

# Teaching Writing for the “Real World”: Community and Workplace Writing

*The authors present a case study project that can help students learn more about the role of writing for the workplace and in community organizations.*

W

e live in a highly textual world. Texts meet us and our students at every turn: on our cell phone screens, computer screens, in the news tickers that run along the bottom of our television screens, in newspapers, magazines, books, trade newsletters, email, memos, reports, billboards, advertisements, forms, bills, policies, instruction manuals. The world's work largely transpires through text—business, government, and entertainment are all mediated by writing. Interpersonal communication is also largely written now with the advent of technologies that facilitate written talk.

In contrast to this reality, much of the teaching of writing in high school classrooms does not include these kinds of texts in our conversations and in the writing that we ask students to do. Many students leave English language arts classrooms thinking that writing equals creative writing, literary analysis, or the five-paragraph essay, without making the connection that most people write as part of the work they do and as part of being a member of society. Often, in our teaching of writing, we overlook the kinds of writing that are connected to the “real world” that our students and their families interact with on a daily basis.

As teachers of writing with varied experiences in secondary schools, Upward Bound and ELL programs, colleges, and teacher education, we have begun to see the merit of broadening the kinds of writing and texts that we teach. Specifically, we have developed a curriculum that brings workplace and community writing,<sup>1</sup> along with rhetoric and visual design, to the forefront of our writing classrooms. Here, we want to share our ex-

periences with teaching community and workplace writing with student writers, and we propose that teaching this kind of writing in the English curriculum can tap into students' interests, literacy experiences, critical-thinking skills, and rhetorical awareness.

In this article, we offer an approach to teaching that can help students prepare to write for the workplace and in the community: a case study of community-based writing. In this case-study project, students work in groups to study the writing needs and practices of a community-based group or organization, such as a local public library, a student organization, or a nonprofit health clinic, and then students work in groups to create a document the organization needs. We explain the rationale for such a project, the project design and implementation, tips for making the project a success, and implications for student learning about writing for varied audiences, document design, and creating documents that are meant not only to be read, but to be used.

## Why Teach Approaches to Workplace and Community Writing?

Each of us had that “first job.” For the three of us, it was bagging groceries at the local supermarket, shelving books at the city library, and serving Big Macs at the local McDonald's. For each of these jobs, we had to fill out job applications, request work permits signed by school guidance counselors and teachers, participate in workplace orientations, negotiate with managers over schedules, find our way through the mounds of paperwork supplied by human resources—all in search of a first paycheck.

When we look at students today, particularly those in high school and college classrooms, the pursuit of the first paycheck is still enticing and persuasive. In fact, many of these students have already experienced multiple jobs and worksites. Much like we did, they negotiate the complexities of paperwork, unfamiliar forms, new communication expectations, and inevitably new kinds of writing. These workplace experiences compete with academic experiences, and often we hear complaints about how their academic classes and the writing that they do in English class don't seem relevant in the "real world" of work.

In recent years, colleges and universities have started to respond to the requests of both students and employers by implementing writing courses on technical and professional communication. Technical and professional writing has become a well-researched area within composition and rhetoric. In our work with both inservice and preservice English language arts teachers, we often hear questions about how to make writing relevant to students and how to build writing skills for students that might extend beyond the classroom. We believe that community and workplace writing provides a place for making these kinds of connections for students, not only in college but also in high school settings. Here's why.

Schools equip students well for writing in school: writing individually, writing to be assessed on their knowledge of either content or writing itself, writing to make connections across fields of knowledge. But research on workplace writing tells us that there are salient features of this kind of writing that are rarely taken up in school, including the following:

- writing collaboratively
- writing for multiple audiences
- writing for multiple purposes
- writing for audiences that know less about the topic than does the writer
- writing that is meant to be not only read, but to be used to accomplish a task (Dias, Freedman, Medway, and Paré)

Writing in the community and workplace requires the writer to be rhetorically savvy—to anticipate the needs, purposes, and responses of multiple

readers; to learn how to write unfamiliar genres; to learn to write with others, who may be sitting next to you or sitting at a computer across the country. As the way we write changes in the world, so do writing processes and the ways that writers go about learning how to write in new situations.

