writing about them reminds us that oral history is a writing genre as well as an oral performance.1 Stories come in many different forms: oral performances, plays, jokes, life narratives, dreams, testimonies, community narratives, and oral traditions passed down over generations. The function of all these genres of telling is to transform experience into knowledge that can then be shared in a wider community."
>
> (Aras et al., p. 2)

Good oral history interviewers (Adapted from Aras et al., p. 15):

- Rely on respectful language and acknowledge the pain that narrators may have suffered. Acknowledge grief but do not use phrases like, "I know how you feel." Such phrases can seem like trivializing other people's pain.
- Use warm-up questions to make narrators feel comfortable at the beginning of the interview. A warm-up question, such as asking narrators for their preferred names and pronouns, shows narrators that you are willing to allow them to shape the interview content.
- Allow narrators to answer questions in the ways that feel most comfortable to them. Open-ended questions—questions with no right or wrong answers—are best.
- Base questions on what narrators have already said. This allows interviewers to continue the conversation across multiple questions. For example, ask about a

similar incident or ask narrators for their assessment of an event. You can also prompt additional information simply by asking, "Could you tell me more?"
- Allow narrators time if they need to cry or take a break.
- Summarize and confirm what narrators have said through a technique called "sayback." When using sayback, the interviewer says something like, "So, as I hear you saying……" This technique allows the narrator to correct a faulty misinterpretation on the part of the interviewer.
- Allow narrators to describe events, expectations, and emotions in their own terms. Do not correct narrators.
- Use objects and texts, such as dairies, to help prompt insights from narrators. If you wish to use such materials, you should always invite participants *before* the interview to bring such items to the interview.
- At the end of an interview, a good interviewer also thanks narrators and asks them for any information that they might wish to share. If an interviewer is worried about a narrator, they might follow-up with a call to check on them.

Listening to trauma

In the 1960s, the CUNY system developed a program called SEEK to expand university admissions. Notice in this interview with Marvina White how the interviewer listens and respects Marvina's recounting of trauma. And in this inquiry-based article, notice how Sean Molloy, the interviewer, retains that same respect.

Important characteristics of an interviewer are:

- ***Attention***: "This is primarily conveyed through questions that often include a phrase or thought of the narrator at the beginning, and often an atmosphere of silence that is filled with expectation and interest."
- ***Connection***: "The ability to create an environment of neutral and supportive listening in which any experience, no matter how graphic or harrowing, can be conveyed and absorbed, without resulting in creating excess emotion within the fieldwork situation."
- ***Constructive listening and interpretation***: "The activity of listening, usually silently, must be punctuated by the activity of intelligent questions which crystallize the connections made, most importantly, by the narrator but also by an attentive oral historian who can reflect additional connections and encourage the process of interpretation." (Albarelli et al., 2020, p. 26-27)

Discussion: At this point, you will want to draft some interview questions and ask a friend to help you think through possible answers. Often you will find that you have too many questions! For an oral history, it is better to let narrators spend time working through a story or a few stories, rather than briefly answering a number of questions.

Interviewing Activity

Using the interview tips, identify two people whom you would like to interview. Interview each person for 30-45 minutes.

3.3. Composing Your Community Writing Project

In this session, you will expand your op-ed pitch or your interview questions and compose a full draft of your community project. This is where the personal narrative exploration you did in Module 1, the research and analysis you worked on in Module 2, and the scaffolded activities you did in the first two sessions of Module 3 come together to support a community-based COVID-19 project.

Op-ed: Using the writing tips and strategies in Session 3.2, write an approximately 750-word op-ed that includes a news hook for your reader, a clear position and counter position, and specific anecdotal and research-based evidence to both engage the reader and support that position. Remember that you are likely writing about a community issue for a public audience, so accessible, clear language and attention to your specific intended audience—local newspaper? National media outlet?—are important. Individual publications most often offer specific submission guidance on whether they want pitched ideas or full drafts, but in either case, it is best to have a full draft prepared in case an editor responds with interest.

Oral history: After the interview, listen to the interview again and try to transcribe the audio as accurately as possible. If you do not have time to transcribe the entire interview, try transcribing pieces of the interview that you find most compelling. If you find the audio too fuzzy at times, you can add ellipses to the interview transcript to note that the audio was inaudible. For example, "I called my mother at the nursing home to see …[inaudible]… The nurse told me that my mom had been transferred to another room."

Getting feedback on your community-based writing

Op-ed: Before you send your op-ed out for possible publication, you will likely want some feedback. Consider your intended audience. Remember that you can write for local community outlets as well as more general publications, and see how your writing resonates with an intended reader or readers. Some feedback that may be helpful include questions like these: Are the argument and counter argument clear and easy for readers to pinpoint? Does the reader feel connected to the topic through anecdotal experiences? Is the argument supported with facts? Is the scope of the research and content working, or do your readers need more details to arrive at your point with you?

Oral history: While it is always most ethical to allow narrators to review interview transcripts before those transcripts are made public, you need to set expectations. Interviews are not polished speeches. What makes an interview powerful is the rhythm of everyday language, the persona of the speaker, and the bond with the interviewer. So, while it is fine to allow narrators to correct factually incorrect information and revisit passages that need further elaboration, you want to avoid revising the interview transcript into a speech. You also will want to allow narrators to delete any information they feel puts them at risk. Sensitive comments that are made based on trauma are fine; comments that jeopardize the well-being of narrators or others named in the interview are not.

Bibliography, Suggested Readings, and Additional Resources

For the bibliography, suggested readings, and additional resources that the authors provided with the original assignment, please see the Supplementary Materials for this article.

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.v5i2.116.

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Writing for Players

Using Video Game Documentation to Explore the Role of Audience Agency in Technical Writing

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Abstract

This article describes a technical writing assignment that requires students to use Minecraft to design and document interactive learning environments. In this project, students balance a critical awareness of this game's technical features with a rhetorical understanding of how those features impact the audience's experiences and actions. This article demonstrates how video game-based writing projects can help students understand the role of an audience's agency in technical communication.

Introduction: Technical Writing and Critical Game Studies

Contemporary writing scholars have emphasized the rhetorical dimensions of technical communication insofar as real-world technical documentation often attempts to elicit deliberate action from its audience (Markel, 2015). In doing so, these researchers push back against the characterization of technical writing as a set of decontextualized skills that convey information from a neutral perspective (Surma, 2005). For instance, Johnson-Eilola and Selber (2013) explore the role of audience agency in technical communication. By "audience agency," they mean writing scenarios in which an audience's reactions towards or interactions with a given piece of technology are directly impacted by the composing practices of an author. From instruction sets that familiarize novices with complex equipment to workflow charts that detail member responsibilities within an organization, technical writing attempts to channel an audience's actions within specific situations. Acknowledging the presence of audience agency reveals how writers are challenged with "interpreting use situations [of new technologies] and weighing possible responses" (Johnson-Eilola & Selber, 2013, p. 3) of an active readership. This means that technical writers must simultaneously coordinate the design of new technologies and empathize with the perspective of their intended audience in order to effectively communicate how users can deploy these technologies in particular scenarios. Consequently, technical writers operate at the intersection between design-based understandings of technological development and rhetorical understandings of how users might interpret and apply new technologies in unique ways.

As rhetorical approaches to technical writing emerged, scholars within critical game studies explored how video games are uniquely suited for exploring the role of user agency in real-world technical communication (deWinter & Moeller, 2014; Greene & Palmer, 2011; Mason, 2013; Rice, 2012). Eyman (2008) argues that video games are fundamentally premised upon user agency insofar as digital games rely on player participation in order to function. However, agency is not a one-way street between a player and a game because virtual gamespaces "feature both users and system agency (including non-player characters, the environments in which actions take place, and rules that govern in-game interactions)" (Eyman, 2008, p. 246). A game's mechanics

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and dynamic environments govern player actions, but these structural features can respond to user input to offer players more possibilities for undertaking impactful activities. Hence, video games call attention to the idea that "agency" denotes the on-going, reciprocal exchanges between users and a given technology, as opposed to locating agency solely within a user or given piece of technology. This means that documentation which facilitates video game development must consider the interrelation between the structural features of a virtual gamespace and possible player responses. This is much like how Johnson-Eilola and Selber (2013) argue that technical writers design use-scenarios for new technologies while also speculating about how users will respond to these scenarios.

While these authors have been influential in reinforcing the critical value of technical writing and video games, scholarship that discusses real-world applications of game-based projects in technical communication classes is still in its early stages. In order to further explore the connection between technical writing and critical game studies, this essay will discuss my experiences designing a collaborative writing project around Minecraft for several college-level technical writing seminars. In doing so, I demonstrate how documenting interactive games can help students re-envision technical writing as a composing process that engages with the experiences and agency of an active audience.

Context and Rationale: Selecting Minecraft as a Learning Tool

From 2014 through 2016, I taught four upper-division technical writing seminars. The goal of these courses was to familiarize students with effective composing strategies used in real-world technical documentation. I wanted to structure my seminars around video games in order to emphasize the dynamic, but occasionally overlooked, elements of technical communication as described by Eyman (2008) as well as Johnson-Eilola and Selber (2013). My hope was that having video games and game documentation operate as the primary focus of class assignments could help students avoid overly abstract discussions regarding the rhetorical dimensions of technical writing. This approach offered students concrete examples of how technical writing practices impact an audience's interaction with complex processes.

I reflected upon my own gaming habits when selecting a game to use in my classes. As a graduate student who moved across the country for my PhD program, I kept in contact with friends by playing games online. Minecraft was a popular choice among my cohort. Minecraft is an open-world game wherein players use simple blocks to build elaborate structures. The game also includes more complex features, such as blocks that transmit "redstone power," which can be used to activate simple on/off switches and create elaborate networks of chain reactions. While there is a survival mode that tasks players with salvaging resources and warding off enemies, the game has a creative mode which removes the threat of enemy attacks or environmental hazards and provides players with infinite building materials.

My personal experiences led me to investigate the critical and social dimensions of Minecraft, both of which influenced the decision to incorporate this game into my classes. In terms of criticism, there is a wide breadth of scholarship that examines how different subjects can be taught using Minecraft (Abrams, 2017; Bos et al., 2014; Dezuanni et al., 2015; Overby & Jones, 2015; Short, 2012). While much of this scholarship discusses precollegiate education rather than college-level instruction, these researchers analyze effective teaching strategies and common obstacles that emerge when integrating video games into traditional classroom settings. My technical writing seminars were my first time including video games in a college course, so I wanted to use a game that had scholarship dedicated to its pedagogical applications.

From a social perspective, the Minecraft player community exemplifies the interconnection between audience agency and technical documentation. Minecraft players have a reputation for creating ornate projects such as functional binary calculators or logic gates that simulate the operation of computer processors. When building these projects, players have composed highly detailed documents in the form of collaborative Wikis ("Minecraft Wiki," n.d.) and building guides ("Minecraft Community," n.d.). These resources not only describe the technical processes underlying specific projects, they also explain how readers might apply these processes to their own gaming sessions. Thus, player-generated documents exhibit the same awareness of audience agency described by both technical writing researchers and critical game scholars. By extension, using Minecraft in my classes meant I could show students real-world technical documentation and demonstrate how that documentation shapes the gameplay experiences of others.

Assignment: Creating Interactive Learning Environments with Minecraft

In my classes, students produced documents detailing Minecraft's features and affordances. Smaller assignments during the semester's first half asked students to compose technical descriptions of game mechanics and an instruction set that introduced new players to effective gameplay strategies. These earlier projects served two purposes. First, they familiarized students with Minecraft's functionality and allowed them to experiment with the game in a semi-structured manner. Second, these projects highlighted the rhetorical underpinnings of technical communication in the sense that students were encouraged to draw from their own gameplay experiences while composing their assignments; reflecting upon uncertainties or obstacles they encountered first-hand helped students anticipate the difficulties that a novice might face. Envisioning the circumstances of their intended audience encouraged students to reconsider how they might communicate gameplay mechanics in such a way that motivated readers to apply said mechanics to personal gaming sessions.

For the second half of the semester, students were organized into four- or five-person groups based on similar majors. Each group was tasked with documenting and constructing an interactive learning environment in Minecraft. The goal of this learning environment was to teach their audience about a procedure or policy that is used by professional communities. It is possible for this project to succeed if group members have different majors, but I thought that organizing students based on common research interests would make it easier for groups to select a procedure/policy which all members were familiar with.

This project had a written and digital component. For the written component, groups composed a "Design Portfolio" using a typical word processor. This multi-section document mimicked the genres and formats used in actual game development. For instance, game design documentation often discusses the context and relevance of the main themes for a proposed game. Additionally, game documentation explains how specific interactive experiences can help players further explore the concepts underlying a game's narrative and/or mechanics. In real-world scenarios, these types of writing practices not only persuade members within a company to provide resources for moving ahead with development but also help designers envision the types of player (re)actions they want to cultivate.

Students would undertake the same composing practices used by game designers in their Design Portfolios. Each Portfolio identified the concept students wanted to communicate to prospective players, explained how this concept functions in professional or academic settings, and described gameplay scenarios that would allow players to learn about this concept via interactive experiences. This document also examined the context surrounding each group's

learning environment, meaning that students considered how their projects might benefit specific parties or organizations which are impacted by the ideas represented in their Minecraft realms. For example, one group of students were all engineering majors and wanted to discuss spatial reasoning (i.e., the ability to negotiate and manipulate objects in three dimensions in order to solve problems, all while negotiating material constraints or limitations). Their rationale was that they felt as though traditional math and physics classes emphasized decontextualized theoretical formulas without offering students the ability to see how these formulas are used in real-world situations. In their Design Portfolio, they defined spatial reasoning, explained why it was important for engineering projects, and narrated the types of interactive experiences (which will be further discussed in the following section) that would help players foster critical spatial reasoning skills.

For the digital component of this project, students created working prototypes of their learning environments and conducted end-of-semester presentations that discussed the goals and functionality of these gamespaces. I told students that I did not expect professional-grade prototypes. Rather, creating usable prototypes allowed students to see how the design of their learning environments would invite user participation in deliberate ways. In terms of scaffolding assignments, I began the design process by asking students to diagram a "user roadmap" that explained what they wanted players to do first, second, and so on while navigating their interactive gamespaces. I also asked students to note moments where their users may be able to take different "paths" in their roadmap, by which I mean moments where users had a choice to undertake actions in whichever order they prefer. Students then used these roadmaps as an outline for the literal design of their Minecraft environments. That is to say, students designed their virtual gamespaces in response to the sequence of actions they wanted their users to undertake. For example, one group wanted to discuss the impact of sustainable agricultural initiatives in rural areas. Their roadmap diagramed a sequence wherein players would build an irrigation system in a step-by-step fashion. When translating this roadmap into the actual design of their learning environment, these students decided to have users enter their Minecraft realm in a desert. Then, in-game signs would guide users towards streams where they would begin digging and managing an irrigation system. The contrast between the desert environment and water systems would focus players' attention on the structure and functionality of irrigation networks.

The goal of these user roadmaps was to encourage students to consider the perspective of their audience and begin thinking about how they could channel users' actions towards specific goals. Put differently, I wanted students to avoid overemphasizing the abstract ideas they wanted to explore via their learning environments and, instead, design their environments with the experiences and actions of their intended audience in mind. To reiterate Johnson-Eilola and Selber's (2013) argument, technical writers operate at the intersection between design-based understandings of technological functionality and rhetorical understandings of how users interact with said functionality. In much the same way, emphasizing user experiences as the point of access into the design and creation of an interactive Minecraft environment would encourage students to combine design-focused and rhetorically focused perspectives in their writing and planning processes.

Once students had created the basic foundation of their Minecraft environments, I dedicated a week of class to prototype testing. On these days, students came to class with working prototypes of their Minecraft environments on their laptops. I asked students to experiment with each other's projects and respond to a reflection worksheet. This worksheet asked students to narrate moments of difficultly or uncertainty along with moments of curiosity, interest, and even surprise while testing out their peers' projects. These reflections functioned as usability

reports insofar as they represented both productive and unproductive user experiences. Student groups then read the reflections of their peers and revised the structure of their Minecraft environments to account for the gameplay experiences of others. This, in turn, allowed students to refine the intended user experiences outlined in their user roadmaps and Design Portfolio.

Reflection: Shifting Impressions of Technical Writing

I would like to discuss several experiences that illustrate how Minecraft helped students rethink their assumptions about technical writing. At the onset of the semester, I asked students to define "successful" technical writing. Common responses included terms such as "clear" and "objective." Several weeks later, I asked students to define a "successful" user experience while they were planning their Minecraft projects. In contrast to previous responses, students described dynamic interactions between users and their learning environments. One student was building a binary calculator and said she wanted users to initially feel "confused" but then "enlightened" about this complex machine. Another student was recreating our city's downtown area with historical information about major landmarks. He wanted users to feel "confident" in their ability to navigate this area in real life and excited to explore other neighborhoods afterwards.

I find it fascinating that students initially characterized technical writing as a neutral form of communication in which an audience does not (or cannot) exert any interpretive energy when reading a text. Conversely, students approached their Minecraft projects by emphasizing the agency of their audience and speculating the reactions or experiences of users within an interactive gamespace. This emphasis on audience agency was further reinforced when students began constructing their learning environments. For example, the aforementioned group of engineering students wanted to teach their players about the importance of spatial reasoning in large-scale engineering projects. They created a gamespace where players would construct transportation networks between several villages while negotiating geographical obstacles and managing limited resources. When reviewing an early draft of their Design Portfolio, I asked how users would know what actions they needed to undertake. These students decided to build a library populated with books describing different transportation mechanisms along with the benefits and drawbacks of each option. Interestingly, these books also included backstories that contextualized each village's circumstances. For example, an underground village had an "ancient burial ground" that players could not build upon, while a mountaintop castle had more construction materials due to a strong mining economy.

Students explained that these books were designed to inform users of in-game objectives while also encouraging experimentation with different strategies when connecting villages, thereby illustrating the notion that there is no single, definitive method for creating transportation networks. However, the inclusion of fictional backstories reveals the generative potential of highlighting audience agency in technical writing. On the one hand, these books communicated highly technical details of engineering procedures. On the other hand, these books framed engineering procedures through elaborate histories regarding the socio-material variables that influence infrastructure development. Hence, these backstories conveyed the idea that engineers must navigate cultural limitations while applying highly specialized processes in construction projects. Furthermore, it was the consideration of audience agency (i.e., wanting to contextualize and communicate potential user actions) which expanded this gamespace's initial focus on spatial reasoning to include the implicit social elements of engineering projects.

Challenges: Adapting Minecraft to New Contexts

To echo an earlier sentiment, agency denotes the reciprocal exchanges between users and technology. While students did not explicitly use the term "agency" when composing their documents, I structured class activities and assignment feedback to direct students' attention towards the interrelation between the mechanics of their learning environments and potential reactions of their audience. In both the aforementioned engineering project and descriptions of ideal player experiences, students balanced a technically minded understanding of their gamespaces with a rhetorical awareness of how said gamespaces might channel user actions in deliberate ways. In doing so, student writing became the medium through which interactive experiences were actively created as opposed to student writing operating as a neutral vehicle for disseminating information.

Using video games to reapproach technical writing as a creative process requires instructors to reframe their assessment methods. Colby (2014) argues that game-based writing projects should include opportunities for students to clarify the logic used when creating interactive experiences for others. Emphasizing the rationale underlying key design choices can endow students with critical thinking skills that will help them feel more confident in their ability to effectively use different technologies in the future (Shipka, 2011). In my classes, I made a distinction between "front-end" writing that would be circulated to an intended audience, such as the Design Portfolio, and self-reflective "back-end" writing which explained design decisions to myself and fellow classmates. I evaluated "front-end" writing based on technical documentation conventions (e.g. precise definitions of gameplay mechanics, effective formatting techniques, etc.). Conversely, I evaluated "back-end" writing on a complete/incomplete basis, focusing on students' explanations of how/why intended user experiences would help their audience comprehend an abstract concept.

If instructors adapt this Minecraft project for other classes, I suggest creating exercises that allow students to reflect upon the types of interactive experiences they want to cultivate for others. Providing students an opportunity to articulate personal goals when designing interactive projects can further clarify the higher-order writing skills fostered by game-based assignments, which, in turn, may quell potential concerns about using games in the classroom. In my classes, several students expressed hesitation towards the professional relevance of our Minecraft projects. I told my classes to think of Minecraft as a metaphor, so to speak, for how digital media technologies lend themselves to new forms of engagement between authors and audiences. This means that creating virtual gamespaces supports the same rhetorically sensitive composing practices that can be used when crafting digitally mediated user experiences in different professional scenarios. Treating Minecraft as representative of larger trends surrounding digitally mediated user experiences made it easier for students to understand the benefits of using games in a class that did not typically have a digital emphasis.

Conclusion

Documenting and constructing interactive gamespaces underscored the role of user agency in technical writing insofar as students needed to consider how their design decisions would elicit actions from intended users. This is not to say that video games are the only outlet for reenvisioning audience agency within technical writing. Rather, video games are one medium that can help students reconsider the impact their composing practices can have on others. I hope that my teaching experiences and course materials can help instructors continue exploring the affordances of using game-based projects in traditional classroom environments.

