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## Sections

[Focus](#)  
[Columns and Reviews](#)  
[Consulting](#)  
[Training](#)  
[News & Announcements](#)

---

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[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

---

## About Us

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---

## Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

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[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Spring 2009 \(Volume 6 Issue 2\) - Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing Centers](#)

## Strategies for Professional Writing

[Spring 2009 / Training](#)

by **Lisa Avery**, *University of California at Santa Barbara*, **Lisa Leit**, *University of Texas at Austin*, and **Allison Perlman**, *New Jersey Institute of Technology and Rutgers University-Newark*

**Using the rhetorical writing process approach for resumes, personal statements, and cover letters**

### Professional Writing Consultations

When students come in to [The University of Texas at Austin Undergraduate Writing Center](#) with documents which are geared toward particular, post-baccalaureate professional goals, consultants are faced with a very particular situation: on the one hand, writers are demonstrably more invested in the outcome of the writing project—will it get me a job? Into graduate school? Into the internship program?—and on the other hand, often much less confident about their approach, and therefore somewhat more dependent upon the consultant for evaluative feedback. In thinking about consultations for professional writing, we find that although the basic strategies we employ for other consultations work well, we also understand that the forms of the documents and their intended audiences may present unique challenges/approaches. In this paper, we will first examine three forms of professional writing most commonly seen in writing center consultations: resumes, cover letters, and personal statements. Because students' quality of professional writing often affects their chances of realizing their real world goals, some consultants may feel compelled to step into the role of career coach and feel somewhat responsible for the success or failure of the consultees' applications. To remove some of this unnecessary pressure, we suggest strategies to approach professional writing consultations as an opportunity to teach long term writing process-oriented skills.

**Focusing on the process of writing—a generative cycle which includes audience awareness, thoughtful planning, writing, and revision—helps most students feel confident when approaching any writing project.**

Students who come in with resumes and cover letters are usually applying for an internship, applying for a particular job, or are constructing a resume at a professor's request (either as preparation for writing a recommendation or as preparation for the student's professional career). Personal statements are required by most graduate degree programs, as well as many scholarships and some internships. In each case, students are learning how to present their goals and experience to a professional audience in order to gain entry into a particular, professional organization.

The stakes in such consultations are a bit different than academically-oriented

ones, both for the consultant and the consultee. Students imagine—and rightly—these documents as providing entrance into a career of their choice and consultants must navigate between their desire to help students achieve their professional goals—even when that help is limited to working on a particular document or set of documents—and their commitment to the practices of non-evaluative, non-directive work at the UWC.

When training consultants how to work on professional documents, we focus on ways to support both our desire to help students achieve their goals and our desire to work within the parameters of good consulting practices by supporting what we truly believe to be most beneficial for students coming in to the writing center. Focusing on the process of writing—a generative cycle which includes audience awareness, thoughtful planning, writing, and revision—helps most students feel confident when approaching any writing project. In the case of professional writing, we also find that most students eventually leave the center feeling satisfied that their document is doing the work that they want it to—many professional writing projects average three consultations.

It can be difficult in such consultations to learn how to provide valuable feedback while remaining non-evaluative, thus it is important to remember that “non-evaluative” can have somewhat fuzzy boundaries. On the one hand, we want to provide constructive feedback about the clarity, appropriateness, and content of any given essay, and on the other, we do not wish to give students feedback about potential outcomes—grades, success in their chosen professional field. Still, such feedback is often precisely the kind of comfort many students are searching for. We recommend finding your own balance between “counselor” and “consultant” by reminding students that while we can provide useful assistance in helping them understand and accommodate their audience, we are not their intended audience and thus cannot predict whether or not these documents will have the desired effect. Remaining focused on the process of writing—accommodating an audience, having a clear organizational method and lucid prose—helps students to retain control over their own writing and focus on the process, rather than the product, thus supporting our goals to help students hone their overall writing skills.

### **Resumes and Cover Letters**

A suggested approach for keeping consultations on resumes and cover letters focused on the writing process is to focus on their rhetorical purpose and context. The steps of one such strategy is outlined below:

*Purpose Statement.* Start by asking the consultee to articulate the purpose of the documents and to keep it in mind throughout the consultation. As it is likely that the student is attempting to obtain a job or position, ask the student to think in terms of persuasion. A tool that might help students with this is: “In this [resume/cover letter] I [describe how/provide evidence that]...”

*Audience Assessment.* Detail the people, or types of people the consultee is attempting to persuade. Who is likely to be reading and/or evaluating the documents? What are they likely to want to know (or not want to know!)? What is likely to be important to them? What level of formality and tone is likely to be expected?

**[...O]ur goal is to help students become better writers over the course of their lifetimes by using the writing they bring in as an opportunity to model and teach effective writing-process-oriented**

## **strategies that can be applied to writing they do in a variety of rhetorical situations.**

*Establish Rhetorical Situation.* Ask the consultee to assess the rhetorical situation in order to determine the appropriate approach, tone, content, and format of the resume and/or cover letter. Specifically, ask the student to carefully read the wording of the position advertisement or posting and use the stated information to brainstorm approaches together.

*Use of Resources.* Work with the student to ascertain whether the degree to which expected formats, templates, and aesthetics should be adhered to. Use any relevant writing center sources such as knowledgeable consultants, handouts on resumes and cover letters, and library reference books. Encourage the student to seek feedback and guidance from experts in the specific field such as career counselors, friends and family, and professors.