Despite the wonderful, meaningful opportunities that workplace and community writing projects can create for students, many general English or writing classes don't touch on workplace genres at all. Often, we hear that there simply isn't time in the curriculum. But as our experiences with that first job and the pursuit of that first paycheck tell us, students are usually interested in learning about workplace writing. Furthermore, we see this kind of writing, coupled with rhetorically based writing instruction, as a way to teach writing strategies that students can put to use across the curriculum and beyond the classroom walls. Simply put, we use workplace and community writing projects as the "carrot" to draw

students of all levels into discussions and writing experiences that highlight audience, purpose, genre, and usability in ways that resonate with them in their daily lives. We know our students, and for many of them, writing remains a place of struggle, boredom, and disconnect. Through projects such as the one outlined below and other workplace writing curricula that we have developed, our goal is to provide students with real-world documents, readers, and writers and to lead them into critical conversation and analysis about these kinds of texts, how they are used by their readers, and how they meet the intentions of their writers.

### A Rhetorically Based Model

In our teaching of this kind of writing curriculum, we have found that concepts of rhetoric—audience, purpose, and genre—are especially tangible for students in a class or project on community and workplace writing. By teaching writing with a "rhetorically

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based model,” we call students’ attention to texts as sites of negotiation between writers, readers, and contexts. These concepts provide students with accessible and generative ways to analyze texts they encounter, use, and read, and they provide an entry point for composing unfamiliar genres. When writing documents meant for a specific community or workplace, the concept of audience becomes more meaningful to students. In addition, the rhetorical concepts are readily transferable across writing situations, offering a critical approach students can use as they write within and beyond the classroom.

Teaching rhetorical awareness<sup>2</sup> means asking students to think about how purpose, audience, and genre work together to inform and give shape to pieces of writing. This approach helps students imagine the act of writing behind a given document. For example, Christina often works with middle school and high school students on a Genre Scavenger Hunt activity. She and her students gather all the kinds of texts that they encounter on a given day. Back in the classroom, they work in small groups to talk about each text’s primary and secondary audience, the purpose and goals of the writer(s), the form and design of the document, how and where it might be used, and the style and formality of the language the writers have used. Suddenly, genres that are familiar to students—menus, websites, flyers—become sites of inquiry, occasions for ana-

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lyzing the choices a writer made in constructing, writing, and designing a document with a specific purpose and audience in mind. This kind of activity also builds an awareness in students, so that they begin to see when writers handle rhetoric effectively and when they don’t, engaging students in critical-thinking skills that help them to evaluate the texts that surround them on a daily basis.

Using rhetoric to teach writing is not a new concept, but too often rhetoric is not used as a framework when teaching workplace and community-based writing. Instead, students are asked to memorize and reproduce templates for documents such as memos and business letters. Many classes entitled Business Communication or Technical

Writing focus on the forms of genres often used in the workplace—the memo, business letter, résumé, proposal, report—and treat these forms as formulas and templates. Students are told to write with certain-sized margins, fonts, spacing, and indenting. Students may leave these courses with the impression that writing for the workplace is easy—simply follow the template laid out in the textbook and you can’t go wrong.

We can see why the template-based approach is tempting for both teachers and students. The work of designing a document is simplified into a form that can be applied to many different writing situations. But the reality of writing in the community or workplace is often much more complicated. Format, formality, font, length, and the expectations of readers can and often do differ from one workplace or community setting to another. The wide array of style sheets that exist in corporate settings speak to how both large corporations and local businesses use style and language to present themselves to the public, to their employees, and in their daily business transactions. There are considerations of audience, word choice, tone, and many other concerns that a writer must negotiate, and these considerations exemplify the kinds of questions that we want students to ask as they write in our classrooms and beyond. Our goal is to empower student writers with the approaches and thinking skills to negotiate differing levels of variety and expectations in their writing—both now and in the future.