ASSIGNMENT

Designing and Documenting an Interactive Learning Environment

Project Overview

As we have discussed throughout the semester, technical writing is a rhetorical negotiation between authors and audiences insofar as technical writers often try to elicit specific actions on the part of an intended readership. In other words, to be a rhetorically aware technical writer means that you are able to anticipate the perspectives of your audience and acknowledge how your writing can influence the ways in which your readership engages with a given piece of technology.

For this group project, you and 3-4 of your classmates will design and document an interactive learning environment using Minecraft. The goal of this learning environment will be to teach your audience about a procedure, process, or policy that is actively used by professionals in real-world scenarios. Undertaking this project will test your ability to compose rhetorically aware technical documentation by creating interactive scenarios that allow your audience to actively participate in or experiment with a complex concept.

This assignment will have a written and digital component. Each group will compose a single Design Portfolio, which will be a multi-section document that explains the specific mechanics of your Minecraft learning environment and outlines the types of interactive experiences you want to create for your audience. The Design Portfolio will also examine the larger context(s) surrounding the development and potential deployment of this learning environment. Additionally, each group will create a working prototype of their learning environment and offer a brief end-of-semester presentation that demonstrates the basic functionality of your proposed Minecraft realm.

To clarify, this project will not be graded based on the overall polish or entertainment value of your Minecraft learning environment. Rather, this project will be evaluated based on your ability to clearly articulate the interactive experiences you want to design for your audience and rationalize how/why these interactive experiences can grant your audience a better understanding of the ideas being simulated in your Minecraft realm. Hence, actively building a prototype of your Minecraft realm will help you get a better sense of how other users might navigate or respond to your virtual gamespace, which will allow you to refine the types of designed experiences that are explained in the Design Portfolio.

Rationale and Purpose

This project has two main learning outcomes. First, this assignment will give you an opportunity to refine the writing skills you have cultivated throughout our class. The Design Portfolio is meant to mimic the types of technical documentation that facilitates the development of video games and other types of digital media technologies. However, "technical documentation" is not a single genre but, instead, is an umbrella term for the numerous formats, scenarios, and writing strategies used throughout different professional contexts. Consequently, each section of the Design Portfolio is designed to test out a writing strategy that can be applied to different professional communication scenarios.

For instance, one section of the Design Portfolio asks you to explain the concept or process you want your audience to learn about. In offering this explanation, you can apply the same writing strategies you used in the Technical Description project from earlier in the semester. In another section, you will need to describe the types of interactive experiences or actions you

want your audience to undertake. Narrating intended user experiences will test many of the same skills you used when creating your Instruction Set. In short, it might be useful to think of the Design Portfolio as a "toolbox" of different writing strategies that are used in real-world technical communication scenarios.

In terms of the second main learning outcome, this project will help you further comprehend the rhetorical dimensions of technical communication. Throughout the semester, we have discussed how technical documentation simultaneously coordinates the design of new technologies while also attempting to elicit specific types of actions on the part of an intended audience. In a similar fashion, your Design Portfolio will explain how key design decisions can lend themselves to intended experiences and reactions on the part of your audience. That is to say, designing an interactive gamespace will require you to produce documentation that balances a technical understanding of the features/affordances of a given technology (i.e., the unique mechanics of your Minecraft realm) with a rhetorical understanding of how users might respond to said features/affordances.

Structure and Criteria

Your group's Design Portfolio will include the following sections, each of which will need to respond to a list of specific questions. Please note that you do not need to answer these questions in a linear, step-by-step fashion. Instead, these questions are meant to represent the goals/aims and criteria that are associated with project proposals in real-world professional scenarios.

Introduction (200-300 words)

- What is the general structure and purpose of your Minecraft project?
- What will your audience learn from navigating this learning environment?
- What are the potential benefits of your Minecraft project and the types of learning experiences that occur therein?

Context and Motivation (500-600 words)

- What specific process, procedure, practice, or policy do you want to simulate? When answering this question, you will need to clearly define the main focus of your learning environment in such a way that someone with little-to-no background knowledge can understand it.
- How does your chosen topic actually function in real-world professional scenarios? In other words, what is the real-world importance or value of your chosen topic?
- Who is your intended audience and why would they benefit from learning about your chosen topic via interactive experiences in Minecraft?
- Are there other parties, organizations, or types of individuals who would directly or indirectly benefit from your learning environment? For example, how can teaching your intended audience about a specific topic help organizations who are equally invested in this topic (or invested in the success of your intended audience)?

Project Summary and Intended Outcomes (500-600 words)

- How will you translate the topic you mentioned in the Context and Motivation section into Minecraft? What specific mechanics or features of this game will be used to familiarize your audience with your chosen topic?
- What types of experiences and actions do you want your audience to undertake? In other words, how will your audience actually interact with your learning

environment? In answering these questions, it would be helpful to provide at least one example of an interactive experience that uses specific gameplay mechanics or scenarios to elicit certain types of actions/reactions on the part of your audience.
- What in-game goals/objectives will your audience achieve? How will your learning environment communicate these goals/objectives?
- How can undertaking certain actions and achieving in-game goals/objective help your audience understand the complexities and intricacies of your given topic?

Project Planning (300-400 words)

- How will you begin approaching this project? What steps will you take first, second, etc?
- What implementation issues or challenges do you foresee arising as you conduct this project?
- What outside technologies and/or resources will you utilize when designing, documenting, and creating your interactive learning environment?
- How will you split up the work within your group? What tasks will be handled by individuals and what tasks will be handled as an entire group?

Conclusion (250-350 words)

- If given the proper support, how might your project continue to grow in the future? What new features or applications might be possible?
- How might your project be incorporated into institutional or commercial organizations?

Evaluation

Your Design Portfolio will be evaluated based on how well each section responds to the respective questions outlined above. Additionally, this project will be evaluated based on the standards and best practices associated with effective communication strategies used in professional scenarios. Hence, structural issues such as typos, grammatical errors, and late submissions of rough/final drafts will result in grade penalties.

Preparation

Student groups will be organized into groups based on similar majors or overlapping research fields. This does not mean that each group will consist of members from the exact same major. In fact, most groups will have some diversity in regards to each students' discipline. Having a diversity of perspectives can enhance the impact of your virtual learning environments in the sense that each group member can contribute their own expertise when selecting a topic and designing interactive scenarios for your audience. This, in turn, can lend itself to more nuanced and complex learning environments.

For example, your group may include students from electrical engineering and architecture. In this case, your group could create a learning environment that demonstrates how multiple disciplines must work together when designing and creating buildings or public projects. This means that your Minecraft project would help users understand how building infrastructure must abide by multiple disciplinary-specific codes, regulations, and conventions. In creating this project, each member would be able to discuss how their own discipline approaches infrastructure projects and the entire group would decide on how to communicate the intersection between multiple disciplines to an intended audience via interactive gameplay scenarios.

Assignment Sequence

The following is a tentative schedule for the remainder of the semester. Abiding by this schedule will allow enough time to coordinate a feasible workflow with your group members, allow me to provide feedback on rough drafts of your Design Portfolio, conduct peer-review sessions with your peers, and create/modify the working prototype of your Minecraft learning environment.

Week One

- Decide on a specific process, procedure, practice, or policy you want to design your project around
- Locate at least two scholarly sources that discuss the importance of your chosen topic for a specific professional community
- Locate at least one current event/example that demonstrates how your chosen topic functions in real-world professional scenarios

Week Two

- Brainstorm possible user experiences that will help your audience learn about your chosen topic
- Identify 2-3 specific Minecraft mechanics that can be to facilitate/foster the possible user experiences you brainstormed
- Begin drafting "Context and Motivation" section
- Begin drafting "Project Summary and Intended Outcomes" section
- Begin drafting "Project Planning" section

Week Three

- Set up multiplayer Minecraft server or purchase a subscription to "Minecraft Realms"
- Finalize rough draft of "Context and Motivation" section
- Finalize rough draft of "Project Summary and Intended Outcomes" section
- Finalize rough draft of "Project Planning" section

Week Four

- Begin creating Minecraft learning environment
- Complete First Progress Report

Week Five

- Review comments on rough draft of Design Portfolio sections and compose a 100-word cover letter that explains how you plan to revise each section in conjunction with my comments (please note: there needs to be a cover letter for EACH section of the Design Portfolio)
- Continue creating Minecraft learning environment
- Complete Second Progress Report

Week Six

- Bring functional prototype of your Minecraft project to class so classmates can test out your learning environment
- Complete worksheet for prototype testing

Week Seven

- Revise and submit final draft of Design Portfolio based on class workshops and my feedback
- Finalize and conduct end-of-semester presentation for your Minecraft learning environment

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.v5i2.60.

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The Research Prospectus in First-Year Writing (and Beyond)

Teaching for Writing Transfer

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Abstract

This paper discusses a first-year writing research prospectus prompt designed to support first-year undergraduate students transitioning from high school writing—which often focuses on summary and synthesis—to college-level writing. In college, "research papers" often require knowledge production: developing research questions that address gaps in existing scholarship. My prospectus prompt offers a scaffolded structure for writers embarking on such college-level projects, and it also offers a tool to facilitate writing transfer, with the goal of enabling students to develop major research projects independently in other classes. It does so in two ways. First, it labels the components of major research projects (e.g. objects of study, research questions about those objects of study, and the theoretical frameworks used to analyze objects of study). Second, it provides a process for approaching research projects, including showing students how to develop research questions and how to move beyond summarizing and synthesizing other scholars.

This paper introduces a first-year writing (FYW) research prospectus designed to teach first-year undergraduate students how to move beyond high school research reports into college level writing. In college, "research papers" often require knowledge production: developing research questions that address gaps in existing scholarship. My prospectus prompt offers a scaffolded structure for writers embarking on such college-level projects. More importantly, it facilitates writing transfer by identifying the components of major research projects and making visible how such projects are developed: how to develop research questions, and how to move beyond summarizing and synthesizing other scholars. The assignment's goal is to enable students to develop such projects independently in later classes. While this article focuses primarily on a FYW prospectus prompt, I conclude by discussing a graduate version that I have used to guide graduate students in fields ranging from forensics to literature.

Origin Story #1: The Components of a Research Project

When I first began teaching FYW, the students' final research projects were well-organized, well-documented recitations of other scholars' work on massive topics like "gun control." Essentially, my first-year college students were continuing to engage in summary and synthesis, the most common forms of high school writing (Beil et al. 2007, p. 7; Rounsaville et al. 2008, p. 102-103). In those early classes, I identified two problems: 1) students did not know how to narrow their projects, and 2) students did not know how to move beyond summary and synthesis of existing scholarship.

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Several colleagues came to my rescue. First, Rachel Riedner suggested I shift from discussing paper "topics" to "objects of study." As I eventually came to define these terms in my prompt, a *topic* is a "broad and general issue that can be studied." An "object of study" is any narrowly defined "object" being studied. Examples of an "object" include an utterance, a written or visual text, a political or historical event, an actual object, person, or a group. More specifically, Shakespearian plays are a broad topic; *King Lear* is an object of study. Political protests are a broad topic; the Westboro Baptist Church visiting George Washington University in 2010 to protest the "gay-friendly" campus is an object of study. This language gave me a way to show students how to narrowly define projects for any subject/discipline.

Second, my colleague Mark Mullen introduced me to theoretical "lenses": scholarly conversations through which to analyze objects of study. I eventually named such scholarly conversations "frameworks."[1] Some frameworks focus on specific theories, like feminist theory. Others cluster within disciplines, like psychology. Applying a framework to an object of study generates research questions. For instance, the Westboro Baptist Church protest, to which straight students responded by organizing a counterprotest, could be analyzed through a free speech framework: Given the harm the protest might have caused some students, should that protest have been banned, or was allowing the counterprotest ("more speech") the better choice? Alternately, a different framework such as allyship raised different questions: While straight students tried to serve as allies to the campus gay community, did the straight students overstep allyship bounds by organizing the counterprotest without consulting the George Washington University gay community? Each "framework" raises different questions about the object of study.

Origin Story #2: The Research Prospectus as a Tool for Writing Transfer

These two components—an object of study and theoretical frameworks—became the basis of my research prospectus prompt, along with a third component, research questions. A new problem emerged, however. Former students repeatedly emailed me because they did not know how to transfer what they had done in my class to other college classes. As Inoue (2019) described, "Getting students in a program or classroom to produce a certain kind of written product does not mean that anyone has learned anything in particular. It means they have been able to reproduce a certain kind of document in those circumstances . . . [We do not know] whether students can or will be able to transfer what they learned to future contexts" (p. 149). I did know: my former students were telling me they could not develop college-level research projects without me.

Two of my colleagues, Phil Troutman and Mark Mullen, proposed using a research prospectus. I was skeptical. Like many academics, I first encountered the prospectus genre—also called a proposal—as a graduate student. Here is how the conversation with my dissertation advisor went:

> ME: You want me to write what?
>
> ADVISOR: A prospectus.
>
> ME: What's that?
>
> ADVISOR: A document that describes what your dissertation will be about.
>
> ME: You want me to describe something I haven't yet written??

My advisor was not alone in her struggles to explain this genre. The prospectus is, to use Swales's (1996) term, an "occluded" genre, one that exists "to support and validate the

manufacture of knowledge," but that—because it operates behind the scenes—is often not a genre writers encounter until they have to write in it (p. 46-7).

Several college writing handbooks, which often target first-year writers, include brief introductions to "research proposals." However, these handbooks simply tell students to "outline a specific research question and/or hypothesis, and describe how you would go about answering the question" (Miller-Cochran et al., 2018, p. 271-272) or "Your objective is to make a case for the question you plan to explore" (Hacker & Sommers, 2016, p. 408). The assumption is that students already have their questions. For many students just beginning their research, however, the challenge is not explaining why a question is important, but rather how to develop a question that interests them.

I decided to assign a prospectus as a scaffolding step before the major research project. Unlike the college handbooks, however, my prompt establishes the groundwork for students to construct research questions. The prompt provides a space to identify, research, and sift through possible frameworks to apply to the object of study, thus helping students visualize different potential research questions. It gives students a way to imagine—and then choose—the frameworks and questions that most interest them. The prompt also makes visible the process students are following, so they can reproduce and adapt it later.

Research on writing transfer—the process of students adapting writing skills and knowledge learned in one context to a new context—has shown such transfer is difficult to achieve (Beaufort, 2007; Bergmann & Zepernick, 2007; McCarthy, 1987). Recent research, however, offers models that help teach writing transfer: writing about writing (Bird et al., 2019; Downs & Wardle, 2007), teaching for transfer (Yancey et al., 2014), and genre-based approaches (Devitt et al., 2004; Driscoll et al., 2020; Tardy, 2016). My FYW research prospectus prompt aligns itself with these models by giving students the vocabulary and explicit writing knowledge to facilitate writing in new contexts. If the goal of FYW is to prepare students for college-level, academic writing, then I want my students to leave FYW knowing the components from which academic scholarship is constructed, so that they can succeed in future writing contexts without me.[2]

In terms of institutional context, the FYW curriculum at George Washington University uses theme-based courses, taught by multi-disciplinary faculty who either teach FYW via their home disciplines, or who select cross-disciplinary themes to teach college-level research and writing. The course themes I use are often cross-disciplinary. For instance, the FYW theme I have taught most frequently is profanity. Students have written research papers on profane utterances that drew upon research in the social sciences, business, the humanities, and law. More recently, I used the prospectus prompt to scaffold a FYW research paper grounded in the social sciences, where students conducted interviews and surveys of college writers, which they then analyzed using theoretical frameworks from writing studies, psychology, and education. The approach to "theoretical frameworks" that I teach is most closely aligned to how scholarship is shaped in the humanities and social sciences, and thus is most likely to transfer successfully to future college courses in those disciplines. At the end of this article, however, I also discuss how the prompt attempts to build a bridge to future writing in the sciences and business.

In the following sections, I describe how I launch the assignment and student responses. I conclude with plans to use the prospectus in a graduate student "dissertation boot camp."

First Steps: Introducing the Prospectus to First-Year Students

The FYW version of the prospectus is divided into three sections,[3] one for each of the three components already discussed: 1) object of study research, 2) "theoretical framework" research

where specific "theory sources" are summarized, and 3) research questions. I begin teaching the prospectus by having students read an introduction to the assignment vocabulary.[4] I define "frameworks" as scholarly conversations. I show examples of how scholars working within a field read and cite each other: I label individual articles or books within such scholarly conversations "theory sources." The "theory source" concept is borrowed from Bizup (2008), although Bizup used the term "method" source, a label derived from the "methods" sections of social science and science articles. Bizup defined such sources as those "from which a writer derives a governing concept or a manner of working" (p.76). Based on reviewer feedback for this article, this year I replaced Bizup's social science-based label with "theory" sources because it better matched the humanities-based projects my students were engaged in. "Theory" sources provide my FYW students with intellectual tools that help them shape their analysis, evaluation, and/or interpretation of their object of study. I ask students to envision each individual theory source as part of a larger scholarly conversation; I call that conversation a "theoretical framework." For example, one theoretical framework explores how people from historically dominant groups can work in allyship with historically minoritized groups. A specific "theory source" within that broader framework is K.R. Kraemer's (2007) article on allyship, which my class used to analyze the Westboro Baptist Church visit. I need both terms because in order to find specific theory sources via library database searches, students have to be able to describe and conceptualize the broader conversation—the theoretical framework—within which the theory sources they hope to find are situated.

I do not show students the prospectus prompt until after they have decided upon their object of study, and after they are comfortable with the assignment's concepts and terms. Students research and write several one-page, pre-writing assignments, each exploring a possible object of study, and share one of those assignments with the class. To learn what theoretical frameworks are, the full class—seventeen students—devotes approximately ten minutes toward helping each peer brainstorm possible frameworks that might intersect with the proposed object of study. For instance, one student wrote about a U.S. soccer player caught yelling the f-slur at a ball boy who dropped a ball. For a framework, the student explored scholarly research on homophobia in team sports. This framework helped the student develop a question about the part played by that soccer player's straight identity, in a professional soccer context where only one professional player had thus far come out as gay. A different framework—on branding—later generated different questions focused on Major League Soccer's response to the incident.[5]

In the process of generating ideas, students learn to shape research questions about the object of study, via the frameworks they propose. This full-class brainstorming requires four classroom sessions, but the repetition provides important practice of new conceptual moves: imagining possible theoretical frameworks that might intersect with an object of study, brainstorming possible database search terms for the frameworks, and seeing the different research questions each framework can potentially generate.[6]

Only after students have selected their objects of study and identified at least one possible theory source do they read the prospectus prompt. At that stage, the only new term/concept is the requirement to include and define a "keyword"; I explain it by pointing to articles where scholars define keywords in ways that shaped their arguments. When students read the prospectus prompt, I emphasize that the prospectus is *not* a traditional essay: there is no thesis, no introduction, no transitions, no conclusion. It is more of a heavily segmented, intellectual exercise with subheadings than what students recognize as a "paper." I convey that segmentation in part by presenting the assignment as a chart (which also serves as the grading rubric). I also have students read a sample prospectus, provided with permission by a former student. As homework, each student prepares three questions about either the prompt or the sample; in

class, we discuss those questions until students fully understand the genre expectations.

Contributing to Scholarly Conversations

One of my goals as a teacher of academic writing is for students to learn that academic research contributes to conversations on an object of study. A student learning to produce knowledge usually engages in two steps:

1) Familiarize themselves with current conversations about the object of study to enable identifying gaps in the scholarship, what Swales (1990) called finding a "niche."
2) Identify and apply the analytical tools (the "theory sources") that will shape analysis.

Within my FYW course, there is not time for both steps. My prompt thus creates an automatic scholarly "niche" for students' research projects by requiring objects of study that are too new to have been the focus of any published scholarship. For instance, in my profanity-themed FYW class, most students write about a public, profane utterance from the past eighteen months. We discuss the approximate time it takes to publish scholarly articles and books—longer than eighteen months—so that students understand why no scholarship yet exists on the utterance they have selected.[7] Students hesitate at this point: they have been trained to distrust "non-academic" sources such as newspaper articles, YouTube videos, or Twitter comments. Because scholarship does not yet exist on their objects of study, however, I point out they will have to use non-academic sources. I tell students that *they* will be the scholars to open conversations, to contribute new scholarship on their chosen objects of study.

To ensure that students understand not all research has to be entirely "new," on the last day of the semester, I introduce students to the literature review genre. Doing so helps students see that scholars explore existing research before launching into new projects. Literature reviews allow scholars to gauge what current or relevant research—and what gaps in that research—exists for "objects" that have been well studied (such as Shakespeare's *King Lear*), as well as those that have not (their projects on recent profanity).

By already creating the scholarly "niche" that students will fill with their research, my prospectus prompt emphasizes the second step for producing authentic scholarship about an object of study: learning how to identify and apply relevant scholarly frameworks. For the prospectus, students find two or three specific journal articles or book chapters ("theory sources"), and summarize them, one paragraph each. By separating "framework" research from "object of study" research, the prompt makes it structurally impossible for students to engage in pure summary/synthesis.

In class, I illustrate this point with whiteboard diagrams, represented in the figures. Figure 1 shows a high school research report, where students summarize and synthesize research on an object of study. Because students only research the object of study, their writing can only repeat what other researchers have written.

Figure 2 shows a college-level research project, where students research an object of study, but also select theory sources that never mention the object of study. In their writing (represented by the blue-filled arrows), *students* do the intellectual work of applying theory sources to the object of study. This structure makes pure summary and synthesis impossible.

