WRITING FOR THE PUBLIC: DIGITAL CONTEXTS

EngCmp 0420, Spring 2011, University of Pittsburgh
Prof. Annette Vee

Meeting time: W 6-8:30pm
Meeting place: 219 Cathedral of Learning
Course website: http://writingforthepublic.wordpress.com/
Course Twitter hashtag: #engcmp0420

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Course Description

Pitt's Writing for the Public course is designed to allow students to explore the theory and practice of writing that serves the public interest. Public writing is crucial in the nonprofit and government sector, serving every kind of cause: safety and health, political activism, the environment, policy education, animal and human rights, and the arts. Increasingly, these sectors rely on digital communication to get their messages out to the public. This section of the course focuses on writing for the public interest with digital genres.

You will have the opportunity to delve into an issue you are passionate about and compose a variety of documents to express the complexities of that issue. You can expect to report on events you attend, interview people, and identify and regularly read many sources of information about the issue you choose: professional journals, media outlets, websites, research studies, or other materials.

We will explore typography, writing style, and visual and audio design in order to create complex textual/digital documents on issues pertinent to the public interest. Along with text-centered proposals, editorials and articles, you will also create a website, write for a blog, use the social media platform Twitter and compose an audio piece suitable for podcasting. We'll use examples of public writing, theoretical articles, and the work of students in the class to inform our discussion.

The first half of the course will focus on an introduction to the theory and practice of writing for the public in digital contexts. You will practice the writing and revision process, identify public issues, conduct research, and explore the range of genres that constitute digital writing in the nonprofit and governmental sectors. The second half of the course will be driven by your public interest project. Your final project will be a website that includes audio, visual, textual and social media elements.

Goals for Pitt's Writing for the Public Course

Writing for the Public is a writing-intensive course that focuses on helping students learn about and use specific forms of reading and writing that are common in the nonprofit and government sectors of American life. It is a

core course in Pitt's Public and Professional Writing (PPW) Certificate Program. The course enables students to do the following:

Learn how persuasive writing functions in both nonprofit and government contexts. Students will learn about standards for writing and the range of genres that constitute writing in the public interest, and they will learn how to identify and research public issues.

Learn how to engage with the contexts and goals of writing in the public interest, including ways of satisfying the needs of their readers and what is at stake in writing a document that is published by an agency or nonprofit.

Compose sustained arguments supported by research (including interviewing) to persuade a particular audience to take a particular action. Students will choose a social issue or problem to research and write about and will narrow their focus to create a project that can be completed during the course.

Address the rhetorical and technical challenges of using images, captions, tables, charts, and other design elements to advance an argument and persuade an audience.

Craft language with attention to both style and precision. The course will allow students to better edit their own writing and to provide useful feedback on their colleagues' writing.

Students who earn a C or above in Writing for the Public have substantially progressed toward fulfilling the goals listed above.

Course Requirements

To succeed in this course, you will need to stay on top of assignments, participate actively in online and in-class discussions, and respect your peers in conversation and reviews of their work. You will need to complete course readings and submit your work—both drafts and final projects—on time. There are no long essays for this course; instead, there are many smaller projects and short writings that will be compiled into your final website. Because there are so many smaller elements to this course, it is imperative that you stay organized. Use a calendar to remind you of drafts, assignments, and short digital writings on the blog and Twitter.

Because part of your work in the course is to offer useful and intelligent feedback to your colleagues in class, your attendance and participation is mandatory.

If, at any time, you have questions or concerns about your ability to fulfill the expectations for this course, please contact me. I aim to help you succeed in the course, and together we can resolve most issues that may come up.

Course Readings

Required text: Joseph Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* (available through Pitt's Bookstore)

Readings will be available online through CourseWeb unless otherwise noted. Readings for each week are listed on the course calendar (see below) by the day they are due to be read. Throughout the semester, you will also be reading and commenting on your peers' work.

Grading

The Proposal, Press Release, Visual Argument, Infographics, Audio Interview/Argument, White Paper will all be graded at their 2nd draft. The grades are weighted toward the final website to give you an opportunity to revise them for a final, (presumably) higher grade.