### **The Case Study Project: Building a Community/Workplace Writing Opportunity for Students**

We have found the Case Study<sup>3</sup> Project to be useful in helping students to understand, in a more hands-on way, what it means to take a rhetorical approach to workplace and community writing. The project serves as a culminating activity for lessons on rhetoric, the importance of genre, audience, purpose, the differences between workplace and academic writing, and the elements of visual design. Depending on class time and other curricular obligations, we devote from four weeks to a full semester to the Case Study Project.

The Case Study Project allows students to apply class discussions on rhetorical intentions and visual design to a defined task for a defined audience. As part of the project, students work in collaborative writing teams to create a document for a nonprofit or student organization that the teacher has contacted prior to beginning the project. Through this project, students gain experience with the benefits and challenges of collaborative writing—seeing how their words and ideas blend and having to negotiate differences of opinion as they arise; students also have the opportunity to see how other writing teams interpret this same assignment, analyze the differences in each version of the document, and provide feedback to one another as part of the drafting process. Overall, the three main objectives of the Case Study Project are to provide students with the experience of writing collaboratively, the opportunity to work with an actual “client”<sup>4</sup> (or audience beyond the classroom setting), and the opportunity to apply the knowledge that they have gained in earlier discussions about workplace writing.

### Phase One: Teacher Preparation

To begin this project, we looked for a nonprofit or a student organization that would be interested in working with us and our students. In the past, we have worked with organizations such as the Red Cross, a literacy program, a student literary magazine, a public library, the university writing center, and an Upward Bound program. We have sought organizations that we already have contact with and that have a readily available set of documents that can be shared with the students. The commitment for this organization typically includes meeting or corresponding with the teacher before and during the project and selecting a document that needs to be reinvented in some way, perhaps because it hasn't been effective in the past, because it needs to reach a different audience, or because it could benefit from a new design and approach.

In our experience, the document should be one that is not too difficult or complicated to construct, such as a flyer or poster, so that the students can focus on both the visual design and writing that will be included in the document and so that there

is ample time for other students in the class to provide feedback before the final draft is sent to the client.

We also ask the representative from the organization to come to class at the beginning and the end of the project, first to talk with students about the organization's mission and the purpose and audience for the document to be redesigned and then to discuss what worked well in each of the teams' documents and, potentially, which document or which elements from each document will be used by the organization and why. If a representative from the organization isn't able to come to class at the beginning and at the end of the project, a letter or email to the class can provide the context for the class to begin the project or the closure that they need at the end of the project.

Ideally, though, it is best for the representative to come to both class meetings so that students can ask questions about the organization's mission, the purpose and audience (and history) of the document they're working on, and, at the end of the project, to talk about what worked well in each document and why the organization selected the version of the document that they did.

**As part of the project, students work in collaborative writing teams to create a document for a nonprofit or student organization.**

### Phase Two: Teaching Students about the Importance of Visual Design

One of our goals is to teach students that, along with the text, the visual elements of a document are often selected based on genre, the writer's goals, the reader's expectations, and the subject that is being communicated. As the teacher, you do not need to have specialized knowledge of fonts, spacing, readability, or layout to teach visual design. We are all persuaded by the visual construction of texts around us. The trick is to help students step back and examine the visual aspects of a text as part of a text's rhetorical construction. Once students realize how visual elements are used effectively in the documents they read and use, they can use the same visual moves in their own texts.

Here are some visual design terms and concepts that we share with students and ask them to identify in sample documents:

- Readability
- Page layout (columns, boxes, tri-fold, double-sided)
- Font choice
- Use of white space
- Color
- Images (logos, icons, artwork)
- Page layout and placement
- Presentation (kinds of papers, color of paper, bindings)
- Headers and footers
- Heading and subheadings
- Textual emphasis: text with underlining, boldface, and italics
- Charts, tables, visual aids, photos, etc.