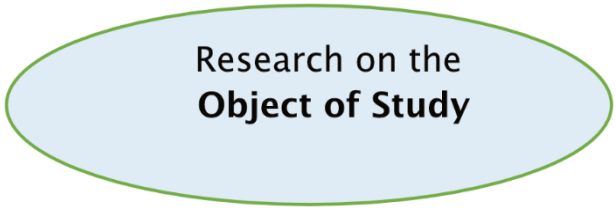

Figure 1. High school research report. Blue shading indicates student writing.

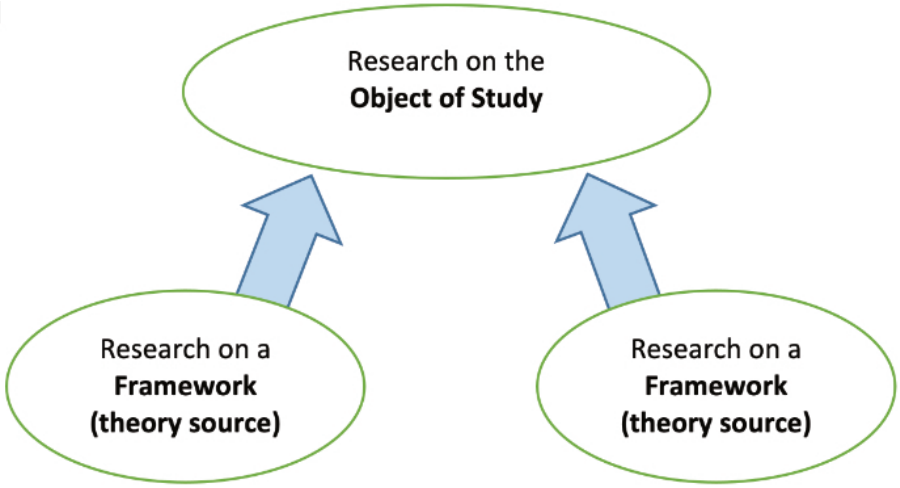

Figure 2. College level research project. Blue shading indicates student writing.

Research Questions and Facilitating Dialogue

The prospectus also shows writers how to develop research questions. The questions that the students develop must be about the object of study. Next to each research question that students frame, the prompt demands that they also name the theory source that will help them answer that question. This structure enables professors to engage in productive dialogue with students about their research questions. Without a prospectus, professors are stuck asking a question to which students often don't have an answer: "What are your research questions?" With a prospectus, professors can instead ask a sequence of facilitative questions:

- "What frameworks exist that might intersect with this object of study?"
- "Which of those frameworks raise questions that interest you?"
- "What questions about the object of study will this specific theory source help you answer?"

While students who write strong prospectus drafts are well positioned to outline and write final projects, the prompt is perhaps most valuable for students who do poorly initially because it facilitates productive dialogue, based on the questions above. In end-of-semester self-assessments, students often comment that they plan to borrow and adapt the prospectus structure as a planning tool for future major papers.

Transfer and the Disciplinary Limits of this FYW Prompt

Given the humanities-influenced research projects in my profanity-themed FYW course, students leaving my course are well situated to transfer what they learned into "near transfer" humanities contexts (Perkins & Salomon, 1988). Students moving into science or business contexts, however, will be faced with "far transfer," that is, the need to abstract the essence of a skill or knowledge to apply it in a new context (Perkins & Salomon, 1988). To address this limit, in the "Introductory Overview" to the prospectus I include a section entitled, "Disciplinary examples of how 'theory' sources work." There, I give "theory source" examples from the sciences, social sciences, business, and humanities. In the humanities, "theory sources" provide an analytical tool with which to examine an object. In the sciences, "theory sources" provide the foundation for the researcher's methodological choices, which the "Introductory Overview" describes as "an experimental method which you [the researcher/student] might then borrow [from a scholar] to conduct your own experiment." Both Bizup (2008) and I see these intellectual moves as the same—a source providing "a governing concept or a manner of working" (p. 76)—but I admit the abstraction level is high for students outside the humanities. I thus talk students through this section of the prompt, linger over the examples, and return to those examples in individualized ways as I find out students' planned majors. To prevent possible negative transfer, with each major paper I ask students to also reflect on their writing in other courses, asking what FYW concepts and skills they have been able to use—and which concepts and skills have *not* applied. I emphasize that writing in new disciplinary contexts demands that students determine what writing strategies are not appropriate in the new context, as well as which concepts will transfer.

Graduate Students: The Dissertation Prospectus

For graduate students, I add a literature review requirement to the prompt, so students explore existing research on their object of study. In cases where literature reviews do not make visible a "gap" that a thesis or dissertation could address, the framework section becomes key. For such students, finding "theory sources"—scholarly sources that do not discuss the object of study—helps overcome the anxiety of influence (Bloom, 1973). For instance, one graduate student studying literature felt she was simply repeating, rather than adding to, the conversations surrounding her object of study. Adding a framework section to her prospectus pushed her to locate two or three scholars not directly engaged in her object of study, but whose work provided a theoretical framework through which to analyze her object of study. The process also enabled her to understand and articulate how her line of analysis differed from that of other scholars.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, almost all dissertation advice books, many of which include chapters on writing proposals, currently focus on disciplines outside the humanities. Only a small handful offer more general advice targeting all graduate students (Bolker, 1998; Dunleavy, 2003) or writers in the humanities (Clark, 2007; Semenza, 2010). Moving forward, I hope to develop the graduate version of my prospectus prompt by partnering with my college's writing in the disciplines program and writing center to develop a stand-alone workshop, and eventually a one-week "dissertation boot camp." Providing graduate students—particularly in the humanities, where the prospectus genre tends to be the least explained—with explicit instruction about the genre's

purpose and scaffolding structure could potentially save months (perhaps years) of dissertation time. The humanities-shaped terminology of the FYW version of the prompt adapts well for humanities graduate students. With further adaptations—such as shifting terminology from "theory sources" to "method sources" and the addition of an explicit "methodology" section, this prompt could also become the basis for graduate students in the sciences and business. Ultimately, a prospectus should facilitate productive dialogue between students and faculty, and provide a structured process that supports students, at any level, as they learn to become producers of knowledge within their fields.

ASSIGNMENT

Papers 2 and 3: Introductory Overview to the Research Project

The Research Project Assignment

For your major research project this semester, I will ask you to develop an argument about an object of study: a specific, profane utterance.

Steps in this Project

To develop your research project, you will engage in two steps:

1. *STEP ONE: Write a Research Prospectus (Paper #2)*
   A prospectus is a planning document that will help you structure your initial research on your project as you make decisions about a) which object of study you want to focus on, b) which scholarly tools you want to use to analyze that object of study, and c) which research questions you want ask about that object of study.
2. *STEP TWO: Write the Final Research Project (Paper #3):*
   The final project is where you'll answer the research questions you've posed about your object of study, drawing on the scholarly sources you identified in the prospectus.

Project Vocabulary

1. Object of Study

A paper *topic* is a broad and general issue that can be studied and analyzed. For instance, the general use of the term "bitch" by comedians is a *topic*. In contrast, an *object of study* is a single instance within that broader topic: it's a specific utterance, embedded in a particular context—such as a single usage of the word "bitch." For your final research project (and the Research Prospectus leading up to it), you might write about a politician's use of "fuck" at a specific fundraiser, about a specific performance where a comedian used a racial epithet, about an athlete's use of the f-slur toward a referee during a specific game. What all these instances have in common is that they are individual moments—a particular moment at a particular time and place where an individual speech act occurred.

Center your paper on an *object of study* that focuses on a specific, profane utterance. That utterance may be part of a public event that has been reported on in public forums (newspapers, magazines, blogs, news websites, etc.), or it may be something you said or experienced (i.e., personal experiences are allowed for this paper).

While your object of study will focus on a specific, profane utterance, that speech act may have provoked a response or several responses. For instance, when Dick Cheney uttered "fuck" on the Senate floor in 2004, there were a slew of responses. As the writer, you would choose the responses that seem most relevant to your project and include them in your object of study to research and analyze. In other words, your "object of study" will be a specific event which will probably include not only the profane utterance, but also the response(s) to that utterance.

Limits to selecting your object of study

The goal of this paper is for you to contribute your voice as a scholar to conversations regarding your object of study. In order for you to do so, you must choose a moment when profanity was used *that has not been written about by other scholars*. If you choose a widely-publicized object of study that took place over 18 months ago—such as Dick Cheney's 2004 use of "fuck" on the Senate floor—there is a very good chance that some scholar somewhere has already written about that object of study. Your paper would then turn into a report on other scholars' analyses of the profane utterance. That's *not* the assignment.

To ensure that there is space for your voice in the scholarship on your object of study, you should do one of three things:

1. Write about a small, local instance where a profane utterance was reported on publicly (in local newspapers, a local blog, a local news source), but that remained a local news item, rather than a national or international item. For instance, when the (all Black) Washington, DC, Dunbar high school football team went to play a game against the (largely White) Maryland Fort Hill high school team and the "N-word" was allegedly used against the Dunbar team players, the local DC press picked up the story—but it remained a local news item, unreported on a national scale. If you go with this option, you may pick any instance, whether contemporary or historical, to work with. To find this type of object of study, you may want to focus on local or historic newspapers.
2. Write about an instance where a profane utterance was reported on publicly in the national and/or international press, but restrict yourself to utterances that took place in the *past 18 months (i.e., since April 20XX)*. Given the publishing timeline of most scholarly publications, it usually takes 18-24 months before scholars respond to and analyze such public incidents in their articles and/or books. Thus, if you restrict yourself to utterances that have taken place since *April 20XX*, you'll be inserting your voice into the conversation before that conversation gets fully started (so there will be intellectual space for you to develop your own line of analysis and argument).
3. Write about a personal experience that involved yourself or a close friend/family member. Because you'll be writing about a personal experience, you'll obviously have a clear field for writing: no published scholars will have written about this object of study, so you'll be the one doing the intellectual work of contextualizing it, analyzing it, and developing your own line of argument.

Broadening your understanding of "object of study"

For the purposes of this class, your object of study must be an instance of profanity. The term "object of study," however, can be used in other contexts, for other assignments. It usually refers to a specific person (i.e., a specific political figure, athlete, or musician), group (i.e., the hacker group, "Anonymous"), event (i.e., a political assassination, a specific market crash, a specific experiment or case study), object (i.e., a specific novel or film), or place (i.e., Times Square). You

may find it useful to think about this definition more broadly, so that you can start looking for "objects of study" in the scholarly articles you read, as well as the future papers that are assigned to you during your time at GW.

2. "Theory" Sources and "Theoretical Frameworks"

"Theory" Sources

"Theory" sources are scholarly texts that provide writers with the intellectual tools needed to *analyze, interpret, or evaluate* events, places, objects, phenomena, groups, or people (i.e., to help writers discuss their objects of study).

Disciplinary examples of how "theory" sources work:

- In the sciences, a "theory" source might be an article in *Science* that explains how to conduct an experiment in microfluidics—an experimental method which you might then borrow to conduct your own experiment.
- In the social sciences, a "theory" source might be an article explaining how a certain study was conducted (i.e., how to establish intercoder reliability)—an experimental method you could borrow to conduct your own study.
- In business, a "theory" source might be Adam Smith's theory of economics—and you might draw on his theory to help you analyze your object of study (such as a recent federal decision about regulating banking practices).
- In the humanities, a "theory" source might be a feminist scholar whose work will help you analyze anything from a recent film to a Shakespearean play.

"Theoretical Frameworks"

Scholars—the people who produce "theory" sources—write to other scholars in their field: they read and cite each other to make visible their conversations. In disciplines within the humanities, those conversational networks are often referred to as "theoretical frameworks," "intellectual frameworks," or "scholarly lenses."

To find a useful "theory" source, you have to identify the scholarly conversation taking place--the "theoretical framework" that houses that conversation. Such conversations sometimes cluster around a specific theory. Think of Adam Smith's theory of economics, which has generated and shaped a number of scholarly conversations, or think of feminism or Marxism. These are theories that have engaged a number of scholars. In selecting such a theory, your task would be to familiarize yourself with several of the main voices within a particular theory and to decide which of those sources to adopt as the "theory" sources that would best help you analyze your object of study.

Or, you may choose to take a more disciplinary approach. Scholarly conversations are often clustered within disciplines and sub-disciplines, such as linguistics, anthropology, psychology, sociology, literature, history, economics, biology, architecture, etc. Again, these are disciplines that have engaged a number of scholars. In selecting such a discipline, your task would be to familiarize yourself with several of the main voices within a particular discipline (or, more probably, a particular sub-discipline, such as the study of Hip Hop within African American Studies; or child development within psychology) and then select from among those scholars the specific "theory" sources that will best help you analyze your object of study.

Profanity as a (mostly minor) framework for your project

In addition to finding a framework (scholarly conversation) to engage with for your object of study, our course readings will provide you with a second possible framework: profanity. In our class, we've read scholars who are engaged in conversations with each other (witness how Stephens cites Pinker; how Seizer cites Douglas). Given that your objects of study must focus on an instance of profanity, almost all of you will draw on one or two course readings as "theory" sources contributing to those "framework" conversations on profanity.

The theory sources that you select are what will guide your approach to your object of study and determine the kinds of research questions you'll ask. These theory sources will provide you with the tools to develop you own voice, your own analysis, your own critical inquiry into and interpretation of your object of study. Your use of these theory sources will push you beyond simply repeating what others have said about your object of study (writing a "report" on it), to *adding* to that conversation.

Paper #2: Research Paper Prospectus

Percentage of Final Grade

25% of your final grade

Technical Details

- A 1500-1750 word prospectus, formatted in MLA style, double-spaced, 12 point font, Times New Roman or Arial. *Please include your final word count (not including the Works Cited page) in parentheses after the final paragraph of the paper.*
- Works Cited page: This page should include at least **two scholarly sources** found through the library's electronic subscription services and the book catalog. **At least one of these sources must be a book.** The Works Cited page should also include several object of study sources (which may be newspaper articles, websites, blogs, etc).

Due Dates

Finalize object of study and explore possible frameworks	Wednesday, [DATE]
Workshop drafts are due at your individual conferences with me:	
—Individual Conferences	Monday, [DATE]
—Individual Conferences	Wednesday, [DATE]
—Individual Conferences	Friday, [DATE]
Final drafts due in class	Monday, [DATE]

Definitions, Goals, Tips

A "prospectus" is a genre commonly used to establish the intellectual parameters of major projects, such as honors theses or capstone writing projects. A prospectus is also useful, however, for long research papers, as it will help you delineate the major aspects of your project *before you sit down to write the paper*. It's a trouble-shooting tool that allows you to test out the different parts of your project at an early stage—before you've committed a massive amount of time to researching and writing—to see whether you're likely to hit a dead end, and whether the lines of research you're following are leading to the kinds of research questions you're actually interested in exploring.

College writing asks you to *add your own voice* to scholarly conversations. To do so with credibility and authority, you need to give yourself analytical tools. "Theory" sources will provide you with the criteria/tools/lenses to develop your *own* analysis about your object of study. Your research on your object of study and "theory" sources must be completely separate: you may *not* draw on the same sources for these different parts of your research. Because your theory sources will be completely different from your sources for your object of study, *you* will have to do the intellectual work of applying the theory sources (your analytical tools) to the information and narratives that you've gathered about your object of study. In doing so, you will develop your own analysis/interpretation/ evaluation of the object of study.

Finally, the prospectus helps prepare you for the moment when you develop the "research questions" that will structure and guide your final paper. The task of the final research paper will be to answer these questions. "Research questions," as defined by this prospectus, are open-ended. That is, they are interpretive, evaluative, analytical, or argumentative questions (i.e., questions that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no," and that cannot be answered just by looking up factual information). These questions should arise from your theory sources but should be articulated in terms of your object of study (i.e., *the questions should be about your object of study*).

Formatting this Assignment

This prospectus will be formatted in a series of individual sections that will be set apart from one another by subheadings. The subheadings that you'll use are given in the chart below. After each subheading, you'll write one or more paragraphs, giving however much information is needed to respond to that prompt (without, of course, exceeding the set page limit for the assignment). You may decide to combine several of the subheadings or change the order of the entries. For instance, some of you may prefer to begin by describing the background context for your object of study, before introducing the object of study itself. Others will choose to merge the "keyword" section into the "theory sources" section. That's fine, but please do include all the relevant subheadings for any given section.

Below is not only the prompt to which you'll be responding for this analytical portion of the assignment, but also the rubric that I'll be using to grade the paper.

Assignment

(*Editors' note*: The author's assignment is represented here in paragraph form. As the author has noted above, however, students receive it in the form of a table. The Supplementary Materials available online present the assignment in its original formatting.)

1. Object of Study and its Rhetorical Situation: 18 pts

The object of study identifies a specific, profane utterance, along with any relevant responses. In this section of the prospectus, you've brought in enough information to introduce your object of study to readers unfamiliar with it.

2. Theory Sources and their Corresponding Theoretical Frameworks: 42 pts

> Begin by naming the framework (scholarly conversation) within which your "theory" sources are situated. Then introduce two or three "theory" sources within that framework (most students devote a separate paragraph to each theory source). Where appropriate, research debates within the framework and select theory sources that represent alternative/oppositional perspectives. Your description of each theory source should address readers unfamiliar with it and follow the

"SCaD" process, where you include a ***S***ummary of the source, ***C***ontextualize a quotation from the source so that readers can understand the quotation as we're reading it, ***a***nd ***D***iscuss the quotation (showing your readers what you want us to see in the quotation). Your handling of the "theory" source should be detailed enough that by the time I finish reading about each theory source, I should be able to see how it will help you develop your analysis of your object of study.

REQUIREMENTS

- *Your "theory" sources for this section should have been found through the library's services and MUST be one of the following types of sources:*
  - *scholarly journal article*
  - *book*
  - *legal case*
- *Your "theory" sources must explore different information/ideas (i.e., two "theory" sources explaining that trash talk is beneficial in the heat of a game would be redundant)*
- *Include one or two italicized sentences (but not more) at the end of each SCaD paragraph that briefly applies that theory source to a specific aspect of your object of study, to show the line of analysis you plan to use the theory source to develop in the final paper.*

Target length = Approximately 2 pages

3. "Research" Questions: 15 pts

REQUIREMENTS:

At the beginning of this section (which can be a bullet-pointed list of questions), re-name the scholarly framework from which the questions will arise.

- Present at least *three questions*—more, if possible—from the named framework
- **Name (in parentheses next to each question) the theory source(s) that will help you answer that particular question.**
- The questions *MUST be articulated in terms of your object of study* because your paper is about the object of study, *not* your theory sources.
- *At least one major set of debates should be visible in your questions.*

NOTE: "Research" questions are open-ended questions that invite analysis, interpretation, or argument *about your object of study*. The work of your final paper will be to answer those questions.

4. Keywords: 10 pts

Definition: Keywords are words that you, as the researcher and writer, plan to explicitly define in your final paper in order to shape how your readers think about those terms.

REQUIREMENTS:

- Devote one full paragraph to defining a keyword
- *Cite at least one scholar (and possibly more)* to help you establish your definition ("scholar" means you need to draw on scholarly journal articles, books, or legal cases). Introduce your source, draw upon a quotation to help you define the keyword, and explicate the quotation.
- Make visible to the reader (explicitly or implicitly) why you picked this keyword (i.e., why giving it a precise definition matters to your project)

TIP: Do *not* cite a dictionary definition or encyclopedia (including Wikipedia). Doing so would signal to your reader that you're not an expert on this topic—and that's a problem in a research paper. Instead, cite the scholars you've been reading: use these definitions to make visible the range and depth of your research to your readers. A potential exception to this rule is profane words. For instance, while a number of scholars have provided definitions of the "n-word" and "bitch," it's very difficult to find scholars who provide definitions of the f-slur or "gay." If you are struggling to find a scholarly definition for one of your keywords, talk to Prof. Hayes about it.

5. Correct grammar/Clear of typos: 5 pts
NOTE: Not a subheading—this is a grading criterion

6. Correct formatting of the Works Cited page: 10 pts
NOTE: Not a subheading—this is a grading criterion

Final Research Project

PERCENTAGE OF FINAL GRADE: 35%

Assignment

This paper will bring together all of the work you have done this semester. It should present, in beautifully worded prose, a provocative, complex, and persuasive argument about an object of study that focuses on a specific, profane utterance. Contextualize that utterance in order to make visible the impact of the rhetorical situation on the word/phrase as it was used in that particular time and place.

Your argument about this object of study should…

- Be grounded in the research you have done on your object of study;
- Include whatever background context your readers will need to understand your argument fully;
- Be shaped by your exploration of theory sources drawn from at least one framework;
- Make visible the exigency for writing this paper (the immediate, pressing need for the intervention you are making in the conversation surrounding your object of study).

NOTE: This essay is not an extended summary of (or report on) your various sources. Instead, it is your opportunity to make an original contribution to the conversation surrounding the object of study that you are examining.

Technical details

- **2500-3000 words**, double-spaced lines, one-inch margins, 12 point font, Times New Roman or Arial. Number the pages. *Please include your final word count (not including the References page, DO include the title page and abstract in the word count) in parentheses after the final paragraph of the paper.*
- **References (APA format)** with **a minimum of 8 sources**, including at least three scholarly sources. At least one of the three scholarly sources must be a book; at least one must be a scholarly journal article.