Digital participation (Twitter, blog, Wikipedia) 10%
In-class participation   10%
Proposal   10%
Press Release   5%
Visual Arguments   5%
Infographics   5%
Audio Interview/Argument   10%
White Paper   5%
Website   35% (*corrected from handout in class Jan 5)
Final reflection letter (pass/fail)   5%

Late work—including late or incomplete drafts on workshop days—will be docked one letter grade per day it is late, unless prior arrangements are made with me for extensions, etc. I offer extensions only in extreme circumstances, but please contact me if this applies to you.

Participation

Participation in the class consists of short writings in class and on the course blog and Twitter, peer review, discussion, and your general contribution to the work we do together.

Someone with an excellent participation grade:
• 	will have attended class and appeared engaged without fail;
• 	will have offered timely, insightful comments to his peers;
• 	will have always brought her readings or other materials to class;
• 	will have contributed regularly and thoughtfully to class discussions both online and offline.
• 	will engage in conversation on the course blog and Twitter, over and above required minimums

Some people are more likely to speak up than others and some are more comfortable sharing ideas after they have had more time to process them; for these reasons, I offer both online (that is, written and not time-sensitive) and offline (that is, vocal and real-time) venues in which to participate in the class. It's normal to be more comfortable in one space than another, but your work as a professional communicator requires that you be proficient in sharing your ideas in real-time, asynchronous, written and face-to-face contexts. Please see me if you have questions about how to participate more actively in any area of the class.

Policies and Procedures

Attendance

Regular attendance in this course is required. <u>If you miss more than two weeks total of this course (2 class meetings), you will not pass the course.</u>

It is your responsibility to get the assignments, class notes, and course changes from a classmate if you do miss a class. It is also your responsibility to complete the missing work. In-class work cannot be made up.

I understand that things happen and you may need to miss a class because you're sick, you've missed your flight back to campus, or you have pressing personal or family issues. The policy above allows for such absences without penalty. If you need to be absent for some extraordinary reason—because of a severe accident or illness, a family emergency or death, a religious holiday or jury duty—please let me know, and we will work something out. For such absences, either prior notification or subsequent documentation will be required.

Academic Integrity

The University asks us to include in our course descriptions this quotation from Pitt's Senate Committee on Tenure and Academic Freedom (February 1974):

> The integrity of the academic process requires fair and impartial evaluation on the part of faculty and honest academic conduct on the part of students. To this end, students are expected to conduct themselves at a high level of responsibility in the fulfillment of the course of their study. It is the corresponding responsibility of faculty to make clear to students those standards by which students will be evaluated, and the resources permissible for use by students during the course of their study and evaluation. The educational process is perceived as a joint faculty-student enterprise which will perforce involve professional judgment by faculty and may involve—without penalty—reasoned exception by students to the data or views offered by faculty.

Plagiarism hurts the relationships and scholarship we construct during this class. Assignments for this course are designed to be relevant to your specific contexts and are therefore nearly impossible to plagiarize in full. More commonly, students plagiarize by improperly quoting and documenting their sources. We will review how to properly document sources in class and I am happy to answer questions about how you can ensure that work you do for the class is your own. Additionally, please visit the English Department's site defining plagiarism and explaining how to properly document sources: http://www.englishlit.pitt.edu/lit_plagiarism.html.

Should you plagiarize, consequences are severe: students suspected of violating the University of Pittsburgh Policy on Academic Integrity, noted above, will be required to participate in the outlined procedural process that I initiate. A minimum sanction of a failing grade for the paper or project will be imposed.

Disability Resources

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, please inform me and the Office of Disability Resources and Services as early as possible in the term. You can reach DRS at (412) 648-7890 or (412) 383-7355 (TTY) and you can visit their office at 216 William Pitt Union. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

The Writing Center

The Writing Center is a free tutorial service for Pitt students. Writing Center consultants can help you learn how to generate ideas, organize your writing, and understand assignments. They can help you understand and deal with any sentence-level problems that you have, too. It's a great place to go in order to have a reader respond to your work so that you can do some intensive work on your writing. You can call for an appointment at (412) 624-6556.

The writing center is located in M-2 Thaw Hall and it is open Monday through Thursday 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Friday 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. You can also visit drop-in sites at Hillman Library and Tower A, 12th Floor Lounge. Visit the Writing Center website at http://www.english.pitt.edu/writingcenter/ for more information.