We demonstrate and teach students about these concepts in class through inquiry and demonstrations. For example, Michelle asks students to work in groups to identify a webpage that makes

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effective use of visual elements and a webpage that makes ineffective use of visual elements, and then the students present the pages to the class, explaining what they see as effective and ineffective use of visual design. During each presentation, students are invited to chime in on what they see as effective and ineffective design choices. After all the groups have presented,

she asks the class to think about patterns they saw across the presentations, and then, with the class, she creates lists of pointers on what makes for effective and ineffective design. There are many possibilities for such an assignment. For instance, teachers might want to tap into students’ extracurricular interests and create a faux MySpace or Facebook account/webpage and ask for students’ help in how to design it effectively.

Once students begin to examine texts from their everyday lives, advertising, and the Web, the multiple ways that visual elements are used to communicate to multiple audiences becomes more obvious. Our goal is to help them to read these real-world examples more critically and also to allow them to make more informed choices when designing documents for their client in the days ahead.

### Phase Three: Organizing Students into Writing Teams

During Phase Three of the Case Study Project, we organize students in writing teams of four to five students, distributing students who are technologically savvy across the writing groups. We ask each team to create a name to identify itself on all documents that the team produces. The names that Katherine’s students used when creating a poster for the Upward Bound (UB) Program were The Fantastic Flyers, The Mavericks, The High Flyers, and Take It to the Max, and students in Michelle’s class chose names such as Writer’s Block, Ink Blots Inc., Writer’s Cramp, and Three’s Company. Students also create a logo to provide a graphic representation of their writing team’s name. This initial activity helps the students create a group identity and begin collaborating on a low-stakes activity.

### Phase Four: Meeting the Client

After students develop the team name and logo, we ask the client—or the representative from the organization—to talk with the students about the organization’s mission and the document to be revised. Students interview the client, asking specific questions about the intended audience for this document, the language and design features that need to be included on the document, and additional questions about the organization to help each team develop an informed understanding of the organization’s needs. When Katherine’s students worked with the UB Program, for example, the clients wanted the writing teams to develop a new recruiting poster to be displayed in New Hampshire high schools; the primary audience for the poster was high school sophomores and juniors who would be eligible for the UB Program. Because Upward Bound is a federally funded program, the director

had specific parameters that the writing teams needed to follow, especially the use of specific colors, a UB logo and slogan, and information that had to appear on the poster.

While we prefer that students have the opportunity to interview the client to find out more about the program and the writing task they have been given, this is not always possible, as we have noted earlier. For example, because the UB staff could not attend the class meeting prior to the beginning of this project, they provided a wealth of artifacts for students to look through, including a cache of photos from the previous summer's classes, brochures, addresses for the local and federal UB websites, and sample posters from previous years. The students were also invited to email the director if they had questions about the organization or the document they were creating. Each writing team then drew on these materials, first offering individual observations in a memo to their team members about the organization's mission and activities. Even if interviewing the client is an option, collecting and analyzing documents can be especially helpful as students seek to understand how the organization designs and uses public documents and what role each document plays within the organization's structure. The following is a sample prompt that we give to students to help them get started with this phase of the project:

Evaluate the websites, brochures, flyers, and/or photos that you received in class from our client. Individually, jot down your observations about these documents. Here are some questions to guide you:

- What is your overall impression of the organization and its purpose/mission?
- What are some key words and phrases that the organization uses?
- How readable and legible are these documents?
- What are the visuals that are included in these documents (logos, graphics, photos) and how well are they used?
- What do these visuals tell you about the organization and its purpose/mission?
- Who do you think are the audiences for these documents and why?

### Phase Five: Writing Teams on a Mission

After reading one another's responses, members of each writing team cull their observations about the materials they have been working with to share their observations with one another. They begin to build a plan for the document they will create for their client, considering the following two questions:

1. Based on your individual observations and analysis, what visual elements from these documents do you think you should include in your document redesign and why?
2. Based on your individual observations and analysis, what language (words, phrases, slogans, etc.) do you think you should include in your document redesign and why?