Notes

[1]I adapted this term from Greene's (2001) discussion of "framing" writing.

[2]There is considerable debate on the role of FYW in American universities. I agree with scholars who argue that what constitutes "good" writing is determined by the disciplines (Crowley, 1991), discourse communities (Beaufort, 2007), or activity systems (Russell, 1995) in which writers work. However, I also agree with writing transfer scholars who argue that FYW *can* help transition students from high school to college-level writing through attention to writing transfer-enhancing moves (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Gorzelsky et al., 2017; Yancey et al., 2014).

[3]When working with graduate students, I add a fourth section to the prospectus: a literature review. For reasons explained later in the article, I exclude a literature review from the FYW version of the assignment.

[4]In past years, I defined the assignment vocabulary in the final paper prompt, which students read first. Based on reviewer feedback for this article, however, this year I moved the assignment vocabulary ("object of study," "frameworks") to a new introductory "overview" of the prospectus and final paper, which worked well.

[5]With this student's permission, I have posted their prospectus to my George Washington University faculty web page to serve as a sample prospectus for interested readers. It is also available at part of the Supplementary Materials on this journal's website.

[6]For scholarship on the impact of practice, see Ericsson (2006), Kellogg and Whiteford (2009), and Schwartz et al. (2005).

[7]In the prompt, two other options are presented that allow students to explore objects of study that have not been discussed by scholars.

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.v5i2.63.

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If They Build It

Student-Designed Assignments in a Molecular Biology Laboratory

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Abstract

In an undergraduate biochemistry and molecular biology lab course, students designed their own final assignment to communicate their laboratory work to non-disciplinary audiences. A "meta-assignment" guided them as they proposed the content, form, and process requirements. Students strove to develop unique ideas, and all successfully completed their self-assigned projects. Providing students in this class with the freedom, responsibility, and appropriate scaffolding to build their own projects and learning experiences allowed them to interact with their discipline in new ways and enhanced their abilities to design and plan their work, communicate scientific ideas to nonscientists, and think creatively.

Reflective Essay

Giving students more control over their work can enrich a classroom (Boersma et al., 2001). Here, I describe a nested assignment in which students design and propose their own writing projects and then complete them. In this activity, the student, rather than the instructor, decides the product of the assignment, the process by which they will work on the assignment, and the parameters by which the product should be judged. My experience teaching this assignment has suggested to me that when students define the expectations and outcomes of a learning activity, they take greater ownership over their academic experience, enhance their project planning and management skills, and deploy creative forms of communication.

I first asked students to design their own assignments in a writing-intensive laboratory course in molecular genetics at Penn State Berks, a small college in the Penn State University system. There were sixteen students in the class, all majors in biochemistry and molecular biology, all graduating seniors. In this de facto capstone course, students spend most of the semester on an extended lab project that integrates theory and technique and involves both wet work and computational biology. To complement the notebooks, lab reports, and problem sets that form the backbone of assessments in the course, I sought an activity that would engage them in a unique way. In prior offerings, I had found that seniors looking forward to commencement could become distracted from their classwork. In addition, I presumed that in postgraduate school or in the workplace, they would be taking more responsibility for planning, executing, and assessing their work. I sensed that students at this stage of their education were ready for a different kind of assignment: I wondered, specifically, if my detailed learning objectives and finely gridded rubrics were overly prescriptive, possibly even stifling, to students who were ready to grow as independent thinkers. As Anderson and Krathwohl (2001), in their seminal revision of Bloom's taxonomy, put it: "Not all important learning outcomes can, should, or must be stated as a priori objectives" (p. 21). I wanted to provide "a *direction* for learning, but not a particular *destination*" (p. 21).

Furthermore, I wanted to encourage them to expand their understanding of how to communicate science. Although lab reports and PowerPoint talks are sturdy, dependable frames

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for showcasing disciplinary knowledge and practicing writing within the conventions of their field, there are benefits to students learning to present and interpret their work through other forms and to other audiences. For instance, those trained in the discipline increasingly have been called upon to translate science to the public (Brownell et al., 2013; Greenwood & Riordan, 2001). Communicating to a nonscientific audience requires "deliberate practice and careful attention to language" as well as an expanded rhetorical awareness that will serve students in future contexts in science and beyond (Brownell et al., 2013). Presenting to non-specialists also gives scientists at all levels an opportunity to reconsider and reengage with their work while serving out a "civic duty" (Greenwood & Riordan, 2001).

Therefore, rather than assign my students one final lab report, I asked them to design their own assignments, presenting their laboratory work from the semester in a format of their choice to an audience of their choosing. That year, their lab project involved cloning, sequencing, and analyzing a series of plant genes that encoded glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase, a commonly studied housekeeping enzyme, to allow determination of evolutionary relationships among the plants. The project was based on approaches described by Lau and Robinson (2009) and Hall (2013). I instructed the students to tell the "story" of this lab work, to consider how they wanted their story to be evaluated, and to devise a workplan for creating, revising, and refining their story. By referring to what they were making as a story rather than a report or manuscript, I hoped to guide them away from academic and disciplinary forms and toward reflecting on their lab work not only as a collection of procedures, experiments, data, and ideas, but also as an experience.

I had set them loose to wander territory that was likely unfamiliar and perhaps unsettling. As a kind of map, I gave them a "meta-assignment" that I hoped would enable them to explore without imposing undue constraints on them. This assignment about the assignment they were to design instructed them to generate proposals in three parts. The first part described what content they were planning to include, how they would tell their stories, to whom and for what purpose—a recast version of John Bean's (2011) "RAFT" for writing assignments that defines a role, audience, format, and topic for student writing. In this case, however, students built their own RAFTs. I suggested possible forms, genres, and media: a recorded TED talk? an interview? an article in a popular science magazine? (Lab reports, posters, and PowerPoint presentations were not forbidden, but students agreed that those did not represent the most interesting possibilities.) I also emphasized they could choose other forms as their imagination and judgment allowed. Their audiences could range from young children (a challenge for the budding molecular geneticist) to a peer group with expertise equal to theirs. I asked them to envision the situation surrounding their storytelling and the purpose of their communication. What they presented would be their lab work, of course, but they would choose the scope and the level of detail. Providing students with control over and responsibility for these components forced them to reckon with how the parts of a RAFT are connected and interdependent.

In the second part of their proposals, students constructed rubrics for the assessment of their own projects. I hoped that describing important measures of achievement in their proposed work would further help them conceive of the dimensions and shape their work ultimately might take. This aspect of the proposal was not intended to teach students how to make a rubric, but to encourage them to think about, as they were planning their project, how they would like it to be evaluated. Suggested rubric categories included the breadth, depth, and/or accuracy of their technical content; the focus, clarity, and organization of the presentation; elements of style; and mechanics.

In the proposal's third section, students outlined a workplan. They could work with a partner or alone; most chose to work with the partner they had been paired with throughout the

semester for lab work, but two students decided to work by themselves. Collaborators defined who would generate what content and how they would work together to revise and refine. They set deadlines and deliverables, including dates for drafts and peer and instructor feedback. In other words, they took responsibility for managing the workflow of this long-term project.

I stipulated two requirements, which I intended as guardrails to keep the students on track. First, I told them I needed to approve their three-part proposals. I gave them hard deadlines for a draft proposal and, three weeks later, for final approval. Students then had, at minimum, three weeks remaining in the semester to execute the project. Proposal approval required several rounds of feedback and revision—this scaffolding was meant to ensure high-quality proposals from all students. For instance, I asked groups to think about what would make their telling of the story unique, or to reimagine the purpose of their communication (e.g. Why would employees of this hypothetical biotech company need to understand the particulars of this molecular genetics project?); or to adjust their format to speak to the audience more effectively, or more carefully consider the audience itself (e.g. Does the owner's age for this fictional Facebook page imply something about the friends he is speaking to?); or to rethink the kind of content that might be appropriate or possible for a given format (e.g. What topics are necessary and engaging enough to teach elementary school children the basic idea of gene cloning?). For this part of the proposal, I tended to offer feedback as a potential audience member rather than a genre expert; fortunately, students chose audiences I was familiar with and whose perspectives I could adopt. In response to the proposed rubrics, I guided students to expand categories (e.g."Grammatically correct" could be broadened to "clarity" and describe both text and diagrams.); better define the levels of mastery (e.g. Provide specific details to explain the difference between "not very organized" and "organized, but needs improvement."); recalibrate the weighting of categories (e.g. A product that's "successful" in a category should probably earn more than 75% credit.). Regarding workplans, I suggested how they could solicit feedback on drafts from their peers (even from outside the class) as well as from me or other faculty.

In addition to gaining approval of their proposals, students needed to work according to what they proposed. (Any substantive modifications to their proposal required reapproval.) I would assess each final product according to its corresponding rubric for two-thirds of the grade. The remaining one-third would reflect the student's ability to work as they had planned: a compilation of all drafts and feedback in dated order for each project was compared against its respective workplan. Thus, students were accountable not only for what they were proposing to make but also how they were proposing to make it. They were building their own learning structures.

Along with the meta-assignment, I provided an example I created of a full proposal with RAFT, rubric, and workplan (see Model Proposal). What I left out, however, was any particular expectation about what they would make. That discomfited some of them, but most took up the challenge without complaint. And once they started dreaming up ideas, they strove to develop their own original concepts. Many students adopted digital forms to tell their stories. The use of electronic media likely reflected their environment and upbringing and also anticipates the thinking, doing, and making in which they will engage in the future, where digital fluency will play an increasingly large role (Brown, 2006; Sparrow, 2018). All students made the project personal and—through cycles of feedback and revision as described above—thoughtfully considered role, audience, form, and topic. For instance, one student, who would enter business development after graduating, worked with another student to create media directed at a sales force pitching courseware to biochemistry lab instructors. In addition to providing a technical overview of the lab work they had done that semester, they surveyed their peers and instructor

for input about the educational quality of the gene cloning, sequencing, and bioinformatics work and then packaged the content into a training video for the sales teams. Another pair of students, both of whom worked as ambassadors for our college's admissions office, created a glossy issue of a digital magazine featuring biochemistry labs to interest prospective students in the major. Using Microsoft Publisher, they assembled an overview of the scientific project and illustrations and descriptions of the various experimental techniques used in their bench work. They also included photos and short bios of themselves and described their future career plans and career outlook for students in the major. Another student chronicled her experiences throughout the semester in a series of emails to her nonscientist mother. This endeavor required translating jargon and explaining technical concepts in even simpler terms than the magazine and the training video. It also inspired this student to simultaneously tell the story of a semester in the life of a college senior. Other examples of student work in this class included a blog and a Facebook page for fellow science students, lessons to introduce molecular cell biology to school-age (K-5) children, and a whodunit graphic novella featuring department faculty and depicting the application of molecular biology to forensics.

Grades became less important in this milieu: students never mentioned them to me. They remained motivated, however. They addressed my suggestions on the first drafts of their proposals, and the second drafts, and the third. Everyone obtained approval by the deadline. And then they scrambled to outdo one another in executing their proposals. There was no strife either within groups or between individuals, but there was a spirit of competition in the class, perhaps reflecting their level of investment in the work. Everybody completed their proposed projects according to their plans. Seeing their engagement and excitement, I suggested we put on a showcase event for the science division. They agreed and, during the middle of final exams week, presented their projects in a mini-symposium attended by friends and faculty (many at the students' invitation) across the division and the campus.[1] After the showcase, the students completed an optional, anonymous survey, in which they unanimously agreed the experience had helped increase their creativity and prepared them for a more independent phase of their educational journey and even had increased their interest in molecular genetics. They expressed appreciation for the chance to develop their creative, collaborative, and time management skills and called it "rewarding," "challenging," and "fun." They talked about how it was "nerve-wracking" to work without structure, and how at the same time they "loved the freedom."

Like any learning activity, how students respond to designing their own assignment depends on context. Last year, I adapted the strategy of student-designed assignments in an upper-division seminar in structural biology.[2] In the survey described above, several of the molecular genetics students had suggested giving future classes more time to generate ideas, and so I introduced the meta-assignment to these structural biology students before the midpoint of the semester.[3] They did not begin working in earnest, however, until near the proposal due date, two-thirds through the term. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had abruptly switched from face-to-face classes to meeting online, and the quality of their project proposals, despite my feedback, was uneven. I was disappointed but not surprised, given their procrastination and the challenges of maintaining engagement and communication in the emergency online learning environment. I decided to de-emphasize the proposals and instead asked students to present (through Zoom) their proposed ideas and preliminary work to me and their classmates for informal feedback. That is, we transformed the remote classroom into an online workshop, a digital studio (Brown, 2006). This additional (ungraded) requirement of presenting their early ideas activated the structural biology class. As they showed their works in progress through Zoom, students who had already devoted significant time and attention to the projects—and

there were several—impressed their classmates. Students who had not—and there were several of those, too—sheepishly deprecated their own efforts. More importantly, they subsequently reconsidered their projects, in some cases submitting entirely new proposals to me.

After receiving feedback in this workshop setting, the structural biology students, like the molecular genetics students the year before, submitted final projects that reflected a high degree of creativity and investment: a podcast telling the story of genetically engineered insulin, a fable in which a medieval village falls victim to a disease caused by proteinaceous infection, a virtual museum of protein structures toured from a first-person perspective. There was a concept for a Disney Epcot-like attraction that would entertain and educate theme park guests by engaging them in a game that simulated, in impressive detail, proteins being assembled, folding, and interacting with one another. This project included a portfolio of drawings depicting the overall layout of the exhibit, the various stages of the game itself, an anthropomorphized double-helix mascot named Eugene; a written statement describing the genesis and evolution of the ideas; and a three-dimensional scale model of the entire gaming station. In other words, the effort revealed the student's interest in themed entertainment design and his artistic and scientific talents, and also a motivation to exceed not only my (and his) initial hopes for the project, but to surpass even my (and his) increased anticipation following the presentation of his preliminary sketches and drafts. Other course components—homework, seminar discussions, problem sets, cumulative exams—evaluated the depth of the students' disciplinary knowledge; these submissions showed not only how the students learned to convey those complex scientific concepts to nonscientist audiences but also how engaging students' creativity can enhance their interaction with a narrow, specialized discipline.

The usefulness of the workshop component in the structural biology course suggests other ways to adapt and improve student-designed assignments. Although I have asked students to include peer review in their workplans, instituting a more formal peer review process could add another layer of "nesting" to the experience. Greater emphasis on peer review—with guidelines for effective review—would provide students with additional early feedback on their proposals and projects while building their communication and collaborative skills (Nilson, 2003). It also could help reviewers see the assignment and their own proposals and projects from a different perspective. For projects with nonscientist audiences, incorporating reviews from readers and viewers outside the class would encourage students to consider even more carefully how to reach their intended audiences and how to better align their standards of evaluation to them. Although the rubrics worked well enough for my grading the projects, students have tended to emphasize typical writing elements regarding content, organization, style, and mechanics. While students are not necessarily training to become teachers (and rubric-makers), having them more intentionally define how their work might and should be received and judged by the people they are targeting should further deepen the experience.

Instructors are always balancing objectives and detailed directions against creativity and independent thinking—creativity, after all, depends on structure (Goldenberg et al., 1999)—and we have to weigh things differently for seniors and first-years, in small classes and large, for different disciplines, different courses, even different sections of the same course. Whether any lesson "works" in a given context depends on many factors. Regardless, my experiences with student-designed assignments demonstrated to me the value of exploring different ways to define (or not) expectations in a variety of situations. From an essay question on a final exam asking general biology students to nominate a creature for "most awesome organism in the world" to incorporating a semester-long undergraduate research experience into a lab course (Auchincloss et al., 2014), I have tried to give students the room and the materials to build. And, with the right guidance, they have responded. By both providing structure and clearing space,

and by doing so with intention and care, we can create places with the potential for deeper engagement, surprise, and delight—for us and for our students.

ASSIGNMENT

Meta-Assignment

Overview

In the final project for the course, you'll design your own assignment and then create an original work to complete your assignment. This "product" will tell the story of your GAPDH molecular cloning and bioinformatics work this semester. You'll tell the story in a format of your choice, to an audience of your choice. You will also decide how to evaluate the success of your storytelling.

You'll start by developing a project proposal, which I must approve, and then you'll develop the product itself. Both the product and the process by which you create it are integral to this project.

You may work with a partner or you may work alone for this project. If you choose to collaborate, both of you will receive the same grade.

Rationale

This final project is a bit out of the norm for me, and perhaps for you, too. Since many of you are nearing the end of your college career and will be moving into a more independent phase of your educational journey, I want to give you the freedom and responsibility to develop your own learning experience. Through this activity, I anticipate you'll increase your competency in project design, planning, and evaluation and improve your ability to communicate scientific knowledge. I also hope that in developing your own project and by generating work that's more "creative" than, say, a typical lab report, you'll gain a broader perspective on science, communication, and learning itself.

The Project Proposal

There are two hard-and-fast requirements for this project: I must approve your proposal, and you must work according to what you propose. If, in the course of creating your product, you wish to alter your approved proposal, I must approve the modification.

Developing the proposal will take some brainstorming (maybe a bit of daydreaming?) and some outside research. Approval will likely require multiple rounds of drafting and revision. Develop your proposal as soon as possible and gather feedback on it from me, your classmates, and other interested parties.

Your project proposal will describe the product you wish to create, the rubric against which your product will be evaluated, and the process by which you will create the product. Each of these components is described below.

Proposal Part 1: What will you create?

Imagine what your final product looks like. What's your story? Who are you speaking to, and why? How will you tell your story? These questions (detailed below) are interrelated—so as you refine and reimagine your product, you'll want to consider these elements in combination.

1. Content: What will you present?

Naturally, you'll be communicating essential aspects of your work with GAPDH cloning and plant phylogeny, but you'll need to decide the scope and depth and how to frame your story. Some of you will want to include some of the fine details—for instance, the use of the Eco47IR gene as a selection tool for subcloning, or BLASTing a genomic query sequence against the mRNA database to identify the intron-exon boundaries, or how MEGA aligns sequences and calculates a phylogenetic tree. Others will use broader brush strokes to provide a higher-level description of the work.

What you emphasize will depend on your audience, format, and purpose.

In your proposal, define your content as precisely as you can—that will make it easier to create your product.

2. Format: How will you tell your story?

   You may present your story in any form using words (written or spoken). You may also use graphics or multimedia, but don't tell your story solely with visual imagery.

   Some options: a nonfiction article (for example, for a popular science magazine), a creative essay, an exchange of letters, an interview (written or filmed), an instructional resource or teaching guide, a PowerPoint or TED talk, a video essay, a graphic novella, a poster, a website, or . . .

   As you decide on the genre and media for telling your story, explain why that form is particularly suited to your content, audience, and purpose.

   By the way, you should have some familiarity with the genre / media you choose—or at least a willingness to learn about it!

   Again, providing specifics here will help you think out possible directions for the project and pave the way for the product creation phase of the project. Include an approximate length to help define the scope of your work.

3. Audience: To whom will you speak?

   If you choose a more creative genre, you may be presenting to a lay audience who has little knowledge of molecular genetics. More technical forms might target other potential students in the course, or even instructors.

   As in the example below, you may speak to yourself, but not solely to yourself. Or you may wish to speak to a particular person important in your life or choose a wider audience. Depending on your project's format, you may define more than one audience.

4. Purpose: What do you seek to accomplish with the work?

   To inform? Entertain? Persuade?

   Your purpose in telling a story is tied to the way you tell it and to whom—and what story you ultimately tell.

Once you've answered these four questions for yourself, describe your responses in your proposal. Start with an overview that shows how these elements of the story are interconnected in your proposed work. Then explicitly describe each of the elements (not necessarily in the above order).

Proposal Part 2: How should your creation be evaluated?

Define the criteria by which you will define success. Consider aspects of the work such as the quality and development of ideas—this could be the accuracy, scope, and depth of technical content; how you frame your argument (the background and rationale); focus and clarity and the logical connection between your main ideas and supporting details. You might also think about presentation style, mechanics, and/or other appropriate categories.

Assemble a **rubric** based on these criteria.

First, define the criteria and the characteristics of a successful product. Include categories that address the scientific content, the quality of communication, and the impact of the work. Within each category, you may define the various levels of achievement—for example, what constitutes "A" level work, "B" work, "C", etc.

Then, if you desire, weight the categories in your rubric as you see fit. Or you may choose not to define weights if you believe your work should be evaluated in a more comprehensive or holistic manner. (The example below uses a holistic rubric.)

Proposal Part 3: How will you create this work?

As you probably know, a plan helps you organize, manage, and hold yourself accountable. Draft a **workplan** that will keep you on track for successfully completing the project.

This workplan should detail deadlines and "deliverables." Deliverables will include the outlines, storyboards, rough drafts, sketches, etc. that you'll create as you progress through the project.

Deliverables also include self-assessments, peer feedback, and instructor feedback that you'll use to guide your revisions—you must include each of these elements in your proposal for approval.

If you're working with a partner, please indicate this. Also, detail in your workplan who is responsible for what.

At the end of the project, in addition to the final draft of your work, you'll submit a portfolio that includes all formative works—drafts, feedback, etc. with the dates of completion. (Save copies of everything!)

Grading

I'll evaluate your project on the final product (judging it against your rubric, 100 points) and the process by which you created it (judging your portfolio against your workplan, 50 points).