Technology etiquette

Please turn off your cell phone **before** class begins and keep it inside your book bag, purse, etc—do *not* keep it on your desk during class. I allow and encourage the use of computers, netbooks, tablets, etc. in class for those who want to take notes digitally during class. These devices are *not* for socializing during class, however; studies show that these activities are distracting to your ability to learn and participate. You may visit our blog, Wikipedia or dictionary sites, etc. to help you understand a concept we're discussing in class. If you are socializing online or on your phone (including texting) during class, then you will be considered absent for that class period. Please contact me if you have specific questions about this policy.

Course Schedule

Life is complicated; consequently, this schedule is subject to change.

Week 1 (Jan 5): introduction
Intro to Course

By Friday, Jan 7:
> Register for the class blog and post an introductory post with your goals for the class.
> Launch a twitter account, follow me (@profvee) and send me an email with your username. Once I get everyone's usernames, I'll send out an email with them so that you can follow everyone else in the class. Begin tweeting!

Week 2 (Jan 12): digital writing // rhetoric // researching a public issue

Reading
- Bowdon, Melody and J. Blake Scott. "A Rhetorical Toolbox for Technical and Professional Communication." Service Learning in Technical and Professional Communication. Longman, 2003.
- Simmons, W, Michele and Jeffrey T Grabill. "Toward a Civic Rhetoric for Technologically and Scientifically Complex Places." College *Composition and Communication;* Feb 2007; 58(3), 419-448.

Writing
> Register with course blog and launch your own Twitter account (tag #pittcmp0420)
> By Friday, Jan 14, post an answer to the question on the blog or post your own question.

In class
> Discuss rhetorical terms from Bowden & Scott: kairos (Gorgias), exigence (Bitzer), audience, discourse community, "available means of persuasion" (Aristotle), genres as social action (C. Miller), ethos, pathos, logos (Aristotle). How do these rhetorical contexts change in digital contexts?
> Look on websites/discuss public issues to write about.

Week 3 (Jan 19): writing style // proposal workshop

Reading
- Joseph Williams, Lessons 1–3: "Understanding Style," "Correctness," and "Actions."
- "Memos." Purdue OWL: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/590/1/
- "Interviewing" and "In Their Own Words" (especially up to pg. 66), News Reporting and Writing

Writing
- Issue Proposal (memo format), Draft #1 due in class for workshopping. Bring three copies for peer review and discussion. See example memo at the Purdue OWL: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/590/04/
- Make list of potential interviewees & set up an interview.
- By Friday, Jan 21, post a progress report on your research and a question or challenge you've found. Offer a substantive comment on someone else's post. (You'll follow this pattern every week until Feb 18, for a total of 4 posts and comments.)

In class
> Workshop Issue Proposals; discuss writing style and how to find additional research on a topic.

DUE MON, JAN 24: Issue Proposal, Draft #2 uploaded to CourseWeb by 5pm.

Week 4 (Jan 26): visual / image design

Reading
- Park, Roger. "Common Design Pitfalls" and "Redesign," *Looking Good in Print,* 6th Ed. Scottsdale: Paraglyph Press, 2006.
- Faigley, et al. "Picturing texts," in *Picturing Texts*, Norton, 2004.
- Optional resource: Robin Williams's *Non-designer's Design Book* (2008) is online through PittCat.

Writing
Writing / research notes, to be discussed in class.

In class
Discuss blog and progress on research; look at examples of visual design and redesign; discuss principles of unity, pattern, balance, etc., in visual design.

Week 5 (Feb 2): audio design

Reading
Williams, Lesson 4, "Characters," do designated exercises.
Zinsser, "The Interview"

Writing
TWO Visual Arguments (Draft #1) for your issue

In class
Class critique of visual work; discuss how audio can work for the rhetorical strategies of pathos and ethos and the canon of memory; audio design workshop.

DUE MON, FEB 7: TWO Visual Arguments, Draft #2 uploaded to CourseWeb by 5pm.