After these conversations, students work together to build a plan for the new document. They then develop a collaboratively written business letter about their strategy to share with either the teacher or the client (or both). In Katherine's class, the students wrote a collaborative letter outlining the poster they would be designing for the UB Program. These letters, addressed to the UB staff, were written to help the organization to see whether their current materials were communicating the mission of UB to their potential audience and to open conversation with the UB director in case he had questions about the team's approach to the poster project. The letters also gave Katherine a better sense of each group's plan so that she could assess and monitor their progress.

### Phase Six: Drafting and Revising— Conversations in the Classroom

As the writing teams collaboratively draft their documents, we often talk in class about the importance of "visual rhetoric," or the ways that visuals and words work together to make meaning (George; Hocks). As the students design this document, then, they are applying what they are learning to the collaborative task before them, talking about how to balance the text and the visuals so that one element does not overwhelm the other, and they talk about how to use color and font strategically to communicate effectively to the document's intended audience. They also consider how

an audience might respond by asking the other teams for feedback as they develop drafts of the document.

With the UB Case Study Project, Katherine asked writing teams to project their poster drafts on an LCD projector while the other teams offered feedback in a whole-class workshop setting. The benefit of doing the class workshop is its expediency (especially in cases where time is a factor) and the opportunity for each team to present the rationale for the design and to hear feedback from multiple teams at once. Presenting group-designed plans for action is another common workplace activity in many professions.

Throughout the drafting process, we ask students to maintain notes and hand in official minutes of their meetings (or post them online). The

minutes are a new genre for them to learn, and they also help us as teachers to keep track of their progress and to head off any difficulties that they may be encountering. Students learn to write the minutes for two intended audiences: (1) for the writing teams to see what was discussed and decided on during

class, to facilitate and distribute writing tasks more evenly, and (2) for the teams to communicate their progress to the teacher. Again, keeping meeting minutes is another important workplace literacy skill.

### Phase Seven: Final Presentations

In the final phase of the Case Study Project, writing teams develop a polished draft of their client’s document. They then present these documents to the class and, ideally, to the client as well. If clients are able to attend the presentation of the final drafts, they can offer immediate feedback and points for discussion; if not, the clients can offer feedback in the form of a letter to the writing teams. We will note that there have been occasions where some clients have not provided immediate or written feedback, but in those cases, the teacher can often receive verbal feedback from the clients that he or she can relay to each writing team. While this situ-

ation is not ideal, oral, informal feedback is preferable to no feedback.

### Making Time for Reflection, Final Distribution, and Assessment

In addition to this final presentation, there are three additional actions that we believe are beneficial to students in this project. First, because we believe that reflective writing helps students to articulate what they have learned, we ask students to write a reflective letter to their teacher about the collaborative writing experience. This letter can be completed individually, or each writing team can develop a letter about their writing process. In the case of the UB Case Study, the following prompt elicited a collaboratively written reflective letter and could easily be adapted for other case studies such as this one:

#### Collaboratively Written Writing Process Letter

*Discuss the following three issues:*

- (1) How your group worked together to complete this task
- (2) Why you decided on the document design and the language you used for this poster, and how this design and language is consistent with the look of the Upward Bound mission, organization, and website(s)
- (3) What revisions you made, based on the feedback you received (you could mention any obstacles or challenges with technology that you faced)

In most workplace writing situations, writers need to return to “final” drafts, once the draft is presented to a supervisor, staff, or external audience, for further editing. Because students are developing their work for an external audience who hopes to receive a new document in a usable form, we ask students to edit the document according to the client’s feedback and then distribute a final copy (electronic, if possible, so that it can be altered as needed) to the client and to the teacher.

Finally, we evaluate students both individually and in their groups, using the process letters, the in-progress notes, the final copy of their document, and a rubric designed for this project (see fig. 1).