I'll also ask you to evaluate your final project experience. This will give you an opportunity to reflect on what you learned and will help me assess and revise the project for the next class of students!

Notes

[1]Fifteen students participated in the showcase. One student missed the event when he was called away at the last minute to pick up his grandmother at the airport; she was flying in for the graduation ceremony three days later. He apologized to me and his partner, profusely.

[2]I also introduced the idea of student-designed assignments in the molecular genetics lab course again, but as the COVID-19 pandemic developed, the class decided on a different final project instead, one in which students collaborated on creating a website about the coronavirus and the disease.

[3]In the prior offering of the molecular genetics lab, I had scheduled the introduction of the final project so that students already would have completed much of the wet work. Although they had not yet started the bioinformatics phase, they proved able to include that additional content into their final projects. Thus, I felt comfortable introducing the final project idea earlier in the structural biology class.

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.v5i2.85.

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A Multifaceted Editing and Reflection Project

The DEE-CR Project

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Abstract

This article describes a major assignment in an undergraduate editing course in the Writing and Rhetoric major at St. Edward's University. The DEE-CR (Describe, Evaluate, Edit, Communicate, Reflect) project assignment is an individual assignment that asks students to find a particular non-fiction text that would benefit from the attention of an adept editor, to describe and contextualize it, to evaluate it, to edit it, to practice communicating edits to an author, and finally to reflect on lessons learned. I will describe the assignment's design and purposes, reflect on some outcomes and challenges, and close by offering advice to readers of *Prompt* who might consider adapting the assignment for their courses.

Relevant Contexts for the Assignment

Nationwide, the number of undergraduate writing majors has grown in the past twenty years, even in the face of enrollment challenges and shifting institutional priorities. As Louise Wetherbee Phelps explains, despite difficulties in tracking "reliable and stable data" on independent writing programs, self-reported case studies and other data establish that such programs have flourished even "during times of turbulence and disruptive change in higher education" (Phelps, 2019, p. vii). Writing majors aim to help students develop skills and experience in writing, argumentation, rhetoric, and editing so that they can communicate better and help others do the same. Specialized courses in editing, usually as part of upper-division coursework, are a staple of writing majors, such as those documented in Giberson et al. (2015) and Matzen and Abraham (2019).

St. Edward's University, where I have taught this assignment, is a small, primarily undergraduate university in Austin, Texas and a designated Hispanic-Serving Institution. Since 1987, St. Edward's has offered an undergraduate degree in writing and rhetoric. The Writing and Rhetoric (WRIT) major offers students four concentrations: creative writing, professional writing, journalism and digital media, or a flexible "general" concentration. WRIT 3330: The Craft of Editing is a junior-level course in the major's core and thus is taken by all WRIT students. The course builds on an earlier course in grammar and style (or journalistic copyediting for those concentrators).

WRIT 3330 features two categories of work: a) daily work and b) two major assignments. A typical daily work session features pre-class preparation and a hands-on activity during class time. To prepare for class sessions, students complete assigned readings from two required textbooks—Williams and Bizup's (2017) *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace* and *The Chicago Manual of Style* (2017)—and other materials on topics such as levels of edits, the editor's role, clarity, sentence emphasis, cohesion and coherence, structure, concision, or usage. After completing the readings, students answer discussion prompts on the course learning management system (LMS). The discussion prompts help students to understand concepts from the readings and

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connect them to their own experiences as writers and editors. The discussion posts also help to identify areas of confusion that can be addressed at the beginning of the class session. During the class session, students are given a text to work on in small groups so that they can apply course concepts and gain experience in editing for particular concerns. After the groups have hashed out their editorial suggestions for the day's text, the class comes together as a whole to compare the groups' suggestions and connect the day's work to previous lessons. Work from these hands-on sessions is shared in a Google Drive folder that makes the day-to-day work of the course visible and accessible.

In addition to daily work, the course asks students to complete two major multi-week assignments: the individual DEE-CR assignment and a collaborative developmental editing assignment. These two assignments involve significant time for invention and review and can be revised and resubmitted after grading. Revision policies encourage students to meet with the instructor, apply the feedback they receive, and rework submissions for a (potentially) replaced grade. Those policies also ask students to write a detailed revision memo and use Microsoft Word or other software to make a "blackline" document showing all differences between the original and revised submissions.[1]

DEE-CR Project Goals and Features

The DEE-CR assignment is the first of the two major projects in the course. It aims to help students to develop several skills and dispositions:

a) **Student interest and accountability** in choosing texts to work with (albeit with some constraints);
b) **Sufficient research** to establish the context, genre, audience, and purpose of the text to be edited;
c) **Accurate description** of the chosen text and its context;
d) **Evaluation** of the text's effectiveness and identification of areas for improvement via the intervention of a supportive editor;
e) **Judicious editing** via professional software;
f) **Clear, actionable, supportive feedback** to the author; and
g) **Metacognitive, synthetic reflection** on experience.

The assignment is designed to help students to bridge the gap between working primarily with their own texts and working with others' texts effectively, precisely, and ethically. It asks students to describe, analyze, evaluate, and judiciously edit a text; use authoritative sources; develop clear, supportive communication; and reflect on their knowledge and experiences.

In years past, editing courses might have focused on hand markup of hard-copy texts, but digital technologies have changed how texts are produced and circulated (Arnett, 2013). Brumberger and Lauer (2015) studied 914 professional writing and editing advertisements and found that specific technologies mentioned in the ads included Microsoft Office; Adobe Acrobat; and image-editing, content management, and web authoring tools. In a later observational and interview-based study, Lauer and Brumberger (2019) found that careers in professional writing require employees to produce and edit a range of genres, no longer limited to the primarily textual. Yet even while primarily textual genres are no longer dominant in some contexts, employers continue to seek applicants skilled in written communication, problem-solving, and attention to detail (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2020). Also, the WRIT major's internal data on alumni career outcomes show that our graduates identify skills in editing, grammar, and revision of texts as crucial to their success. Thus, the DEE-CR assignment

asks students to use professional software to edit digitally and to choose a primarily textual genre.

D: Describe

The choice of text is a crucial moment for students and forms the basis of the assignment's first section ("D" for Describe). Because of local contexts, the assignment requires a non-fiction text. At St. Edward's, all WRIT majors, regardless of their concentration, take one introductory course in all of the concentrations. Thus, students in WRIT 3330 have already taken at least one creative writing course that teaches them how to give editorial advice to fiction writers for plot, characterization, setting, and dialogue. Moreover, about half of WRIT majors specialize in creative writing. As a result, all WRIT students have received practice in editing fiction, and about half of them will receive extensive practice. To help students continue to develop a broad range of editing skills, this assignment stipulates a non-fiction text.

A few other restrictions are in place: students may not work on their own writing or on fellow students' writing (such as papers written for other classes), nor are they allowed to select texts from collections of bad writing. Finally, they may not choose articles in the university newspaper because such texts are fairly short and students may work for the paper as paid editors. These guidelines help students to examine a greater range of texts than they might otherwise choose and don't duplicate other editing experiences that students receive throughout the WRIT major.

At first, some students will choose short, insubstantial texts or texts that are too extensive. This challenge is not fixable under any simple rule. Because is more valuable for students to work on texts that they choose than for me to assign a particular text, making the process of text selection a guided negotiation with adequate time and support is critical. Discussion board posts, workshops, and individual conversations with students are crucial to working out the selection of texts. It is also important to be flexible; for instance, representative samples of a lengthy work might be valuable if the student can show a particular reason for wanting to work with a text too extensive as-is. By the same token, a shorter text is not necessarily insubstantial.

The texts that students have chosen so far vary significantly; they include university communications; press releases; opinion articles; corporate documents; various club, governmental, and organization websites; communications they receive from landlords; and others. To help future classes explore their own choices, I have made a list of the texts students have chosen. The list, which can be supplemented every time the assignment is taught, can help in exploratory activities and in negotiating students' choices. To help students choose a text, I ask them to post a range of possible texts that they are considering to an LMS discussion board and answer a written prompt about each possible text. The prompt asks students to describe the text, identify where they found it, explain what they already know about it, and explore why they find it possibly fruitful to work on. In class workshops, the choice of text can then be hashed out.

One recurring mantra of the course is that "no text comes out of a vacuum or enters one." Thus, students must provide a reasonably full picture of the context and exigence for their chosen text via research. WRIT students at the junior level will have already gained experience in contextualizing texts through earlier required courses, including courses in rhetorical analysis and workplace writing. Class workshops and pre-class posts to the course's discussion board guide students to develop the background necessary to make warranted observations about the text's audience, purpose, and genre expectations. This background material could include contemporaneous news accounts, additional materials from or about the organization or author that produced the text, or authoritative guidance on genre expectations. Students are expected to integrate and cite all sources that help them establish the situational exigence from which the text arose.

E: Evaluate

The second section of the assignment ("E" for Evaluate) asks students to evaluate the text in its context, to judge how effective it is, and to point out opportunities to help the author better achieve their goals. Students build upon earlier work in the WRIT curriculum, including the prerequisite course in grammar and style and a 2000-level course in analyzing rhetoric, and use new material from this course to ground their evaluation of the text in defensible judgments. The two required textbooks help students to anchor particular judgments in well-supported rationales. If their chosen text was subject to an institutional style guide or publication's house style, the assignment asks the student to identify and use those particular rules in editing the text and to include them in their submission, typically by a hyperlink.

E: Edit

The third section of the assignment ("E" for Edit) is the actual editing. Drawing on the daily work components of the course, students work closely with the text, deciding what to keep and what to change, what to rework, what to move, what to combine, condense, and the like so their edits advance the author's goals and do not merely reflect the student's own preferences. To show their edits clearly, most students use Microsoft Word's "track changes" feature or the editing tools in Adobe Acrobat, both widely adopted in professional editing contexts. At St. Edward's, students have access to the Office 365 suite as part of the university's IT support. Students may also subscribe to the Adobe Creative Cloud at a discount, and many WRIT students do. Also, all public computers on campus have Office and Creative Cloud installed.

But even with these supports in place, I learned to be flexible in specifying particular software. Alternative change-tracking word processors, such as the free, open-source LibreOffice Writer can also work well, and Google Docs has recently added a document comparison feature. Also, free PDF applications such as Adobe Reader, Mac Preview, or Xodo provide commenting tools that can be used to edit texts effectively. At St. Edward's, all students have access to Google Workspace and might prefer to work in Google Docs before exporting to other formats. With support, students can find a solution that works for them, but some class time for exploration and troubleshooting is necessary. While most students have used word processors and PDF reading applications before, they do not have much practice in using digital software in an editing workflow beyond the commenting feature of Google Docs. Thus, direct instruction and practice are necessary so that each student can make an effective choice of digital tool and feel confident in using it.

C: Communicate

The fourth section of the assignment ("C" for Communicate) asks students to write an (unsent) email addressed to the author so they can communicate clearly and diplomatically, explain their edits, ask questions, and ground editorial feedback in sound foundations. In this section, students identify and describe their edits, ask questions of the author where needed, and make a specific request for action by the author to review and communicate about the edits. *The Chicago Manual of Style* (2017) and sources such as Mackiewicz and Riley (2003) on clarity and politeness strategies, and Speck (1991) on editorial dialogue help students to develop their emails and test different strategies to communicate with authors. The simulated author-editor relationship assumes a future exchange where the edits are discussed and finalized. The email to the author is simulated, not sent. While Spinuzzi (1996) rightly warns of the dangers of "pseudotransactionality"—writing only for the teacher even in professional writing genres—students do not email the author because the pressure to communicate directly with the author might skew students' choices of texts and editorial advice. Many authors are unlikely to welcome

an unsolicited email from an undergraduate with editorial advice. Moreover, I teach the project in the context of a 4/4 workload of writing classes, so the added labor and supervision that direct communication with the author would entail are not sustainable. Asking students to work within an imagined author/editor relationship has, so far, been successful (see student comments below). To enable that imagined relationship, the advice that I give to students in responding to this section of the project underscores how important it is to establish the text's context and ground judicious edits in sound rationales. In my comments to students, I do not pretend to be the author of the text being edited, but rather act as a guide to helping the student make their suggestions clear, warranted, nuanced, sensitive, and helpful if, in the imagined situation, the communication were to be sent to the author.

R: Reflect

The assignment's final section is ("R" for Reflect) asks students to reflect on their choices in editing the text and communicating with the author. As Yancey (2016) explains, reflection is "an epistemological practice based in experience and the theorizing of that experience" (p. 318). Thus, the goal of this section is for students to build a substantive "so what?" point about the problems and opportunities of editing texts, and to connect their work on the DEE-CR assignment to their previous experiences and their emerging skills as editors. This section helps students to trace the journey from understanding a text in its context to making judicious edits to communicating them to the author to making knowledge about how editing someone else's text could help them in their own writing and editing. This final section imagines a composite audience: the student speaking on the page to their past and present selves (i.e. a first-person explanation of "what I learned from this experience" and "what I might do with that knowledge") and to me as the evaluator of their work looking for evidence of their efforts to make something of their experience. One advantage to teaching in a writing major is that students are accustomed to submitting writer's memos, revision memos, reflective essays, and other metacognitive texts that ask them to make knowledge from experience. Despite what might seem to be yet another "reflect on this" requirement, students take this section of the assignment quite seriously. They want to make connections between academic and personal experiences and want assignments to be meaningful. So long as this section contains evidence of a good-faith effort to make meaning from experience, I comment more as a conversation partner than an evaluator in this section.

Reflection and Teaching Notes

Overall, comments in course evaluations show that students see the DEE-CR assignment as valuable, realistic, and relevant. As one student put it, the assignment requires both "small-scale sentence-level editing" and "meta-analysis" of larger concepts such as coherence and cohesion. Another student commented that "My edits are much more judicious compared to how they were before" given the need to ground them in relevant authorities and communicate them gracefully.

Students' comments in the Reflection section provide some evidence of how they are building knowledge from their experiences.[2] For example, one student wrote that "I didn't anticipate how frustrating it would be to . . . restrain myself from just rewriting things into my own conception of 'better.' . . . If there was a change I couldn't justify in the text, then it made me stop and really ask why I wanted a change there at all." That same student added that "Having to address this project as though the author was going to read it . . . changed the tone of my editing. . . . That [experience] is something I should bring forward into all the editing I do."

Table 1. Suggested Timeline for DEE-CR Project. Assignment Week 1 corresponds to Week 4 in the course, after basics of editing have been practiced.

Week(s)	Activity
1	Introduction to assignment, preliminary activities.
2	Possible texts explored.
3–4	Negotiation of/commitment to chosen text, in-process workshops, discussions, and activities; iteration/feedback on low-stakes drafts.
5	Peer review of full drafts, polishing/editing workshop, submission for grading/feedback/revision cycle begins.
7 or 8	Revisions submitted.

Another student drew on their experiences working in the campus writing center, noting that "I identified places where I needed to use directive language for the [text] to make sense. In doing this, I was reminded of my experience as a peer student mentor in the Writing Center." Finally, one student noted that working with a text and trying not to "do more harm than good" helped them "see similar patterns in my own writing."

In addition to the challenges of finding a suitable text discussed above, another challenge is finding the optimal amount of time to complete the assignment. As Bisaillon (2007) notes, editors often work under tight deadlines; thus, an adept editor must be able to size up a text quickly and provide useful advice. The assignment cannot take too long, or it loses some of its value. However, significant time (several weeks) is necessary because each portion of the assignment, not just the editing, challenges students to develop their rhetorical, analytical, synthetic, and reflective capabilities. Readers may consider shortening or lengthening the suggested timeline (see Table 1) for their own contexts.

Finally, the assignment may be adapted in a couple of ways. First, it could be made collaborative by assigning students to work in small teams and by building in additional elements for reflection on the collaborative nature of editing. Making the project collaborative could mitigate the additional work and supervision necessary if students were to communicate directly with authors. One way to add these elements of collaboration and communication with authors would be to adapt the project for service learning. If so adapted, an editorial agreement that specifies the nature and scope of work and manages expectations will be crucial. It may also be necessary to extend the timeline to account for client schedules and instructor feedback before students communicate with the client.

In teaching this assignment, I have been excited by students' choices of texts, which underscore the importance of editing in a wide range of writing situations and genres. Writing mediates much of human activity; thus, opportunities for improving writing are everywhere. I have also been impressed by students' efforts to really understand the situation, purpose, and constraints that the writer was facing so that their editorial advice was judicious and supportive. Assignments that blend the conceptual with the practical and that ask students to make knowledge from their experiences play a small part in designing a better future mediated by writing.

ASSIGNMENT
DEE-CR Project
(Describe, Evaluate, Edit, Communicate, Reflect)

Purposes

- Evaluate and edit a text judiciously for audience, purpose, genre, forum, style, diction, tone, and mechanics.
- Communicate effectively and supportively to an author.
- Make knowledge from your experience.

Overview

- This assignment asks you to select a particular non-fiction text "out there in the world" that you believe would benefit from the attention of an informed, adept editor who can help the writer better achieve their goals.
- You will first describe the text and contextualize it, then evaluate it in terms of audience, purpose, genre, forum, style, diction, tone, and mechanics.
- Then, you will edit the text to better achieve the writer's purposes. Refer to our textbooks (the *Chicago Manual of Style* and Williams and Bizup's *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*) and other assigned resources to ground your efforts in specific concepts and strategies.
- Finally, you will reflect on the edits that you made to the text, offer rationales for why you made them and how they improve the text, and offer a "so what?" knowledge-making point from your having edited the text.

Section Requirements

Submit one consecutively paginated PDF with these seven parts, in this order:

- **D**: Part 1, the **Description**, should inform readers where you found the text, identify its author(s) and audience(s), purpose(s), genre, and forum. The purpose of this section is to contextualize the text so your edits are not just abstractions or preferences. You will have to do some research to establish these grounding conditions. Cite your sources using MLA 8th format, both in this section (in-text citations) and in a Works Cited. You'll need roughly 500 words to develop this section completely yet concisely.
- **E:** Part 2, the **Evaluation**, should evaluate the text in terms of how effective or ineffective it is, given the context you explained in the previous section. Be specific in your evaluative comments about audience, purpose, genre, forum, style, diction, tone, and mechanics. What needs editing and why? What needs to be left as it stands and why? What levels of edits are needed and why? What does the text do well, poorly, or not at all? Which concepts from assigned materials (be specific) will you use in editing the text to better achieve its purposes? You'll need roughly 500 words to develop this section completely yet concisely.
- **E:** Part 3, the **Editing** part, asks you to edit the text and to show those edits clearly. Use Microsoft Word, LibreOffice Writer, or the markup tools in Adobe Acrobat, Mac Preview, or Xodo. I will help you select a tool that works for you. The purpose of this section is to clearly show all modifications to the text. If you have to attach the edited text as an appendix and just refer to it here, that's fine, too. Talk to

me about what's best to do, given the length and complexity of your text. This section is simply the edited text, showing all modifications; you'll reflect on the edits in the next section.

- **C**: Part 4, the **Communicate** part, asks you to communicate about your editorial emendations to the author in the form of an email. The email will require you to refer to spelling or style questions still to be resolved (those that could go more than one way), a list of issues, an overview of changes to the text, and a request for action. Your communication needs to be clear, supported, tactful, actionable, and useful. Use the strategies identified by Mackiewicz and Riley in their article on the "editor as diplomat."
- **R:** Part 5, the **Reflection**, asks you to reflect on how the text is improved by your edits. Recall that editing works at both the macro and micro levels and is intended to best help the text accomplish its purposes. Offer a "so what?" point about the problems, opportunities, and challenges of editing texts that your work on this particular text helps to illuminate. What surprised you? What did you learn from the process of editing this text? What did you draw on from your previous experiences (in or out of school contexts) about giving and receiving feedback? What did you learn that could carry over to other writing and editing situations?
- Part 6 is a simple Works Cited in MLA format. Here you will cite the original text and all sources used in establishing the text's context in the Description section.
- Part 7 is an Appendix consisting of the original unedited text-- retyped, embedded as a screenshot, scanned, or otherwise presented as it was when you found it. I can help you with scanning text, with optical character recognition (OCR), and other workarounds to save any drudgery here.
- After Part 7, put a page break. On the last page, identify the one item that you most want me to comment on when I evaluate your work. Use a short paragraph to do so.

Rules and Advice

- You have to choose a text "in the wild" (not from a textbook, an exercise, a collection of bad writing, etc.).
- Choose a text that you are interested in--but remember that "interest" can take many forms. Don't just settle for the first thing you see. We will have in-class activities designed to help you choose a text and to help your classmates with their own choices.
- Nonfiction prose texts only.
- No "academic paper" texts, such as a class paper.
- No student newspaper texts.
- Choose a text with "enough" to work with. While that standard is loose, if you choose a text that just needs a couple of commas added or removed (or is very short), you won't have much to work with or reflect upon. This assignment assumes that you will see a genuine need for substantive macro/micro editing of the text. By the same token, if you choose a very long text, you might not have enough time. We will negotiate your selection of a text to work with.
- Make sure that your edits are judicious and that they achieve the text's purposes better than the text did before you edited it. Don't chop out essential information (maybe it can be condensed) or just appropriate the text. Don't introduce new errors.