Week 6 (Feb 9): composing for re-delivery and circulation

Reading
- On rhetorical velocity: http://rid.olfo.org/research/delivery/rhetorical-velocity-concept/
- Ridolfo & DeVoss, "Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery, *Kairos*, http://www.technorhetoric.net/13.2/topoi/ridolfo_devoss/intro.html

Writing
- Audio argument/interview due for peer review and discussion in class. Upload audio file & transcript. Bring headphones & laptop to class.
- Bring two press releases to class (preferably related to your issue)

In class
Class critique of audio work; discuss delivery and velocity; examine press releases and think about their re-delivery.

DUE MON, FEB 14: Audio argument/interview uploaded to CourseWeb by 5pm.

Week 7 (Feb 16): composing for the web

Reading
- Stolley, Karl. *How to Design and Write Web Pages Today*, Greenwood, in press. (excerpts)
- Williams lesson 5, "Cohesion and Coherence"
- Zinsser, "Unity," *On Writing Well*

Writing
Press Release Draft 1 due for peer review.

In class
>	Peer review of press releases; dynamic nature of web compositions; intro to writing for the web; basic html & linking; look at several web sites for elements of composition.

DUE MON, FEB 21: Press release and memo on rhetorical delivery uploaded to CourseWeb by 5pm.

Week 8 (Feb 23): composing for the web

Reading
-	Tidwell, Jennifer, "Page layout," *Designing Interfaces*, OReilly.
-	Reading on typography (TBA)

Writing
-	Start Wordpress site & choose basic layout.
-	Post your first entry as an introduction to your issue. (From here on, post something about your issue every week and comment on another student's blog.)

In class
>	More discussion on writing for the web, including design and code elements, Wordpress widgets, etc; introduction to copyright law

Week 9 (Mar 2): ethics of digital writing: accessibility // digital divide // copyright

Reading
-	Electronic Frontier Foundation's FAQ on fair use: http://w2.eff.org/IP/eff_fair_use_faq.php
-	US government publication on copyright (pp 1-6): http://www.copyright.gov/circs/circ1.pdf
-	Stolley, Karl. "Accessibility," *How to Design and Write Web Pages Today*
-	Pew Internet and American Life Project: Survey research on the "digital divide"

Writing
>	Launch Twitter account for your issue & begin tweeting from it.

In class
>	Discuss ethics in digital writing: copyright, accessibility, universal design, the "digital divide"

Week X (Mar 8 & 10): spring break!

Week 10 (Mar 16): wikipedia // publicizing your issue

Reading
-	Shirky, Clay. "Gin, Television and the Cognitive Surplus," *Cognitive Surplus*.
-	Spend an hour or two reading articles relevant to your public issue on Wikipedia.

Writing
>	Integrate elements of visual, audio, press release, and Twitter into your website.

In class
>	Digital peer review of website; discuss alternative ways of getting the word out about your issue.

Week 11 (Mar 23): metadata // data // graphics

Reading
-	Stolley, "Page Metadata," "Tracking visitors, sharing content"
-	Visit sites with good information graphics such as Information is Beautiful, GOOD, Ben Fry, NYTimes.
-	Williams Lesson 7, "Concision"

Writing
- Edit or create at least one Wikipedia page to reflect some research you've done on your issue.
- Draft #1 of 750-1000 word white paper for workshopping

In class
> Workshop white papers; discuss Wikipedia editing; visit websites with good infographics and discuss what makes them good; look at metadata on websites and site analytics on Alexa and Google Analytics.

DUE MON, MAR 28: White Paper, Draft # 2 uploaded to CourseWeb by 5pm.

Week 12 (Mar 30): social media

Reading
- Tufecki, Z. "The Social Media Release as a Corporate Communications"
- Facebook fan pages you're connected to or related to your issue.

Writing
> TWO Infographics on your issue to be workshopped in class.

In class
> Class critique of infographics; discuss social media and activism (e.g., Kickstarter; Pando Projects)

DUE MON, APR 4: Infographics uploaded to CourseWeb by 5pm.

Week 13 (Apr 6): workshop
Have a full draft of your website up and available for workshopping in class.

Week 14 (Apr 13): workshop / wrap-up
Have a full draft of your website up and available for workshopping in class.

Week 15 (Apr 20): presentations
Presentations of final, full websites, round 1

Week 16 (Apr 27): presentations
Presentations of final, full websites, round 2

DUE FRIDAY, APR 29: Reflection on writing for your public issue online and discussion of plans for the future of your website.