*Organization.* Given their stated purpose, make sure that there is sufficient, targeted supporting evidence. For example, if a student's goal is to get a research internship, ask her what she has done that either directly or indirectly suggests she is a prepared and competitive candidate. With that goal in mind, she may choose to describe her volunteer work in a laboratory setting and to remove her summer job at Whataburger as it does not directly support her goal. Remind students that resumes and cover letters are opportunities to highlight their most relevant accomplishments and qualities. If in doubt, ask the student how an experience is relevant, and get them to make the connection for the reader. Was she a manager at Whataburger? Did she show up every day on time? Was she employee of the month? What qualities relevant to her goal do these aspects of her performance at that summer job demonstrate?

*Visual Rhetoric.* Organization and aesthetics matter a great deal in resumes and cover letters; the visual rhetoric serves essentially the same function as an introductory attention grabber in a thesis-driven essay. The extent to which the document appeals to evaluators visually may influence how much attention the content receives, and therefore how likely your consultees are to be seriously considered for the positions to which they are applying. For most rhetorical situations in most fields, creative fields such as film perhaps being the exception, applicants are likely to be evaluated on the basis of how well their professional documents reflect knowledge of the expected organizational and aesthetic norms of the field. Academic resumes are quite different than business resumes, for example. Another consideration is use of font, spacing, and overall design. A strategy that may help students assess their use of design is to hold the document up a foot or so in front of consultees' faces and ask for feedback. Is the font too small? Too zany? Are readers likely to be confused? Does their name stand out enough?

*Conclusion.* For the conclusion, suggest that your consultees evaluate the resumes and cover letters for the effectiveness of a "take home message." What is someone skimming the documents likely to walk away thinking about or knowing about the author? How can this be strengthened in order to support the overall persuasive goal?

*Revision.* Encourage students to seek revision support from a variety of sources. Remind them to go back to their thesis to decide what to keep, what to cut, and what to elaborate. Ask them to analyze how effective their content, organization, and evidence are in achieving their purpose. Just as in all of our UWC consultations, focus first on global, then sentence level concerns–

emphasize the importance of final proofreading after they have honed their layout and content.

## **Personal Statements**

The same writing process model strategies emphasizing a rhetorical approach suggested in detail in the previous section for use with resumes and cover letters also can be applied to consultations on personal statements. Just like consultations on resumes and cover letters, ask students to assess their audience, the rhetorical situation, and to analyze the prompt. Help them to research field-specific templates using handouts, books in the writing center library, and other consultants. Also feel free to go online with them to seek further information. As personal statements are a bit more complicated for students than resumes and cover letters, and vary according to the type of application being submitted, the following suggestions may also be useful.

*General Content.* All programs are likely to want students to provide evidence of:

- tested motivation
- knowledge of the school and specific program
- the degree to which they are “good fits”
- a solid sense of goals
- communication skills
- work ethic
- personality
- compatible values
- relevant experience
- commitment to profession

*Graduate School.* In these essays, readers are likely to look for specific stated interests. Given the nature of graduate school, where students are required to focus in depth on a subject area: What is the student interested in studying? Who does the student want to work with? Encourage the consultee to demonstrate knowledge of and interest in the field. This can be supported with examples of research previously conducted and specific experiences and personal aspects that support specialization.

*Law School.* Generally, attention-grabber stories are well received in law school personal statements. They are also likely to be evaluated on the extent to which ideas are logically organized and communicated.

*Medical School.* In these essays, an attention-grabber story is also considered appropriate. Given the rigor of the path, it may be wise to emphasize the commitment to the goal and convincing motivation.

*Business School and Technical Training Programs.* Personal statements for business school generally take a succinct, straightforward tone and approach and emphasize professional goals and relevant experience in the business world.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has suggested strategies for consultations on resumes, cover letters, and personal statements. We hope using a writing process approach for professional writing consultations will not only help consultations to be more smooth and effective, but also help liberate consultants from the pressure of

being expected to serve as a career coach or counselor. Writing consultants are not responsible for whether or not students get jobs or gain admission to graduate school. We hope they will and wish them every success, but our goal is to help students become better writers over the course of their lifetimes by using the writing they bring in as an opportunity to model and teach effective writing-process-oriented strategies that can be applied to writing they do in a variety of rhetorical situations.

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Lisa Avery

Lisa Avery received her Ph.D from the **Department of English** from **The University of Texas at Austin** in 2007 and currently teaches for the **Writing Program** at the **University of California at Santa Barbara**. Her scholarly interests include examining the connections between space, narrative, and experience in popular cultural texts; the rhetoric and politics of emotion; WAC pedagogy and curriculum; and technology and pedagogy. She is pleased to be living by the ocean.

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Lisa Leit

Lisa Leit, long-time Writing Center consultant, **The University of Texas at Austin** (UT) Rhetoric instructor, and former UT **Undergraduate Writing Center** (UWC) Assistant Director, is the UT UWC Coordinator. Lisa is fundamentally interdisciplinary in approach and brings a well-rounded perspective to the UWC. She graduated from **Penn State** with an undergraduate English degree in 1996. During college, she served as a family mediator and counselor to children from challenging family situations. Before returning to graduate school, she served in professional capacities ranging from Teach for America middle school English teacher on the Mexican border to Office Manager of a New York City branch of an international law firm. Throughout this period, she traveled extensively throughout the continental US, Europe, Mexico, and South America. Lisa then obtained her Ph.D. in Human Ecology at the University of Texas at Austin in May, 2008. Lisa's dissertation,

"Conversational Narcissism in Marriage," was published as a book in 2008 by VDM Verlag.

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Allison Perlman

Allison Perlman is an assistant professor in the **Federated Department of History** at the **New Jersey Institute of Technology** and **Rutgers University-Newark**. She earned her PhD in American Studies from **The University of Texas at Austin** in 2007. While at the University of Texas, she worked at the **Undergraduate Writing Center** for eight years, where she served for two years as an assistant director.

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