- If your chosen text is subject to a particular style guide, work with that style guide, submit it (e.g., with a link), and be sure to describe how you used that guide to make choices.
- If your chosen text is not subject to a particular style guide **or** that guide does not provide a clear answer to a particular question, use CMOS as your style guide. In particular, use CMOS for:
  - Section 5.250, the Glossary of Problematic Words and Phrases
  - Sections 5.251-.260 on biased language
  - Section 6 on Punctuation
  - Section 7 on Spelling, Distinctive Treatment of Words, and Compounds
  - Section 8 on Names, Terms, and Titles of Works
  - Section 9 on Numbers
  - Section 10 on Abbreviations
  - Section 11 on Languages Other than English
- Be prepared to articulate a rationale for all modifications to the text.
- Ask questions early and often. Participate in low-stakes drafting and invention activities.

Evaluation Criteria

Description section

Expectations

- ☐ Informs readers where you found the text, identifies its author(s), audience(s), purpose(s), genre, and forum.
- ☐ Contextualizes the text so your edits are not just abstractions.
- ☐ If sources are needed to establish this context, they are incorporated effectively and cited in the text and a Works Cited.

Comments, Questions, and Advice:

Evaluation Section

Expectations

- ☐ Evaluates the text in terms of how effective or ineffective it is, given the context laid out in the previous section. Explains what the text does well, poorly, or not at all.
- ☐ Clear on what needs editing and why.
- ☐ Refers accurately to specific concepts from CMOS, SLCG, or other relevant materials particular to this text and its context.

Comments, Questions, and Advice:

Editing Section

Expectations

- ☐ Shows the chosen text and your edits clearly by using change-tracked word processing or clear PDF markup.
- ☐ Edits improve the text for its purposes and context, are judicious, and do not introduce new errors.

Comments, Questions, and Advice:

Communication section

Expectations

- ☐ Uses style sheet, issues section, and overview of changes to the text to separate levels of comments and to balance depth and breadth.
- ☐ Clear, supported, tactful, actionable, useful to the author.

Comments, Questions, and Advice:

Reflection section

Expectations

- ☐ Reflects on the edits you made, where you suggested modifications to the text (and where you did not), and how the text is improved by your edits, micro and macro.
- ☐ Offers "so what?" points about the problems, opportunities, and challenges of editing texts that your work on this text helps to illuminate. (Possible questions to develop: What surprised you? How were you judicious in your edits? What did you draw on from your previous experiences [in or out of school]? What did you learn that could carry over to other situations?)

Comments, Questions, and Advice:

Form and Mechanics

All sections present, in order (Description, Evaluation, Editing, Communication, Reflection, Works Cited, Appendix), in consecutively paginated PDF?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Unhampered by disruptive errors (e.g. ineffective sentence fragment, comma splices, fused sentences) or accumulations of minor errors (e.g., dropped quotes, typos, it's/its, missing/repeated words)?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Comments, Questions, and Advice:

Content (90% of grade)

- ☐ Meets All Expectations—100%
- ☐ Meets Most Expectations—85%
- ☐ Shows Effort, but Doesn't Yet Meet Most Expectations—70%
- ☐ Not Assessable—0%

Form and Mechanics (10% of grade)

- ☐ Meets All Expectations—100%
- ☐ Meets Most Expectations—85%
- ☐ Shows Effort, but Doesn't Yet Meet Most Expectations—70%
- ☐ Not Assessable—0%

Overall Grade for Submission (Content + Form and Mechanics)

- ☐ Meets All Expectations—100%
- ☐ Meets Most Expectations—85%
- ☐ Shows Effort, but Doesn't Yet Meet Most Expectations—70%
- ☐ Not Assessable—0%

Overall Comments and Priorities for Revision:

Notes

[1]Revision policies and procedures can be found at drewloewe.net/policies.

[2]Quoted comments here are used with students' written permission.

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.v5i2.83.

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Proleptic Autobiography

Envisioning a Future—and a Path to Get There

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Abstract

This assignment challenges students in an English Language Arts teacher education program to compose a proleptic autobiography—a genre of writing that transforms the customary retrospective autobiographical essay assignment as a way to encourage students to envision and create their future professional selves. The goal of the assignment is to support students' development of realistic expectations of their imminent careers as educators and to foster a deeper appreciation of diverse learners. Composing such an imaginative narrative can help students develop stronger professional dispositions as they consider aspects of their future careers such as work/life balance, economic concerns, developing confidence, and providing support and encouragement to their students.

Panic surrounding attrition among early career educators emerges periodically, and as a teacher educator, I became curious about whether this panic was justified and how it has been investigated and documented. Although much of the panic was unjustified (Henry et al., 2011; Johnson & Down, 2013), I did discover some reason for concern (DeAngelis et al., 2013; Sass et al., 2011; Whipp & Geronime, 2017) and was thus motivated to delve more deeply into the possible reasons why some early career educators choose to abandon the profession. Hochstetler (2011) and Lindqvist et al. (2014) theorize that some early career teachers might enter the profession underprepared for the challenges of the classroom; these novices might possess only vague or unrealistic expectations for the wide range of aspects that comprise everyday life as a teacher. Their scholarship suggests that the practice of creating clear expectations and proactively envisioning a future as a professional educator might boost teacher candidates' resilience and assist their persistence in the face of the many challenges that early career teachers experience.

Considering these goals, I developed a writing assignment that would assist future educators—enrolled in a course called Academic Literacy and the Urban Adolescent, an upper division requirement for English Education majors at a large, urban, public university—to imagine their imminent careers as teachers. I chose to contextualize this assignment within a narrative frame familiar to most students (a narrative autobiography). However, rather than directing students to tell the story of their past, I asked them to tell the story of the futures they intended to create—and to tell that story of the future *as if* they were recollecting the past. As the converse to the more commonly assigned retrospective autobiographical essay, I described this assignment as a proleptic (or forward-facing) autobiography. By provoking students enrolled in a teacher education program to imagine themselves as professional educators completing their fifth year in the classroom, the proleptic focus of the current assignment directs students to envision their future, develop some sort of "action plan" for achieving their goals, and compare their expectations with the realities they will likely experience.

Composing a proleptic autobiography can also help students achieve one of the more abstract goals of the course (and the program), a goal that is often challenging to assess: supporting the development of effective teaching dispositions that include a realistic perception of the profession and that value and support diverse learners and learning styles. The proleptic focus of the assignment can help students avoid conforming to the dominant cultural narratives

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that often pervade autobiographical writing and reify the "romanticized power of education" (Alexander, 2011, p. 609). Prompting students to imagine their futures as professional educators confronting complex challenges in actual classrooms, the proleptic autobiography assignment can encourage students to "explore the possibility that the literacy-equals-success narrative is a faulty, or, at the least, an overly generalized, myth" (Alexander, 2011, p. 610). Composing such a speculative autobiography will allow students to transcend the "simplistic and even inaccurate" (Alexander, 2011, p. 611) narratives easily accessible to them from past autobiographical writing assignments and focus their attention—and professional pursuits—on their future goals by urging them to critically examine their sometimes unwitting complicity in following overarching narratives that the dominant culture has composed for them (Alexander, 2011, p. 627–629). Moreover, proleptic autobiography assignments can help underrepresented students to overcome stereotype threat, another damaging cultural force that enlists marginalized students in their own academic oppression. Claude M. Steele (2010) describes a research study in which Black students had the opportunity to create new narratives for their own experience. This "brief narrative intervention" resulted in an average grade increase of "one-third of a letter grade higher in the next semester" (p. 166). As Steele argues, "Helping to shape the narratives that stereotyped students use to interpret their experience in a school may be a 'high leverage' strategy of intervening" in students' perceptions of themselves and improving academic achievement (p. 166).

Writing proleptic autobiographies also engages students in composing "borderland discourse," which Alsup (2006) describes as "discourse in which there is evidence of contact between disparate personal and professional subjectivities and in which this contact appears to be leading toward the ideological integration of multiple senses of self" (p. 36). Integrating various aspects of one's identity is especially important for pre-professional students who dwell in the liminal space—or "borderland"—between *student* and *professional*. As Alsup (2006) concludes, "such integration through discourse can lead to cognitive, emotional, and corporeal change, or identity growth" (p. 36). Pinar (2012) describes this process as part of the "second or progressive step" of currere, wherein "the student…imagines possible futures, including fears as well as fantasies of fulfillment" (p. 46). Developing the practice of currere, Pinar (2012) argues, leads students to consider their "positionality" as they engage with their colleagues "in the construction of a public sphere" informed by the past, the present, and the future (p. 47). Both the more individual practice of identity integration described by Alsup (2006) and the more social practice of imagining and constructing possible futures with one's colleagues, as described by Pinar (2012), can assist pre-professional students in education, as well as in other fields, to envision and actualize professional environments in which they can succeed. As Kohl (1994) asserts:

> We have to be dreamers ourselves and not allow foolish accusations about being out of touch with the real world bother us. What is real is less important than what can be made real through our efforts and our students' untapped brilliance and boundless energy. (p. 86)

Supporting students in this practice can, as Pham and Taylor (1999) contend, help teacher candidates transform "imagined experience into action" and create "an explicit vision of the future" that enables them to "construct a pathway for getting there" (p. 250); in fact, assisting pre-professional students—in any field—as they discursively construct a realistic impression of their future selves can be an effective ways to help students develop a clearer sense of the ways in which they can transform their current identities as students into their future identities as professionals, whether they aspire to become educators, attorneys, scientists, physicians, or business leaders.

To encourage my students' development of perseverance and persistence that will support them during their initial years in the classroom, I relied upon a foundational principle of critical thinking—the idea that, in addition to learning to write, students also write to learn, a strategy that can also help students "conceptualize writing" in their discipline "in a way that is grounded in" the discipline itself (Carter, 2007, p. 387). Thus, through a discursive medium, I direct students to "construct these envisioned worlds" through "the use of proleptic practice" and create a plan of action that will help them achieve their vision (Hoffman-Kipp et al., 2003, p. 252), a technique that can easily be modified to suit students who are studying in fields other than education.

I introduce the assignment very early in the semester; it is the first formal writing assignment in the course. Since most students are unfamiliar with this genre of speculative writing, I explain—as I mention at the end of the assignment itself—that students are expected to use their imaginations to envision their futures and that their writing will not be assessed according to typical standards of expository writing (*e.g.,* accuracy and veracity). To demonstrate the creative aspects of the assignment, I prepare a mini-lesson on creative nonfiction that includes mentor texts such as passages from *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (1964/1994) and *Into the Wild* by Jon Krakauer (1997). In addition, I provide online sources that students may consult to help them understand the way the genre blends imagination with fact and for clarification of techniques used in the genre (Nordquist, 2018; Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL), n.d.). Finally, I invite students who have taken creative writing courses (or who have experience with creative writing) to share with their peers any strategies or tips that might assist them in composing the proleptic autobiography.

In my spring 2019 course, once students adjusted to the unconventional nature of proleptic writing, they seemed to embrace the opportunity to indulge in a bit of realistic fantasizing about their chosen career. One student mentioned that the assignment "made us think about the realities of being a teacher," and most students expressed the expectation that they would encounter a variety of struggles. For example, they discussed attempts to reconcile and overcome the discrepancies between romanticized visions of themselves as young, "cool," relatable teachers (which one student characterized as "super Hallmark") and more pragmatic images of themselves as eager novices required to cope with a vast array of challenges such as overcrowded classes, scant resources, and unmotivated or apathetic students. More often than not, however, they imagined themselves as adaptable, resilient, and well prepared to confront these challenges as they developed the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they would need for continuous improvement as professional educators. For example, one student concluded, "I had come to realize that there could be no formula…no full proof [*sic*] plan. No single class that I taught could compare to any other because they were all so different." Another expected to undergo noticeable improvement in her ability to design and facilitate effective lessons: "Although my lessons were clumsily put together at first, I began to become more confident in my teaching, and the students began to respond positively to the change." See Table 1 for a list of additional topics and representative student comments.

Reading and responding to their proleptic autobiographies helped me, as an instructor, connect other aspects of their coursework to the ideas they had expressed in their writing. For example, later in the semester, as students worked together in book clubs to establish collaborative guidelines for civil discourse among their peers, I could guide them to consider their work as an "imaginative rehearsal" for some of the classroom management challenges that they had anticipated in their proleptic autobiographies. And as students worked together to build meaning from the "tough" texts they chose to read in their book clubs, I prompted them to assess their efforts as potential models for supporting their future students, who—as many

Table 1. Topics and Student Comments in Proleptic Autobiographies

Topic	Representative Comments
Managing identities and work/life balance	"Balancing my personal and professional lives is a challenge, but I am still able to find happiness in both"; "Doing what I love keeps me happy, and teaching is on that list"; "My profession became a critical part of the person I am today"
Practical concerns (e.g., income, economics)	"The pay is not very generous, but it is consistent and gradually, with savings, accumulates over the years"; "The amount of credit card debt I drowned myself in trying to build my classroom made sure that I didn't really have a paycheck for the first month"
Developing confidence	"In reminding myself that I did not need to be the best teacher ever, I became a better teacher"; "I'm by no means perfect now.... While my glasses may no longer have a deep tint of rose, I never lose sight of why I chose to become a teacher"
Providing support and encouragement	"I want my students to know that they're not alone. I want them to believe in themselves as much as I believe in them"; "I was here to show my students that no matter how stacked you feel the odds are, you can overcome them"; "I hope my students know how much I truly care about their growth and development as readers and writers as well as young adults"
Diversity and inclusion	"I try to...understand the different learning abilities and styles to meet students halfway"; "I think it is my job to help teach them more sensitive and inclusive ways of thinking and speaking, and hopefully encourage them to develop a more tolerant mindset"; "I struggled every day to create a fair and equitable environment in which all of my students could thrive"

had mentioned in their proleptic autobiographies—might also struggle with making meaning from and comprehending challenging texts. The field experiences they were completing for the course afforded additional opportunities to help students connect their current learning with their future aspirations.

Students enrolled in the course are required to complete 25 hours of clinical field experience by tutoring under the supervision of a non-profit organization that places them in urban middle schools and high schools to support underserved students as they work on literacy projects. In the reflective journals that students compose about their experiences working as tutors, some perceive connections—ranging from accurate anticipations to stark incongruities—between the expectations they expressed in the proleptic autobiographies they authored at the beginning of the semester and the real-life experience of working with secondary students in urban secondary schools. This tutoring experience allows students to shift their perspective from that of student, an identity to which they are accustomed after many years in school, to teacher, another identity to which they are accustomed but one that they have had only limited opportunities to inhabit. Students preparing to enter other fields often complete similar field experiences or internships as part of their training and could also benefit from a proleptic autobiography assignment that has been modified to reflect issues relevant to their respective fields. Thus, the writing assignment provides students with a foundational vision of their future selves that they

can immediately begin to evaluate and modify as they embark upon their field experience or internship, one of their first practical steps toward that future as a professional.

As more current data about early career teacher attrition and retention becomes available, I plan to modify the assignment to reflect emergent trends, such as the growing need for bilingual educators, the challenges associated with online instruction (*i.e.*, the "digital divide"), and the urgency of better salaries for teachers. I am also exploring the possibility of including this assignment in each teacher education course I teach so that students will be able to revise and/or supplement earlier versions of their autobiographies. For example, if a student wrote her first proleptic autobiography in one of my fall semester classes and took another class with me during the following spring semester (or any subsequent semester), they could choose to either revise their earlier version or compose the next chapter. In addition, recruiting the support and collaboration of my colleagues who also teach in the program would allow us to integrate the assignment into all courses so that students would have an opportunity to consistently develop their proleptic autobiographies each semester or each year, regardless of which instructor is teaching which course. Embedding the practice of proleptic writing within each course in the program would then allow students to combine reflection (on their previous proleptic autobiographies) with ongoing proleptic compositions. Another valuable opportunity might be to ask pre-service teachers to compose proleptic autobiographies at the start of their student teaching experience and again once they have completed student teaching. Such an exercise will allow them to assess the evolution of their expectations, knowledge, and skills; it could also foster a habitual practice of periodically composing proleptic autobiographies throughout their teaching careers as a way to help guide and support their professional development.

Although pre-service teachers are pursuing careers in academia—an environment with which they are quite familiar after having spent much of their lives in schools—their classroom experiences and field experiences provide them with new perspectives and new insights about education and the roles they can play in the profession. Students in any discipline who are preparing for or engaged in internships, community service-learning, research opportunities, or study abroad, for example, also experience new perspectives and gain new insights; consequently, proleptic writing assignments could be useful anytime students are entering a new reality, either to set goals or to better understand and construct the reality they would like to enter. In addition, proleptic autobiographies might enable undecided students to articulate their aspirations and expectations as they consider various majors and career choices. Encouraging students to create and compose visions of themselves as practicing professionals in specific fields can help them determine whether a given career is a suitable match for their interests and abilities.

ASSIGNMENT

Proleptic Autobiography

Educational researcher Sarah Hochstetler[1] theorizes that "the disconnect between the myths about being an English teacher and the reality of the English classroom likely contribute to low retention. Making space in a teacher education program for thinking about teacher identity is one way to address these misconceptions and thus better prepare students for a career in secondary English education" (p. 258). Similarly, Lindqvist, Nordänger, and Carlsson[2] imply that some portion of teachers who abandon the profession within their first five years were unable to even articulate their expectations for a career as a teacher (p. 100).

Therefore, to help you develop a clearer sense of your future as a secondary English Language Arts teacher and to increase the likelihood that you will persevere in the profession, you will

compose a brief proleptic[3] autobiography of your early career as a classroom teacher.

The Assignment: The year is [current year + 5], and you have been working as a secondary English Language Arts teacher since your successful completion of a single-subject credential program. Look back on the early years of your teaching career and, in a chapter of your autobiography consisting of approximately 1000-1200 words, tell the story of your development as an educator. ***Be sure to compare the expectations you had for your future work as a teacher at the time you began your career with the reality you have experienced as a classroom teacher.***

You are free to discuss any aspects of your professional life, but you might want to consider some of the following topics:

1. The students you teach—demographic information (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender identity, etc.); academic ability; special needs; English language proficiency
2. School setting—urban? suburban? rural? Where in your state? Or are you teaching elsewhere in the USA? Or abroad?
3. Curriculum—which grade level(s) do you teach? What kind of content do you teach? How much control do you have over what you teach?
4. Standardized exams, assessments, and accountability—how do these issues affect your teaching?
5. Administrators and colleagues—describe your relationships with your colleagues, your department chair, assistant principal, principal, superintendent, etc.
6. Work/Life balance—how do you manage or integrate your personal life/identity with your professional life/identity?

An excellent response will:

- Feature a clear structure and organization with a recognizable beginning that introduces the focus, a middle that supports and develops ideas, and a conclusion that wraps up your thoughts in an interesting and compelling manner.
- Compare/contrast your expectations with your (imagined) actual experience.
- Use specific details and examples to develop your ideas.
- Use precise diction to convey meaning clearly.
- Use grammar, punctuation, and spelling that facilitate meaning.
- Consist of at least 1000 words but no more than 1200 words (double-spaced).

N.B. Use your imagination to envision your future. Think of this as a work of creative, speculative non-fiction.

Notes

[1]Hochstetler, S. (2011). Focus on identity development: A proposal for addressing English teacher attrition. *The Clearing House, 84*, 6. 256-259.

[2]Lindqvist, P., Nordänger, U.K., & Carlsson, R. (2014). Teacher attrition the first five years – A multifaceted image. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 40*. 94-103.

[3]*proleptic* means "considering the past from the perspective of the future," similar to a flash-forward; the opposite of *retrospective*.

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.v5i2.84.

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The Writing Process Photo Essay

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Abstract

This article describes and reflects on experiences teaching students to compose a Writing Process Photo Essay in the context of an upper-division college writing course that satisfies a campus-wide writing requirement. As the culmination of a quarter-long student inquiry into their own writing processes, this multimodal assignment asks students to combine text and images to help them reflect on the environments, tools, habits and routines that surround their writing activity. This assignment takes its inspiration from calls for renewed scholarly attention to material and embodied aspects of writing process. In the end, this assignment creates opportunities for students to recognize, reflect, and reimagine their own writing activity in school contexts and beyond.

Assignment Context and Activity Overview

The Writing Process Photo Essay is a multimodal assignment I developed for an upper-division, undergraduate writing course. Its purpose is to provide students a means to engage with their writing processes through documentation, description, and critical reflection. The essay itself is a culmination of my students' quarter-long inquiry into their own writing processes, not just in terms of drafting and revision, but also with particular attention to the situated nature of their writing, including material environments and tools, as well as embodied habits and routines. In the weeks leading up to this assignment, students collect photographs (and screencaps) of their activity as they work on other writing projects for the course. They also complete a series of exercises designed to help them identify aspects of their writing activity they might want to discuss. Finally, students combine selected images, captions, and approximately 500-750 words of prose to compose a multimodal photo essay formatted like the student sample in Figure 1.

I have assigned the Writing Process Photo Essay in the context of an upper-division undergraduate writing course in the University Writing Program (UWP) at the University of California, Davis. This course, designated as UWP 101: Advanced Composition, satisfies one of two campus-wide writing requirements, the other being a lower-division, first-year writing course (typically, UWP 1: Introduction to Academic Literacies). It is worth noting that UWP 101 is only one of multiple options for students to satisfy the upper-division writing requirement, such as other UWP courses focused on writing in specific disciplines or professions. Sections of UWP 101 tend to be structured around themes developed by individual instructors, though each section is expected to fulfill program-wide student learning outcomes. One of the outcomes relevant to the Writing Process Photo Essay is the expectation that students will (according to the UWP website) "improve their ability to manage the writing process to suit the task and situation, including more advanced skills in planning, drafting, revising and editing" ("Student Learning Objectives | UWP," n.d.).

