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Recommended Citation

Bush, Jonathan and Zuidema, Leah A., "Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Good Writing: The Problem of Ethics" (2011).
Faculty Work: Comprehensive List. Paper 53.
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Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Good Writing: The Problem of Ethics

Abstract

The article focuses on good writing in the English classroom. It mentions that the way to know if one has good writing is to see how the audience reacts to it. Writing professionals argue that good writers anticipate readers' reactions as they shape style, page design, and content and every aspect of their writing. It notes that one of the main goals in professional writing is to teach students to use of rhetoric tools to influence their audiences and to emphasize ethical decision-making.

Keywords

English language writing, decision making, middle school students, authors

Disciplines

Educational Methods | English Language and Literature | Rhetoric and Composition

Comments

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Professional Writing in the English Classroom

Good Writing: The Problem of Ethics

How do you define *good writing*? Do you know good writing when you see it? In Leah's professional writing course, college students investigate what "good writing" looks like in their fields of study. They examine writing samples, and they interview professionals in medicine, business, social work, computer science, law, engineering, education, and other fields. The students all ask a version of this question: "How, in your profession, do you know when your writing is successful?" Without fail, at least a few interviewees answer like this: "There's no such thing as a universal definition of 'good' writing. I can't give you a checklist or a formula. The only way to know if your writing is good is to see how your audience reacts to it. If you get the response you're looking for, it's good writing."

As these professionals continue to explain their ideas about good writing, they emphasize some of the same ideas that we emphasized in our first two columns. It's essential, they say, for writers to remember their audience. They argue that good writers anticipate readers' reactions as they shape their content, style, page design, and every other aspect of their writing. In so many words, the

professionals say, "If the structure, grammar, and page design are textbook perfect but the audience isn't impressed, the writing has failed."

We agree that it is essential—in any professional writing—to think about the audience's reaction. In fact, one of our main goals is to teach students to use rhetorical tools for influencing their audiences. However, we also recognize that there can be a dark side to this emphasis on audience. If we aren't careful, a single-minded focus on effect and audience can

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enable an amoral consideration of writing. If we define *good writing* simply as writing that gets the audience to do or think what the writer wants, we fail to take into consideration the needs or well-being of the audience, and we ignore the ways in which writing may hurt others or cause harm. We then lack grounds to critique the sophistry of a deceitful advertising campaign that boosts sales or to condemn a misleading speech that achieves the speaker's goal by unfairly defaming an opponent. If our definition of *good writing* is merely about effect, then

we, like so many political pundits, would have to laud the political campaigns that use specious arguments, innuendo, race-baiting, and outright lies to move the polls in one direction or another.

Clearly, we believe that good writing is about more than effect. It's important to add an additional element to our conversation about professional writing and the English classroom: teaching the ethics of professional writing. Thus, we focus in this column on the decision-making process that goes into professional writing and ways to emphasize ethical decision-making in our writing classrooms.

The Importance of "Case"

Professional writing has at its core an emphasis on action and audience. Certainly we want our students to write effectively—to serve their clients, organizations, and corporations well. However, we also maintain that professional writers have an obligation to act ethically and make responsible rhetorical choices. Furthermore, we want our students to understand the *ethos* of writing within a certain profession—the explicit and implicit concepts that guide how professionals act within their profession.

How do we translate these concepts to our students? For lack

of a better solution, we may be tempted to lecture or to assign readings that lecture: “Writers, whatever you do, be honest, aim for clarity, and consider others’ needs and feelings.” The problem with this approach is its abstractness. It’s easy for writers to be honest, clear, and thoughtful when they’re reporting positive results to a project manager. But how do writers balance honesty, clarity, and civility when they don’t like an idea or situation—and they’ve been asked to share their feedback in writing? When writing ethically is challenging, lectures alone won’t help students to practice what we are preaching.

Ethical principles won’t become “real” for student writers unless they are faced with practical, concrete situations. To be truly curious about ethics, students need to face problems that aren’t easily solved; they need to be puzzled—to face what we might call ethical dilemmas. While it’s important that students face real ethical questions, it’s also crucial that they have a safe space in which to do this. It would be poor teaching (and unethical) to place students in situations where their mistakes could end in shame or regret, cause hurt to others, or otherwise result in damage. To create safe situations for students to think practically about ethics, we teach with cases. This method is often used by professional writing instructors (most prominently seen in the popular text *Professional Writing Online 3.0* by Porter, Sullivan, and Johnson-Eilola) and by English educators (e.g., Alsup and Bush; Johannessen and McCann).

A *case* (what some might call a *scenario*) is a structured writing situation in which students take

on the role of author/professional. A case places students within an imagined situation and then lets them make the important decisions that lead to action. Writers have to decide what the task entails—and negotiate some ethical issues during the process. A good case goes far beyond assigning a task or requiring a particular genre. Good cases pose problems similar to those that professionals face in the “real world.” Effective cases are full of gray areas—and room for discussion, debate, and decision-making. When cases are

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Consider, for example, the ethical challenges that accompany one of the most popular professional writing assignments: the résumé with cover letter. At face value, this is a moderately simple project with a straightforward focus—to produce documents that successfully portray the applicant’s professional qualifications for a particular position. The ethics required of writers seem clear: to represent their qualifications, background, and professional traits accurately. However, writing accurately is more chal-

lenging than it might appear. At its heart, the résumé is a persuasive document, and it can be tempting to push the envelope to increase the effectiveness of the document. One study found that over 50% of résumés include falsified information (Villano); unfortunately, we have witnessed some of these stretches and overstatements ourselves. A tutoring job gets listed as an instructor position; a small class project becomes a community outreach program; a passing grade in a first-year language course morphs into “fluent Spanish”; a student who walked at graduation claims to have a degree in spite of being a few credits short. In an effort to produce an overwhelming narrative of professionalism, candidates exaggerate their experiences. They ask *some* of the right questions to guide their writing:

- What professional experiences, qualifications, and credentials are valued or required for this position?
- Which of my professional experiences, qualifications, and credentials satisfy those requirements?