Class Projects

The main focus of this course is your sustained research and composing about a public issue of your choosing. The minor projects of the course will each be drafted, reviewed by your peers, commented on by me, and finally integrated into a complete website on your issue. Throughout the term, you'll also be posting to a blog and tweeting about your research and composition process as well as your chosen issue.

Your writing for Twitter the course blog, your issue blog, comments on peers' blogs, and your Wikipedia entry (Wk11) will constitute your digital participation grade (10% of the total).

Blog

During the first few weeks of the term, you'll post about your research progress to a private blog, shared only with people in this class. You must post at least 4 posts and 4 comments, but you are welcome and encouraged to post more. You'll be expected to ask questions pertinent to the research and writing project and you'll comment on others' posts and questions. The blog is designed to be a relatively casual discussion space, but you should practice good blog writing on it: compelling titles, clear sentences and vibrant words—all the stuff you'll learn from Williams's *Style*.

During the last half of the term, you'll blog on your own site about your issue. You are expected to come up with your own topics to post on, but you can ask the class for help with invention or get ideas from other students' issue blogs. You'll comment on your peers' blogs as well, to help them stay lively and conversational.

Twitter

You'll set up a Twitter account to tweet about research progress, your writing process and general news and links about your issue. Use the hashtag #engcmp0420 to tweet about the class, and devise your own hashtag to tweet about your issue. Follow me (@profvee) and your classmates, plus find others who are interested in your issue. You should have at least 50 tweets by the end of the semester, but you'll be more successful using Twitter if you don't think about it in terms of quantity. Integrate it into your research habits on your issue, tweet when you encounter a good web source, when you're on the bus and think about something related to your issue, etc.

Proposal (Draft 1 due Jan 19; Draft 2 due Jan 24)

In a 500-750 word memo, your proposal will outline the basic history of your public issue, who is affected by it, what is causing it, which aspects of it you would like to address, and why intervention and attention to the issue is important.

Visual Arguments (Draft 1 due Feb 2; Draft 2 due Feb 7)

Juxtapose an image you have found or made with text to make an argument about your issue. You will do this digitally, using the digital image software you prefer. You'll make two different visual arguments; you must include at least one on your final website.

Audio Argument/Interview (Draft 1 due Feb 9; Draft 2 due Feb 14)

This project requires that you find people who are willing to let you interview them about your issue. You can interview several people, but you should find at least one who is willing to let you take an audio recording of their voice and put it into your audio essay and your website. Your 3-6 minute audio essay will include music or some kind of non-verbal sound, plus the voice of your interviewee. You will probably want to narrate some aspect of your audio piece as well. As a whole, the piece should make an argument pertinent to your issue.

Press Release (Draft 1 due Feb 16; Draft 2 due Feb 21)

A press release is often sent to media outlets by non-profits and businesses when some event occurs. For this assignment, you'll compose a press release related to your issue, paying particular attention to how this press release will be used in digital publications. Your one-page press release will be primarily text, but should also include an image or links to relevant websites. It will be included on your full website.

White Paper (Draft #1 due Mar 23; Draft 2 due Mar 28)

Non-profits and businesses will sometimes issue "white papers" to convey information to the public about a particular issue. Your 750-1000 word (3-4 page) white paper will consolidate some of the research you've conducted over the semester in order to make a concise argument about your issue. You can borrow writing from your blog to include in this paper.

Infographic (Draft #1 due Mar 30; Draft #2 due Apr 4)

Using good design principles, you'll create two infographics reflecting some of the research you've found on your issue. You must include one of them on your full website, but you may include both.

Website (Drafts due throughout the semester; final due Apr 29)

Your website will be make a general argument on your issue through the collected individual compositions from the class. It must include at least one visual argument, one infographic, your audio interview/argument, your press release, and your white paper. It will also include at least 5 blog posts, a Twitter feed section, and various elements such as an "About" page. You'll have the last few weeks of the term to get feedback from me and your peers. You'll present your website during the final weeks of the class.

Reflection Letter

In a formal letter addressed to me, you'll describe some of what you've learned from researching your issue and writing about the web. You should also discuss what plans you have for your website in the future. This letter is a chance for you to reflect on your trajectory though the semester and although the format should be formal, your tone can be informal.