I have organized my sections of UWP 101 around the theme of "writing in a digital age." In this course, students create and maintain blogs in which they research and write about a single

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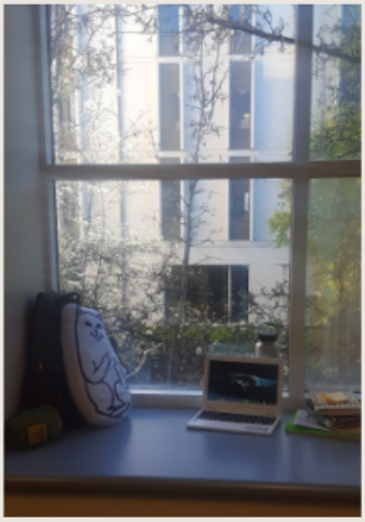
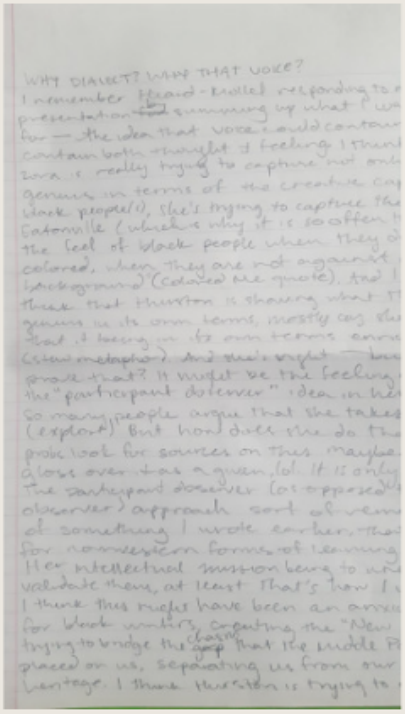


This photo shows you where I'm working. As I mentioned in my introduction, I'm a person who loves variety. I'm also a person who loves nature and being outdoors, so I tend to write outdoors or somewhere where I feel close to it. It's vital to me because it keeps my spirits up as I struggle with ideas. I feel like writing near trees I find beautiful or with the warmth of the sunlight on my skin gives what I'm doing purpose, and inspires me to try my best.

3. Writing near nature

Eventually I have to get some of these thoughts down, even if they aren't one-hundred percent developed, and I usually do this in a kind of "first thought, best thought" style freewrite that I time for twenty or thirty minutes. I prefer to write pen and paper for this stage of the writing process because my ideas feel more organic. It's also easier to annotate effectively and respond to myself while keeping it brief enough to be legible later. A lot of my most interesting ideas have come from this method, and most of the time most of what I write isn't necessarily suitable for academic writing. But I usually end up with something that is, which I take and develop further.



4. Freewriting

Figure 1. Excerpt from a student's Writing Process Photo Essay.

topic of their choosing over a ten-week quarter. My overall aim in the course is to help students engage critically and responsibly in digital spaces by reframing their work as what Richardson (2010) refers to as "connective writing," or writing that engages with what other people have said about their topics (p. 28). The aim of this work, as in more traditional forms of academic writing, is to read critically, participate in an ongoing conversation, and use what others say as an opportunity to develop their own ideas. Through this kind of research and connective writing, students learn not only the specific conventions of blogging, but also develop rhetorical awareness and skills that transfer more generally to academic writing and beyond, like how to engage in sustained inquiry and how to situate oneself in larger, ongoing conversations.

Within the context of this course, the final Writing Process Photo Essay culminates a quarter-long reflective inquiry into students' own writing processes. That inquiry begins with an exercise inspired by Prior and Shipka's (2003) research method of having academic writers draw their writing processes as a means of "tracing the contours of literate activity" (p. 3). Here is the prompt I give students for this exercise:

> On a single page of paper, make a drawing that represents the typical process you

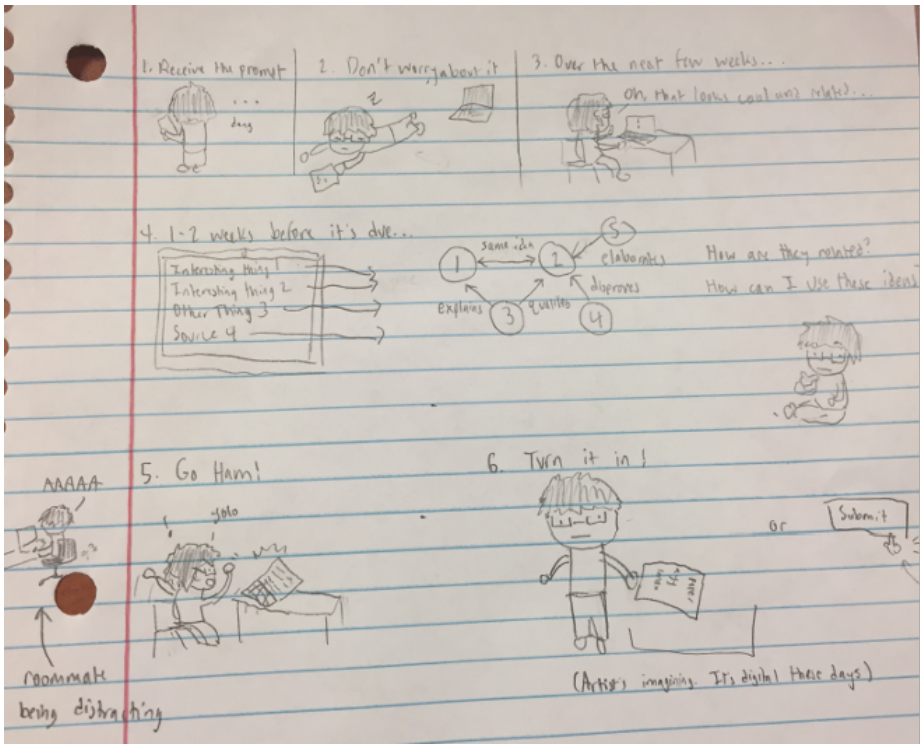


Figure 2. Sample drawing of writing process.

> follow when you write for an academic context. Think of papers you have written in previous courses or the blog posts you have written for this course, and consider how you might render that visually in a drawing. Since a "process" is something that happens over time, you may want to consider how to represent that in your drawing. A timeline, map, flowchart, or even a series of panels (as in comics) might work.

I also encourage students to consider the material conditions of their writing activity, such as the time of day, physical environment, and tools and objects in their surroundings, as well as the habits, routines, or rituals they typically engage in as they compose. Once students have completed these drawings, they share and discuss them in small groups, looking for patterns of commonality or noteworthy contrasts to share with the whole class (see Figure 2 for a sample drawing of a student's writing process).

At the end of this activity, I direct students to begin collecting photographs or screencaps of their writing processes for the remainder of the quarter (usually 4-6 weeks). I purposefully leave what qualifies as "their writing process" open to interpretation; though when we discuss the drawing exercise, I urge students to think of writing processes in broad terms. In early iterations of this assignment, I asked students to collect these images individually and compile them at the end of the quarter. However, in order to extend their engagement with process over more of the quarter and gain insight into the processes of others, I have more recently had students post images to the social media platform, Instagram. Students create a separate account for this purpose (to avoid having to share their existing accounts, if they have them), and I ask them to post and comment on other students' posts each week. By sharing their own images and commenting on those of others, students gain a wider view of the range of the practices, environments, and tools that surround writing.

Finally, as we near the end of the quarter, I have students look at previous students' Writing

Process Photo Essays, and we spend time discussing the features of the form and what students consider effective (or not) in them. I then ask them to make a plan for their own essays, noting which images they want to include and which aspects of their writing processes they want to describe and reflect on.

Assignment Development

The Writing Process Photo Essay was inspired in large part by recent calls in the field for renewed attention to writing processes. Though process pedagogies arguably continue to dominate writing instruction, just as they have for decades, Takayoshi (2018) argues that "by 1995, composing process research had almost completely disappeared from the field's official journals" (p. 554). The problem with this neglect, as Takayoshi sees it, is that "a lot has changed in the world of writing since composing process research last captivated our field" (p. 552), but our understandings of it have failed to keep pace. Similarly, Rule (2018) points out that, even as writing studies scholars increasingly focus on writing's situatedness, embodiment, and materiality, such interest has not manifested itself in the "study of situated material-embodied processes" (p. 404). In other words, even as we were theorizing writing "on massive scales," the field has "left the material terrain and choreography of writing on a micro-level, or process scale, mostly unexplored" (p. 408).

This scholarly neglect has implications for teaching and learning. Fife (2017) argues that students need opportunities to "notice and reflect on how they structure their composing environments," and that without this kind of work, students may have trouble developing "a conception of their practices that they can access in order to consciously adapt them." Moreover, in her more recent book, Rule (2019) suggests that traditional approaches to teaching process rely too much on prescriptivist "*a priori* strategies," rather than engaging students in detailed description of situated writing activity (p. 19). In order to demonstrate why such work might be worthwhile, Rule (2018) describes a research project in which she had graduate student writers document their writing spaces through drawings and video recordings of their writing sessions and then reflect on these artifacts in interviews. Through description and reflection on these representations, her students came to recognize how objects like beverages, furniture, and pets not only set the scene for their writing, but also significantly shaped their processes. Together with Prior and Shipka's (2003) study of writers' processes through drawings and Wyche's (1993) study of her students' writing habits and routines, this work convinced me as a teacher that my own students could benefit from such description and reflection.

In developing this assignment for my own students, I knew I wanted them to use representational artifacts to spur reflection. However, I worried that asking students to record video of their writing sessions, as Rule (2018) did with graduate students, might prove burdensome and overwhelm my undergraduates with too much information. In the end, I adapted Rule's (2018) approach by having my students take photographs of their writing spaces and use those images as starting points for description and critical reflection. Such documentation and curation has the potential to render material and embodied practices as visual artifacts that can in turn be used to elicit concrete details and insights into composing processes. That is to say, the point of starting with images is to ground their analyses in the concrete. Because my students would collect photographs to document their writing processes and then combine those images with reflective writing, I settled on framing the assignment as a "photo essay," even though its purpose is not to learn the generic conventions of that particular form. Instead, the writing process photo essay provided a platform for the kind of documentation, description, and reflection that I hoped would help students better understand the impact of materials and environments, habits and routines on their writing activity.

Implementation

One of the primary challenges of teaching this assignment has to do with timing. The first time I taught it, I positioned the assignment late in the term, as part of a final portfolio unit focused on compiling and reflecting on students' work over the quarter. The problem with this timing, though, was that students had little opportunity to pay attention to their writing processes throughout the quarter and collect images. My eventual solution to this problem was to introduce the assignment much earlier and have students do the drawing exercise around the third week of a ten-week quarter, so that they had more time both to notice patterns in their writing activity and to collect relevant images. As a result, the assignment and related exercises form a kind of metacognitive thread through most of the quarter, rather than a discrete unit. Combined with my more recent decision to have students post their images on Instagram, I have found that the final photo essays collect more varied images and more nuanced reflection on students' writing processes.

Another early challenge was settling on a format for the Writing Process Photo Essay. Because my students were already blogging for the course, I had them create a page on their blogs specifically for the assignment. Initially I thought this made sense, because blogging platforms make it relatively easy to combine text and images. However, with the first batch of submissions, I found that some blog templates and methods of displaying images worked better than others. For example, a number of students formatted images of their writing processes as a slideshow displayed at the top of a blog page, with reflective text below the slideshow interface. As a reader, I found it challenging to engage with these submissions because the relationships between the images and text were confusing to ascertain. In a subsequent quarter of teaching the assignment, I asked students to review several samples of the Writing Process Photo Essay from this early quarter, and (without explicit prompting) they identified the slideshow-formatted samples as unnecessarily confusing. Since that point, I have students review the different formatting options within the blogging platform, and we discuss rhetorical strategies for effectively interweaving text and images.

On the whole, students respond positively to the assignment, indicating both on the assignment itself and in course evaluations that they appreciate the opportunity to reflect on how they write. One common sentiment in the essays is the idea that students had not previously given their writing processes much thought, such as one student who wrote that "before the course, I wasn't aware I had a writing 'process'." Nevertheless, many students manage to gain valuable insights or discover surprising aspects of their writing processes as a result of composing the essay. Some learn that they were more creatures of habit than they realized, such as one who was struck by "how much of a routine this [process] has become for me." Such reflection can provide the opportunity, as Yancey (1998) puts it, "to theorize from and about our own practices, making knowledge and coming to understandings that will themselves be revised through reflection" (p. 6). For example, one of my students wrote that, as a result of paying attention to how she composed, she noticed a habit she was not particularly happy with:

> Rereading my sentences over and over again, and making sure every sentence is right before I can move on to the next, drags out my writing process. This would probably be the thing that I would change, and one that I have actually started to do!

By attending to how she wrote, this student noticed a pattern with her composing process, attached meaning to that pattern (as slowing her productivity), and developed a plan for changing her practices.

Part of my hope for this assignment was to make the situated nature of writing activity more visible to students, and in that regard, it has been largely successful. While nearly all

students discuss various strategies they use for brainstorming, outlining, freewriting, revising, and editing, the vast majority also attend to the "where and with what" aspects of their writing activity (Rule, 2018, p. 425). Among other things, students mention where they write (e.g., kitchen tables, library carrels, coffee shops), times of day they tend to write (typically evening or nighttime), and the tools they use (e.g., laptops, notebooks, search engines). Beyond that, students often discuss the challenges of maintaining their attention and motivation to write amid various distractions and feelings of anxiety, and strategies they use to get the work done. Chief among these is creating an environment that is conducive to writing, though what that means differs significantly from writer to writer. Some discover that they prefer quiet and solitude, while others seek the noise and energy of busy places or listening to music. Students also frequently mention the importance of taking breaks from writing by doing such things as exercising, watching videos, or preparing a meal.

Perhaps one of the more surprising results of this assignment has been the degree to which students discover, through reflection, that much of what they did not consider writing actually contributes to their composing processes. Some come to realize the importance of taking breaks, such as the student who wrote that "the breaks I take in between are when I do some of my most critical thinking about my topic, so I can take less time to actually draft." Another student wrote about becoming aware of the need to "balance work and play," elaborating that

> I never really considered those extra activities a part of my writing process before. It wasn't really until now that I noticed that I do them so often and with such consistency that they actually do form part of my writing process.

Many students write about how things other people might consider distractions, such as music, scented candles, or a television on in the background, actually seem to prevent them from feeling anxious or provide them with energy to continue writing. In this way, one of the more promising outcomes of this assignment is the way in which it helps students recognize existing practices, attach new meanings to them, and develop plans for future writing activities.

Future Development

I consider this assignment to be a work in progress. Though it does seem to help students describe and reflect on their composing processes, I would like to see them engage even more in identifying practices they might want to change, experiment with different strategies, and reflect on how those changes shape their writing activity. One way to do this would be to have more frequent opportunities for students to share their practices with one another. Therefore, in future iterations of the assignment, I intend to increase the amount of collaboration among students as they collect and begin to analyze images of their writing processes. By sharing images with one another, and comparing their approaches to writing, I hope they might, as Rule (2019) puts it, "start seeing *differences* in processes, to see others' conceptions and experiences alongside their own" (p. 209). That is to say, my hope is that, in seeing these *differences*, students can move beyond treating their writing processes as a static set of practices to be described and reflected upon, toward a view of process as dynamic and contingent on context. It may also be beneficial along these lines to have students document and consider their composing processes across different kinds of writing tasks, both academic and otherwise, such as text messages and social media posts.

Another way to highlight *differences* in material and embodied composing processes in particular would be to have students encounter similar assignments across the curriculum, beyond courses that satisfy traditional writing requirements. In other words, I can imagine adapting the Writing Process Photo Essay for writing in the disciplines courses, where the aim

is to teach students how to write, for example, like a biologist or engineer or historian. Such courses often highlight for students key differences in disciplinary generic conventions, but students might also benefit from opportunities to consider how composing processes might differ as well. Such engagement may help students recognize how different audiences, purposes, and genres might call for different practices. For example, writing processes in some disciplines might include time spent collecting and analyzing data, while others might benefit from drafting earlier in the process. Again, the aim would be to move students from a static view of composing processes to one which values flexibility and having a range of strategies to tackle varied writing tasks.

One final future development to this assignment would be to add a third stage beyond description and reflection, and that is experimentation. I intend to reposition the Writing Process Photo Essay as a waypoint to something more like an intervention in which students use their reflections to identify an aspect of their writing activity to experiment with and then report the results. For instance, they might try writing in a cafe instead of the library, using Google Docs instead of Microsoft Word, or writing for longer (or shorter) sessions. They may also work on mapping different environments or tools onto different kinds of writing tasks, such as using notebooks for freewriting. Along the way, students could reflect even more explicitly on the relationship between different writing tasks and the material conditions of the work. Such tinkering might best be done on low-stakes (or non-academic) writing tasks. The eventual aim would not be for students to codify a specific writing process, but rather to develop the flexibility to adapt their composing practices to different contexts and rhetorical situations.

ASSIGNMENT

Writing Process Photo Essay

Whether or not you think of yourself as having a "writing process," you do. That is, you have a process you go through whenever you write, even if that process changes every time. It's more likely, though, that there are practices and activities that you tend to do each time you write, and this assignment aims to get you to reflect on them. Doing so is a first step to considering what aspects of your writing process are working well, and which you might consider changing in the future. For this assignment, you will compose a photo essay that combines text (approximately 500-750 words total) with photos to illustrate your process.

Compiling Images

As you prepare for this assignment, you will need to take photos (or screencaps) that capture different aspects of your writing process. You should aim to have at least ten photos or images to include in your photo essay. Here are some questions to consider when compiling your images:

- What activities do you engage in as you write? How does the writing start? How does it end? What are the steps in between?
- Consider the environment(s) in which you typically write. In what settings or contexts do you write, and when you write, who or what is there with you?
- How do you do the writing? What tools and technologies do you use when you write?
- What are some of the habits, routines, or rituals you typically engage in as part of your writing process?
- What kinds of activities, environments, tools, or routines not typically considered

"writing" are part of your process?

Composing the Photo Essay

A photo essay combines text and photographs into a single composition. For this photo essay, you will need to arrange your images onto a page that you create on your WordPress blog. Use at least ten images, but be selective; more isn't necessarily better. Also, consider what order makes the most sense for your images, and how to arrange them on the page. You may intersperse text with the photos, or you could write a single reflection at the end of the photo essay (if you do this, provide short, descriptive captions for each image).

In your text, your main task is to describe and explain the writing process represented in the images. You should also address the following areas:

- What activities do you engage in as you write? How does the writing start? How does it end? What are the steps in between?
- Consider the environment(s) in which you typically write. In what settings or contexts do you write, and when you write, who or what is there with you?
- How do you do the writing? What tools and technologies do you use when you write?
- What are some of the habits, routines, or rituals you typically engage in as part of your writing process?
- What kinds of activities, environments, tools, or routines not typically considered "writing" are part of your process?
- How typical is this of how you normally write? In what ways do you deviate from this process?
- What do you consider part of your writing process that you left out or was hard to represent?
- How well do you think this process works for you? In what ways are you satisfied or dissatisfied with your typical writing process?
- What would you change about your typical writing process, if you could?

Evaluative Criteria

This assignment will be evaluated according to how it...

- Represents your writing process through images.
- Describes and explains your writing process in text.
- Reflects critically on your writing process.

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.v5i2.46.

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A Cabinet of Curiosities, a Dwelling Place

Weekly Writing on Instagram as Multimodal Praxis

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Abstract

This Instagram "Weekly Writing" assignment is a social-media-based, low-stakes, and longitudinal approach to teaching and experimenting with multimodal composition. Students create an account for the purposes of the class and follow each other. They post three times per week, sometimes freely and sometimes in response to a prompt or challenge. Together, we use the platform and its rich multimodal resources to consider how in-the-moment multimodal composing can spur invention, place the writer in the perpetual position of noticing, and create an archive of experience that holistically communicates beyond the author's original intention. This article discusses the pedagogical rationale for this approach, along with the issues to consider before adopting and adapting this practice.

I have long used a "weekly writing" assignment in my first-year writing (FYW) classes, since it provides students low-stakes exposure to the very thing that causes the most concern and anxiety: writing itself. As a genre, weekly writing assignments can range in approaches and goals: they can be free form, address a question or theme in the course, allow for practice of a particular skill, or act as a mode of research such as a researcher's notebook. They can be kept private between the student and the instructor, or they can be shared in community with the class. As long as the weekly writing assignment provides a relatively open and low-stakes place for students to *practice* writing, all variation in the approach comes down to the instructor's personal preferences, the institutional or departmental context of the course, and any additional goals the instructor might have.