When we teach with cases, our aim is for students to think not only about these questions but also to think about another pair of questions that is at least as important as the first set:

- What, ethically, can and should be included in the résumé for this position?
- Given my experiences, qualifications, and credentials, where is the line that separates rhetorically savvy communication from unethical exaggeration or manipulation?

Deliberations, Decisions, Debates, Discussions

When we ask students to participate in case-based writing, we place them in rhetorical situations in which they have to name and negotiate these kinds of questions. Take, for example, the case in Figure 1, designed not only to teach the genres of the résumé and cover letter but also to prompt some rhetorical and ethical decision-making. For this particular case, students complete their writing in small groups so that they also have opportunities to discuss and debate their decisions with their peers.

It's not difficult to imagine the kinds of conversations that arise in this case situation. When teams are composing their own documents, they immediately find themselves discussing a complex tangle of decisions. Students have many creative ideas about how to put their applicant's qualifications in the best light and how to craft the structure, style, and page design for documents that will pique the hiring committee's interest in their candidate.

However, the stipulation that the winning team will also meet the hiring committee's standards for ethical communication leads students to ask two essential sets of questions:

- What is *ethical communication*? How do we demonstrate it in our writing?
- Are there any specialized guidelines—either written or unwritten—for the ethics of résumé writing in our fictional applicant's line of work? What beliefs or values regarding ethical communication are important to us as writers—and to the members of the hiring committee?

Students deliberate about these questions within their teams as they decide how to shape their application documents. But they also debate their ideas across teams, especially as they present their constructive critiques of others' documents. As their competitive desire to gain the position takes over, students begin to negotiate where the line between the ethical and unethical occurs. In

the midst of this negotiation, they have to explain their decision-making process, naming to themselves and each other how their choices are influenced by *ideals*, by *obligations*, and by anticipated *consequences*. (See Ruggiero to learn more about these factors.)

Our students' debates are critical junctures in their learning about the ethics of professional writing. They learn, hands-on, about the temptations inherent in a job-search situation—and about the dangers inherent in stretching the truth—not only to themselves but also to other applicants and to the organization they are applying to join. As they continue to participate in the case, and especially as they hear about (and perhaps disagree with) the decisions made by other groups, most students become interested in more than simply winning the job for their fictional applicant. They also show strong curiosity about *how* to think through ethical matters, and they are interested in what we as teachers can share with them from our expertise.

This exercise makes visible the ethical complications and issues that underlie what at first appears to be a fairly simple activity. Rather than being a rote act of listing qualifications, composing a résumé and cover letter requires writers to identify and enact professional values.

A Framework for Action

The concept of ethics in writing and professional communication goes far beyond the limited discussion we presented here. All writing, particularly that in the public sphere, is full of ethical

FIGURE 1. A Job Application Case

Each team will write one résumé and cover letter in response to the job description distributed to the class. Your team will receive a unique list of your fictional applicant's experiences and credentials. Each team will also receive at least

- one advantage (such as a personal connection with a member of the hiring committee),
- one disadvantage (such as a grade of Incomplete in a required course), and
- one gray area (such as a volunteering experience that you and your team will have to decide how to describe and categorize).


Your task is to produce the résumé and cover letter that will win you the job. Your prospective employer (me) and the rest of the hiring committee (two human resources managers from our community) will judge which set of application documents is most persuasive. As any hiring team would do, we'll consider how well you match your applicant's experiences and credentials to the position, how effectively you craft your documents, and how successful you are in achieving clear, ethical communication.

decisions. Understanding ethics is an essential element to the teaching of professional writing. Whether our students are writing memos, creating presentations, developing advertisements, building persuasive proposals, presenting data, creating public fliers, or writing within or beyond their profession, we want them to recognize their ethical ideals and obligations as professionals and writers—and to use that recognition as a framework for action.

In the case we presented above, we avoided dictating to our students just what “right” and “wrong” meant. This was purposeful. When students are the ones to name the factors that play into their decision-making, they learn to make their decisions consciously and competently. We want to empower students to make their own choices regarding the ethical obligations of each situation. What might appear to be unethical for one situation may be perfectly appropriate for another. Something that should be left out

for a résumé for one position may be fine for another. And it isn’t our place to dictate just where the line occurs. Just as our students sometimes tell us that there is no such thing as universally *good* writing, there may be no such thing as the universally ethical decision. That said, we want to show our students that ethical decisions, like the rhetorical ones we make in our writing, are complex thought processes that involve consideration, knowledge, and professionalism.

Rather than seeing communication as an amoral act for which the end result is the only metric of success, students need to understand the ethical obligations inherent in professional writing. And this underlies our primary thesis: that professional writing includes much more than success at a certain task. If the task itself is unethical, or problematic, or poorly considered, we want our students to be prepared to think: about the most effective means of achieving success and also about critiquing the task and acting eth-

ically within a potentially unethical situation. In doing so, we are helping to create thinkers who are more than just *good* technicians of print and design, but also *good* writers who can recognize and navigate the ethical dimensions of writing. 

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