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**FIGURE 1.** Sample Rubric for Collaborative Case Study Project

<p><i>Self-assessment:</i> Reflective letter clearly describes learning and progress made during the case study project.</p> <p>Comments:</p>	1 2 3 4 5
<p><i>Analysis of documents:</i> Demonstrates ability to analyze the effectiveness and purpose of documents produced by the client.</p> <p>Comments:</p>	1 2 3 4 5
<p><i>Creation of documents—language:</i> Demonstrates ability to use reader-oriented language when creating document for the client.</p> <p>Comments:</p>	1 2 3 4 5
<p><i>Creation of documents—organization:</i> Demonstrates ability to use reader-oriented organization when creating the document for the client.</p> <p>Comments:</p>	1 2 3 4 5
<p><i>Creation of documents—visual elements:</i> Demonstrates ability to use reader-oriented visual elements when creating the document for the client.</p> <p>Comments:</p>	1 2 3 4 5
<p><i>Collaboration:</i> Demonstrates ability to effectively collaborate with a team, to effectively cowrite letters to the instructor and the client, to successfully complete projects while sharing responsibilities, to communicate clearly to team members, and to negotiate differences.</p> <p>Comments:</p>	1 2 3 4 5
<p><i>Presentation and organization:</i> Document is edited, clearly organized, and presented to the client in a usable form.</p> <p>Comments:</p>	1 2 3 4 5

Grading: Total points: \_\_\_\_\_ / 35 = \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_




## Troubleshooting: Ways to Adapt This Project for Your Needs

We acknowledge that there are real-world hurdles in our Case Study Project. First, finding a client and keeping that client engaged in the project can be difficult. But we believe that some of that difficulty can be resolved early if the teacher is able to talk to the client and work through issues of time commitment and scheduling. A second hurdle is the issue of time constraints. One key feature of the Case Study Project is for all of the students in the class to work on a specific document for a specific client. But we want to note here, too, that the amount of defined activity (working on one specific document or for a specific client) can shift, depending on the teacher’s goals for this assignment. A third hurdle may be a negative response from the client in relation to the work produced by the students. We address this issue by explaining to the client at the beginning of the collaboration that they are not committing to *using* the documents provided by the students and are welcome to further shape the document for their use after the completion of the project. Finally, we acknowledge that collaborative writing activities are often difficult for students. There is always a concern that one student will “carry” the project or that another student will neglect his or her responsibilities to the group. We try to account for that by encouraging regular progress reports, check-in memos, and real clients for students to work with. But we also employ cooperative learning techniques in these assignments by encouraging students to assign roles and responsibilities to each member of the group, including titles such as client liaison, project manager, tech expert, editor, and communications director. If and when groups fail, we step in with teacher support to reinforce and encourage the use of these roles, and we also reassign certain roles as necessary.

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## Conclusion

In the end, we see writing and the ability to communicate effectively as having the potential to open doors for students. We want these doors to be open for all students—even those who may feel disconnected from other forms of school-based writing. As teachers, we want student writers to feel authorized to participate in conversations in their communities, to feel comfortable writing into new situations, to advocate for themselves and others through writing. 

## Notes

1. We are defining workplace and community writing broadly to refer to nonacademic writing used to gain employment (such as résumés), used within a workplace (such as memos, instructions, reports), and used within communities (such as brochures, posters, editorials).
2. The concept of rhetorical awareness is similar to Amy J. Devitt’s proposal for teaching students explicitly about “genre awareness” (198). As she explains, “The goals of teaching genre awareness are for students to understand the intricate connections between contexts and forms, to perceive potential ideological effects of genres, and to discern both constraints and choices that make genres possible” (198).
3. We use the term *case study* here in keeping with its use in business communication, technical writing, and organizational studies. The term refers to a project that makes use of actual problems and situations that real businesses and organizations have faced to engage students in using classroom knowledge to problem solve.
4. In this article and with our students, we use the term *client* to highlight that the audience is not located within the context of the classroom and to emulate terminology often used in workplace writing.

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