In my most recent iteration of the weekly writing assignment, I chose Instagram as the central compositional tool in order to capture ephemeral moments in a writer's inventive and revision practices. Students make a new account for the class and follow their classmates and me. These course-specific accounts create a digital classroom with a smaller, networked ecology in the incomprehensibly expansive social media platform. Through their account, students keep a weekly log of classroom and personal experiences, posting three times per week. One post responds to a particular challenge or prompt related to course goals, and the other two are free for students to decide what they want to capture and share. To engage the multimodal aims of the assignment (and as is necessitated by the platform) each post includes a photo, video, image, poster, or other visual along with a caption that further articulates the exigence behind the post. In providing students with the opportunity to engage in low-stakes weekly writing, this approach also offers a place to actively practice multimodal writing. In what follows, I situate the bounds of multimodal composition, present ethical considerations in choosing this approach, detail two ways in which Instagram cultivates invention and ethos, and provide an outline of the basics of my particular version of this assignment.

The discussion of what "counts" as multimodal composition is complex. Given the brief nature of this essay, a comprehensive account of this discussion is not possible here, but the interested reader might consider Joddy Murray's (2009) *Non-Discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect*

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in Multimodal Composition; Jodi Shipka's (2011) *Toward a Composition Made Whole*; Jason Palmeri's (2012) *Remixing Composition: A History of Multimodal Writing Pedagogy*; Claire Lutkewitte's (2013) edited collection *Multimodal Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*; and Pegeen Reichert Powell's (2020) edited collection *Writing Changes: Alphabetic Text and Multimodal Composition*. These texts, among others, explicate multimodal approaches to teaching composition and complicate the boundaries of multimodal composition or multimodal pedagogy. Across these texts, two central themes emerge. First, that there really is no such thing as a monomodal text, since even a "traditional" essay presented as prose text on a page makes many compositional choices including paragraphing, negotiation of white space, and stylistic priorities, among others. Second is resisting the tendency to conflate multimodal with digital: while digital composition is certainly multimodal not all multimodal composition is necessarily digital (see Shipka, 2011). In this piece, I conceptualize multimodal composition as the layering of compositional choices a writer considers and negotiates in the development of a particular communicative goal. This version of the assignment centers on digital, multimodal composition, but could easily be transitioned into a non-digital, multimodal approach as well.

While social media offers a number of exciting tools and approaches, it also presents ethical issues I had to consider and address before and throughout the semester. Although it is a developing area within multimodal and digital rhetoric research, a few key pieces catalogue pedagogical experimentation with social media, including Instagram and other platforms (Buck, 2015; Coad, 2013; McNely, 2015; Shepherd, 2015). Familiarity with these studies made it easier to visualize what the practice looks like in the classroom, along with the risks/benefits matrix for any social media pedagogical approach. A major concern throughout scholarship on the uses of social media in the classroom is privacy and the potentially negative impacts of digital presence and data-mining (Daer & Potts, 2014; Faris, 2017; Maranto & Barton, 2010; Mina, 2017; Williams, 2017). To address these concerns, I conducted a privacy and presence assessment before committing to Instagram for pedagogical purposes. With Instagram, it is possible to create an account linked to a throw-away email, without your real name, and no other direct connections to personal identity. It is also possible to set a profile to private, so that only approved users can see your content. I also offered students an opportunity to opt out of the social media version of the assignment, and make their own multimodal weekly responses, whether digital or analog. There are many options here, and they are best negotiated with students on a case-by-case basis. In any case, informed consent is crucially important when asking students to engage in any digital spaces not already required by the institution.

The immediate benefit of this assignment is its inherent flexibility. What I present here is but one possible approach to integrating Instagram in the classroom; the practice can adapt and change for a particular institutional context or pedagogical approach. I implemented this assignment in my FYW courses at a large state school with a FYW writing program that serves over 7,000 students each year. Instagram offers a wide variety of compositional options within the platform itself, which can be expanded with free apps that augment Instagram content, such as Canva or Layout. Students can take photos, post captions, take video in creative forms (e.g., slow motion, boomerang, time-lapse), and use geotagging and hashtagging features to connect with other spaces and interests on Instagram. From their weekly writing work, students are able to bring their insights about multimodal compositional choices into their five major projects in the programmatic curriculum (Literacy Narrative; Cultural Object Essay; Disciplinary Literacies Project; The Remix Project; Learning Reflection). The weekly writing augments the programmatic curriculum and is worth 20% of their overall grade; regular assessments of their content are made. This grading approach matches the "persistence, not perfection" motto in my class and gives students confidence to experiment. Rather than teaching multimodality in a

couple of weeks, perhaps with the "Remix" assignment, multimodality becomes a continual point of discussion and practice throughout the course.

In addition to multimodality, I was curious about how this approach to weekly writing might help students to think about invention as an embedded part of a writer's orientation to the world. I wondered how the temporal and archival features of maintaining a social media account might create occasions for teaching invention. How might writing teachers expand opportunities for students to see how their orientations to the world are always, already the ways in which they come to ideas? Since we so often ask students to jump from proposals to outlines to drafts to final products in the span of a few weeks, we might inadvertently mask the inventive moments students have in relation to these processes.

A Cabinet of Curiosities: Invention and Collection

Other scholars have pondered similar questions regarding the uses of digital technology and composition. In *Technologies of Wonder: Rhetorical Practice in a Digital World,* Susan H. Delagrange (2011) connects ideas of visual argument and embodied composing through *Wunderkammern,* popularly translated as a "cabinet of curiosities" (p. 148). Precursors to modern museums, *Wunderkammern* presented objects from places near and far, in visual displays that both heighten the chaos of unrelated objects brought together and the underlying unity of such displays. Delagrange is careful to footnote the colonial origins of such a practice and is also right to suggest that with a new ethical relation to the world around us we might revise the practice of *Wunderkammern* in more generative ways. Jody Shipka (2017) has also played with the idea of *Wunderkammern*, in suggesting that perhaps one way to approach invention is to imagine writers as collectors (p. 143).

Instagram, viewed as a compact grid of image-forward content, reads as a modern day *Wunderkammern,* where the user collects and shares interesting, perplexing, moving, or just random slices of experienced life. The moment of posting is imagined as a connection to a particular audience (one's followers), but the aggregate builds an archive of different iterations of oneself across time and space. This kind of orientation is ideal for complicating, capturing, and critiquing modes of invention, as composers are able to trace moments of conceptual inspiration and growth.

At the middle and end of the semester (in connection with the final assignment—the Learning Reflection) I have students consider their growth, including personal, academic, social, and of course compositional. That is the strength of Instagram as a composing tool—it has the potential to aggregate a vast range of experiences in a concise grid, which primes the creator/viewer for inventional inspiration. Shipka (2017) believes that seeing the writer as a collector "also provides a point of entry for thinking about issues of care, cultivation, and responsiveness/responsibility, highlighting the affective dimensions of texts, objects, performances, and composing practices" (pp. 150-151). Certainly, in an age where we communicate less frequently in person and more through spaces physically distant and mediated by technology, finding ways to cultivate practices in those spaces that have an eye for care, responsiveness, and responsibility seems particularly urgent.

The Dwelling Place: Invention and Ethos

Using Instagram in this assignment also points toward my intention to build and sustain community and communication outside of the physical classroom. In this way, digital composing provides new avenues for theorizing and practicing ethos in composition. In his chapter in

Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres, Córdova (2013) builds on Michael Hyde's notion of ethos as a dwelling place, as presented in *The Ethos of Rhetoric.* This conceptualization of ethos moves away from the more common and reductive definition of "credibility" to ethos as a dwelling place, pointing toward the ways discourse is used to create spaces where "people can deliberate about and 'know together' (con-scientia) some matter of interest" (Hyde, 2004, as cited in Córdova, 2013, p. 147).

In their Instagram-based weekly writing, students dwell on their own account and in community with others. The first fifteen minutes of each class includes a centering discussion from one entry in our course text, *Read This If You Want To Be Instagram Famous* (2017), and a discussion of what content we have enjoyed from each other in response to the weekly prompts. In this way, students come back again and again, re-engaging with their own and classmates' content in new ways. They gather and generate ideas from viewing others' posts and from re-viewing their own. They absorb new approaches both to their inventive noticing and their compositional choices to share that noticing. I also set guidelines for interacting with others' posts, which include commenting on and liking posts as a confirmation of engagement. Like an agile discussion board, our classroom network expands the space/time of our connections beyond the classroom itself. These ongoing interactions foster connection and depth of understanding that interaction limited to the physical classroom might not have allowed, all while providing a centering practice that promoted a sense of coherence throughout the semester.

Some Specifics and Insights

In designing the assignment, I considered if I wanted to allow students to post freely or to provide some guidance or requirements for content development. I decided to set a specific challenge each week that students would respond to in at least one of their posts. These challenges connected to brainstorming for upcoming projects or isolated a particular multimodal compositional skill.

For example, in weeks 11 and 12, we experiment with time-lapse and slow-motion video. Here students consider what kinds of subjects work well for each, having to invert their thinking from capturing a slow-moving target over a few minutes to capturing a fast-moving target over a few seconds. This challenge focuses not only on considering the vast array of compositional tools available on the platform but also on matching those tools with subjects and concepts. I do not predetermine the weekly challenges for the entire course at the beginning of the semester. Rather, I articulate them a week or two in advance based on what was interesting from prior weeks, students' responses to course readings, and questions about work on their major assignments. I find value in this approach because the challenges often arise out of inventive moments in the classroom: students' questions, problems, or suggestions. This process mirrors the inventive potential of the weekly writing practice.

To ground and augment their multimodal experimentation, I assigned three short books, read in small segments over the course of the semester. First, *Read This If You Want To Be Instagram Famous,* edited by Henry Carroll (2017), was particularly helpful for isolating and exploring some of the compositional features on Instagram, as well as considering Instagram as a platform for one's own documentation *and* as a space to connect with others. We also read Roman Muradov's (2018) *On Doing Nothing: Finding Inspiration in Idleness* and Erik Kessels's (2016) *Failed It!: How to Turn Mistakes into Ideas and Other Advice for Successfully Screwing Up.* Kessels's book normalizes the experience of failure in creative and generative practice, which I hoped would help my students overcome their fears of experimentation. Muradov's text helps us think about invention from a radical perspective: rather than pushing or forcing ideas to come, sometimes we need to create

conditions of quiet and idleness for new ideas to emerge. All three books combine text and image in intentional ways, providing another opportunity to analyze compositional choices and apply those insights to their own weekly writing posts.

Overall, my students enjoy the Instagram approach to weekly writing. So far, no one has decided to opt out. In fact, most students have used Instagram before and felt comfortable with the platform. For those who had used it prior to the class, some shared that they appreciated having this second space to explore and experiment, since on their personal accounts they felt stronger pressure from peers to maintain a certain image. For those who had not, they enjoyed getting to learn a new platform, and some even continued posting content to their course accounts after the course ended. In the first week of posts of my first attempt at this assignment, we had a spontaneous, viral trend of pet photos after one student posted a picture of her dog because she missed him. This initial spark of community and collaboration strengthened my resolve to move forward with what felt like a risky, uncertain, vulnerable pedagogical experiment.

At the end of the semester, as we reflect on the assignment together, many students express gratitude for having this archive of their first or second semester in college and say that even if they do not continue to post on it, they will come back to the account to remember their classmates and the experiences they had throughout that semester. Of course, I was happy to see that their understanding of compositional choices had become more complex and nuanced, becoming more sophisticated and responsive to particular exigences. But the idea that they enjoyed the assignment enough to want to revisit their archive, their *Wunderkammern,* is what will keep me coming back to this practice for semesters to come.

ASSIGNMENT

Weekly Writing: Instagram

As a writing teacher, I have always used a "Weekly Writing" assignment as a way to encourage a regular writing practice and check in each week. It has taken many forms over the years, and I like to play around with it and try different approaches to see how it changes engagement with writing. The most common way I've done it in the past was to have students keep a journal document that was shared with me, and write 2-4 pages each week. Some of the writing was prompt-based and from class; some of the writing was totally open-ended -- up to each student to decide for themselves what they wanted to write about (and share with me!).

This semester, we're going to try this out on Instagram. We're using the book *Read This If You Want to Be Instagram Famous* to help us think about how to build a creative and engaged platform. We'll read a couple entries for each class and then try for one of our posts each week to practice one of the tips we've covered. Of course, our purposes are not to become famous on Instagram. I like the book for its design and content...and I'm less concerned with the parts of it about gaining a large following or monetizing your account. If that's something you're interested in (maybe you're thinking of going into business, marketing, etc.…) go for it! Just know that if all you have are the followers from our class, that's okay since our purpose is to think about how we compose in multimodal ways on a daily basis and how we can be more intentional, creative, and engaged in that process.

At the heart of it, the Weekly Writing assignment is meant to get you to CHECK IN to your life. This goes nicely with another one of our texts for the semester *On Doing Nothing* by Roman Muradov. All great writers do one thing really well, and really consistently...they NOTICE. They notice the things happening around them. They notice new details in familiar places. They

notice small interactions between people. They use all of this to continually craft their worldview and to think about how to communicate that worldview to their reader. This is true of creative writers, creative nonfiction writers, academic writers, and even professional writers.

Learning how to notice things in our lives helps us to slow down and to remember that to find anything, we first have to look for it. That's what I'm challenging you to do with this assignment.

The Broad Overview

1. **Create a new account** for this class specifically! I have a personal account and another for this class. You can decide to keep your account public or you can set it to private so you can decide who follows you.
2. **Follow your classmates**: You'll follow all of the people in our class and allow them to follow you.
3. **Post 3 times per week**: Some posts will be open, some posts will try to meet some challenge or speak to a theme that we discuss in class, and one post each week should actively attempt one of the principles we've discussed from the Angell book.
4. **Each post should have a caption.** This is a writing class, after all.
5. **Comment 3 times per week** on various classmates posts: Comment on people's posts, respond to comments on your posts, and generally start to form a community through communication. Try to spread the love! Comment on different accounts each week.
6. **Use our class hashtag on every post!** I want to create an archive of our work to be able to reference later in the semester, and this is a cool way to create a chorus of voices. We'll develop other hashtags throughout the semester, but make sure you use this one each time.

Some Rules

1. **This is for class.** *This is for class.* This is for class. If you already have an Instagram account, you'll probably interact differently on this account than you do on your personal one. This is a great skill to develop, as more of both our personal and professional lives occur on digital spaces these days.
2. **Direct messaging**: It is appropriate sometimes to send a direct message to someone instead of commenting publicly. Maybe you have a deep connection to something they've posted. Maybe you have a question. See if it belongs in the comments first because there is more likelihood to spark engagement on that post that way. So, while you are free to engage each other directly, you are not to harass, stalk, demean, hit on, or otherwise act uncool on people's posts or in their messages. ***If someone is making you uncomfortable, come to me and I will handle it with discreet care.***

Grading

This is worth 10 points per week (15 weeks, 150 points total, 15%). I will input those points on our learning management system each week. I will engage on your profile throughout the week as well; this will be my primary mode of feedback. If you are falling behind or not meeting the assignment, I'll let you know. Otherwise, you can just watch the points roll in each week.

Weekly Challenges

Week 1

What is writing? How do you feel about it? What do you hope to learn in this class? What do you think you will learn? Pair these musings with a photo that you feel represents writing.

Week 2

What is your favorite place to study on campus? Take a picture, geotag it if possible, and describe what you like about that space.

Week 3

Check out the YouTube Channel The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows and if time permits, the TED Talk "Deciphering the Language of Emotion" from John Koenig who runs The Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows.

Choose one of the Obscure Sorrows and make a post that somehow represents it. Link to the video of that sorrow in your comments. OR Make a word for your own obscure sorrow, define it, and make a post that represents it.

Week 4

The Dictionary of Obscure Joy—let's flip the script from last week. Do the same thing, but this time you'll need to create your own word for your own sense of "obscure joy" … and an image or other visual to go with it.

Week 5

This week you're going to take a trip to the art museum on campus. As you explore the museum, I want you to keep your "writing cap" on and try to think of some ways you might be able to link what you're seeing and experiencing to what we've been talking about and learning about writing. You might also think about how it connects to Muradov's ideas.

You'll need to take a picture (or video, boomerang, etc.) in the museum that serves as your post, and write a caption that connects with the ideas above and the picture. Use the geotag function to connect the location in your post. Use the class hashtag and any others that you think might work well for the post.

As is the case with all art and exhibition spaces, you want to walk with care through the space, which means to check in with yourself and be aware of your boundaries or anything that is causing discomfort. You should feel free to remove yourself from those spaces. You are in no way required to see everything in the museum for this challenge.

Week 6

Download the app "Layout." **Layout** allows you to put multiple images into one image, creating a photo collage.

For a layout to be effective and interesting it should have some kind of theme or purpose. For example, maybe you have a two-photo layout that compares you at the beginning of high school versus the beginning of college. Maybe you have a layout of multiple images of your best friend as a tribute to them. Maybe you do a 3x3 grid layout and choose your favorite photo from each of the last nine months. The possibilities and potentials are endless...so get creative!

Include a story, description, quote, or something else that can help us to understand the purpose/theme of your layout beyond just the visuals.

Week 7

For this week you're going to play around with the **Boomerang** effect. It is already in the Instagram app, you just open Instagram, bit the camera logo at the top left corner, and then it should be the first option to the right of "normal."

You can make your boomerang about whatever you'd like, but I do have a few photography/videography tips for making it the most viewer friendly possible:

1. **Hold the camera still,** and focus on the moving object. Because boomerangs are so short and speed up the video you capture, moving the camera can make it difficult to catch what it is you are filming and might make your viewer dizzy.
2. Choose something that becomes **more entertaining the more times you watch it**. We're looking for meaningful motion. The example I included, the little bear in my hot pot from lunch falls over as the server pours hot broth over him. This was a lucky mistake, because actually I took the boomerang later than I wanted to...but watching the water pour without the bear falling over probably wouldn't have been as interesting.
3. You're working with basically a 2-3 second loop. You want to look for **something that feels "complete"** even within that. This is the challenge and why finding a great boomerang is often hard...the moment has usually passed before you can get out the camera. Staged boomerangs are a good way to practice them to begin with!

Week 8: The Halfway Mark!

For this week's challenge, I want you to think about the first half of this semester:

How is it going? What's going well? What's not? What have you learned about yourself in the past eight weeks? How does it compare to last semester at this time? You are still in control of your efforts and outcomes? There is still time to change course—what might need changing? What's the reward you're working toward at the end of the semester? What's the light at the end of the tunnel? What and where is your motivation? Etc. etc. etc.

This is going to be a **CAPTION** heavy post. **Like a paragraph or more.** Try to take a picture this week to include in this post that marks this halfway point, but you can also use things from your archives.

Think about apps and tools we've discussed so far in class

- Layout: Might help you to bring multiple, disparate moments from this semester together
- Canva: Might help you to connect a mantra or thematic quote to an image that speaks to the semester
- Boomerang: Might help you to communicate the often-repetitive nature of academic life...forward, back, forward, back again.
- Creating new words: Maybe you have a new word to add to your dictionaries of sorrows and joys
- Etc. etc.

Week 9

No specific challenge this week—just be sure to make three posts about whatever you'd like by Friday.

Week 10

No specific challenge this week—just be sure to make three posts about whatever you'd like by Friday.

Week 11: TimeLapse!!

As I shared in a post last week, I've been getting really into time lapse these past couple of weeks. There are a few reasons for this for me.

1. It is a way for me to have to leave my phone alone for a length of time. I've really been getting distracted by my phone as I procrastinate on things I need to do, so it's nice to leave it recording somewhere knowing there will be this cool video at the end.
2. It's spring! Which means we've been seeing more of the sun, less grey skies. My apartment has a beautiful view of the sunrise in the morning, so I've been taking advantage of that and sharing it with others.
3. This is the time in the semester that it just feel like things are flying by. Weeks are passing faster than I can keep up with them and all of my end of semester deadlines are suddenly looming. The speed of a timelapse mirrors this feeling, while also reminding me that the speed of nature is much slower and that I might be able to harness some of that steadiness in my own work.

This is what it looks like to reflect on your compositional choices, particularly in multimodal composing. Keep this explanation in mind when you get to the reflection portion of our next paper.

Anyway, all that said—I want us to experiment with **Time Lapse** this week. This could also be a good time to experiment with Stories, because stories let you add cool media (like music!) to your time lapses which helps to further communicate the mood of the video.

So, you can post to your feed or to your story—but if you post to your story please be sure to HIGHLIGHT your story so it saves on your page (otherwise, stories disappear after 24 hours).

You can use your camera (iPhones have a timelapse mode in the camera itself) or you can use the FREE app **Hyperlapse**...which is definitely what you want to use if you are taking timelapse where you are also in motion because it has an algorithm that stabilizes the image. I'll show you some examples in class.

Week 12

Okay now let's do it in reverse! SLOWMO

Slowmo recording has the opposite compositional logic from timelapse. A 5 second video in timelapse would basically be a photo, whereas a 5 second slowmo video would seem to go on forever. You have to find something that gains interest by being slowed way way way down. Usually, it's about the details!

Like last week, you can post it to your story (but be sure to add it to a HIGHLIGHT so it doesn't disappear) or you can post it to your feed. I know iPhones have a slowmo as a function in the camera, but we'll play around with android together in class!

Week 13

It's Spring! Let's celebrate that things are turning green! SO all THREE of your posts this week should focus on the theme "green."

Week 14

No specific challenge this week—just be sure to make three posts about whatever you'd like by Friday.

Week 15

For this final week, I want you to make one of your posts a "preview" for your final paper. Take or find a pictures/video that represents your lesson learned and then write a brief caption (but that has enough context for it to make sense to a reader) that connects to your paper idea.

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.v5i2.78.

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