

# Preparing Students To Write On The Job

Janice C. Redish  
Director  
Document Design Center  
American Institutes for Research  
Washington, D.C.

## Students as Future Employees

Think of the work and living situations in which the students you are now teaching will be five or ten years from now. Both as consumers (for example, as renters, home owners, or bank customers), and as employees, they will have to deal with written documents almost every day. As readers of these documents, they may fuss and fume at the inaccessibility of the information, the gobbledygook in the sentences, or the unattractive design of these documents — just as you and I do now. But how will they do when *they* are asked to *write* these documents — memos for their bosses, reports to clients, or notices for the public?

Perhaps if we spend more time teaching students how to write the types of documents that they will be asked to write on the job, we will someday see more clearly-written and well-organized public documents. I am not belittling the importance of teaching literary criticism or creative writing. I am arguing in favor of *also* giving a critical place in the secondary school and college curriculum to expository writing of the kind one finds in offices, social service agencies, school administrations — in almost any field you can imagine your students entering.

It isn't fair to our students to assume that they will get good job-related writing skills later on. By the time they get to an advanced college or postgraduate level, most students think that they have learned how to write. A few students, notably engineering majors, take especially designed technical writing courses, but most students are never trained to write for the different rhetorical situations they will face on the job.

## Inaccurate Perceptions of Writing on the Job

In working with hundreds of professionals in more than 20 government agencies during the past three years, my colleagues and I have found that many of our clients had been unprepared for the role that expository writing would play in their lives. I think that like our clients, students misunderstand the need for writing skills:

1. Students don't realize how much time they will spend writing on the job. They see themselves in the future as lawyers or nurses or research associates or social service workers, not as writers. Yet, in any of these occupations, our students are going to spend a good part of each day putting words on paper. And as they climb career ladders into administration or management, the time they spend writing is likely to increase, not decrease.
2. Students don't realize the variety of writing that most people do on the job. Asked to name the type of writing a college professor does, most students would reply "research articles for journals." But a typical college professor also writes memos to colleagues, secretaries, and administrators; committee reports; proposals for funding; reviews of other people's work; reference letters for students; letters to prospective students; etc. Just think of *all* the writing you do for your job in the course of a week or month and the variety of audiences and purposes you must attend to. Do your students realize how many tasks a typical teacher has to handle?
3. Students don't realize how much review and revision goes into writing on the job. We seldom ask students to complete more than one draft; but in work settings, most writing (particularly of junior staff) is reviewed before it goes out to the client or the public. Often the writer must negotiate with several reviewers to reach consensus on the wording of a letter, memo, or report. Having students do collaborative writing and setting up review procedures that require revision would better prepare students for on-the-job writing.
4. Students think that good writers can just plunge in and write. They don't realize that expert writers often spend *more* time *planning* than writing.

## Planning is One Key to Successful on-the-job Writing

With our professional clients we stress the importance of the planning stage in any writing task. By asking our clients to articulate plans for the written product, we help to make writers aware of what they are already doing as well as

thinking about what should be done. When clients first begin to use our multi-step process model, they often complain that they don't have the time to devote to planning. The five planning questions we pose, however, only take a lot of time to answer when writers are learning how to use the model. Over time, the planning process becomes semi-automatic and can be accomplished very quickly.

To help writers plan, we pose these five questions:

1. What is the *scope* of the document? Writers must understand the question to be addressed or the message to be presented. If you have ever turned back a paper with the comment, "You didn't understand the assignment," you know that students sometimes do not clarify the scope of the writing task before they begin.
2. Who are the *audiences* for the document? Most writing in offices or agencies has multiple audiences. Some are inside the agency (reviewers or supervisors); others are outside (the client or the public). It is our experience that writers in bureaucratic organizations are highly attuned to the wishes of their internal audiences, but they are often isolated from their external audiences. Similarly, students write to impress their teachers; they seldom have to deal with realistic external audiences. If they were given assignments that had both internal audiences (the teachers) and external audiences (roles played by peers or people outside of school who react to the writing), they might become more sensitive to multiple audiences.
3. What is the *purpose* of the writing? In the world of work, each piece of writing has at least one purpose, perhaps several. A memo may need a different organization and tone if the writers' goal is to persuade someone to act than if that goal is to set forth alternative actions in a neutral fashion, or if it is to preserve a record of a meeting for the files. Unless writers can articulate what they are trying to achieve, they may make inappropriate choices of language or organization and then wonder why the writing didn't succeed.

To be successful communicators, writers have to understand the audiences and purposes of the document, and also

have to tell the readers what the document is, whom it is for, and why they should deal with it. One of the major causes of obscurity in business and government writing is that writers never address readers and do not provide any context-setting statements to tell the readers what the document is about.

4. What is the *readers' task*? In order to make a document useful to the audience, writers must consider how readers will use the document. Many business and government documents are used primarily for reference, but students who are used to writing narratives often continue to use the story-telling approach even when they are writing in work settings. Reference documents require explicit titles, informative tables of contents, headings that pose or answer questions, and a design that allows easy access to different sections of the document. To be prepared to be on-the-job writers, students should have broader experiences than only writing essays that are read like stories.
5. What *constraints* will limit what writers can do? Learning how to balance research time and writing time, how to meet deadlines, and how to keep to page limitations are important skills for students who would be successful employees. Articulating those constraints at the beginning of a writing task forces writers to plan for them rather than allowing the constraints to interfere with final production.

Writing down the answers to the five questions about scope, audience, purpose, readers' task, and constraints at the beginning of a writing assignment makes students think about the *process* of writing. To show students how planning can affect writing, we can present assignments in which students have to prepare the same content material for different purposes and different audiences and discuss the differences in organization, tone, and choice of language called for by different plans. These different assignments would help to prepare better writers who might someday produce business and government writing that is a pleasure to read.