

Writing About Health: A Health Writing Course that Emphasizes Rhetorical Flexibility and Teaches for Transfer

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Introduction

Students from a wide range of majors participate in campus and community events about health, and many seek internships and jobs in healthcare fields. As student interest in health grows, undergraduate writing programs and departments are increasingly offering healthcare writing courses, such as Writing for the Health Professions and Writing in the Health Professions.¹ These courses are often offered at institutions with robust professional schools and pre-professional programs that prepare students to become health practitioners. The major studies of healthcare writing courses (Assad, 2013; Kenzie & McCall, 2017) described how these courses can help prepare students for the specialized writing required when they enter clinical healthcare professions, such as nursing, dentistry, and medicine.²

However, healthcare writing courses are also well positioned to reach students who are not planning to pursue these paths. Because health-related courses are rooted in interdisciplinarity, a concept crucial in understanding how to make and anticipate connections to different contexts, healthcare writing courses can highlight rhetorical flexibility and emphasize transfer of writing skills and knowledge, which can benefit students with a wide range of professional goals.

I consider these features in describing a Writing About Health course aimed to support students in majors across the university. This course drew upon strategies of teaching for transfer while also incorporating key concepts from the health humanities and rhetoric of health and medicine (RHM). The goal was to use healthcare writing in order to help students think like writers and make appropriate moves when approaching new writing challenges. Students need confidence in applying their writing skills and knowledge to future (and as yet unknown) workplace situations, and a healthcare writing course can provide a useful way to help them further develop this confidence

Rhetorical Flexibility, Teaching for Transfer, and the Health Humanities

Despite a growing interest in healthcare writing courses, the body of scholarship exploring course design and pedagogy for these courses is small (Kenzie & McCall, 2017). In 2017, Daniel Kenzie and Mary McCall noted that “no studies as of yet have outlined potential curricula of Writing for the Health Professions courses” (p. 4). In response to this gap, Kenzie and McCall provided one model “developed specifically to meet the needs of a new College of Health and Human Sciences” (p. 5). Their pedagogies aim to help students in this school, many of whom are planning to enter clinical fields. Kenzie and McCall also noted that it is important to consider “the disciplinary representation of students and their postgraduate plans” when designing healthcare writing courses (p. 12), so I designed a course geared

toward preparing students who are not necessarily planning on entering clinical professions. This course could be offered at institutions that do not have professional health sciences schools.

The course moved students to think critically about the writing they may have to do in a range of professions in order to transfer skills and knowledge when encountering new writing situations. To think critically about these areas means that students understand and use appropriate vocabulary to discuss key rhetorical concepts, reflect on what these concepts mean and how they can be meaningful, and begin to imagine how they would apply these concepts in future situations.

Recent work on teaching for transfer, especially in relation to first-year composition courses, provided strategies that can be incorporated into advanced professional and disciplinary curricula like a healthcare writing course. Indeed, Dana Lynn Driscoll (2011) argued that first-year composition instructors need to teach for transfer in order to prepare students for writing in future courses across campus (p. 1). In a similar way, instructors teaching disciplinary and professional writing need to emphasize transfer to the professional world. It is especially important for a professionally oriented disciplinary writing course like *Writing About Health* to focus on forward-reaching transfer. Driscoll (2011) explained that “forward reaching” transfer requires that students “anticipate future situations where they may need the knowledge and skills they are currently learning” (p. 4).³ Instructors can help students think about these future situations, especially as they pertain to potential work scenarios. And Donna Kain and Elizabeth Wardle (2005) reminded us that while “no academic communication course” can teach “students to learn the intricacies of communication in specific workplaces,” instructors can “help students develop transferable strategies and tools for analyzing texts and contexts” (p. 135). This philosophy underpins *Writing About Health*, which I designed with the goal of preparing students to adapt their writing by using a range of rhetorical strategies. The course provided

- 1) an emphasis on rhetorical decision-making, especially related to a diverse range of healthcare situations,
- 2) attention to anticipating forward-reaching transfer of key rhetorical concepts and developing a metacognitive framework through which to do so, and
- 3) attention to the health humanities and RHM as a means of modeling connections between writing and other fields.

These approaches offered a useful way to position the course so that it looked outward to other contexts.

The focus on healthcare in particular worked well in conjunction with the course’s learning goals to prepare students to be thoughtful, confident rhetorical decision-makers who are adept in shifting their writing, especially when encountering situations not covered in college courses. Amy Rubens (2017) described the benefits of incorporating the health humanities into an introductory composition course for nursing students and others interested in the health professions. Her discussion highlighted the close connection between a health-focused course and transfer: “those in health humanities composition courses are poised to carry or ‘transfer’ their knowledge to subsequent courses, including those that might prepare them for the workforce” (p. 362). Rubens’s discussion informed my approach to designing an advanced health-focused professional writing course that

promoted transfer to a range of positions broadly related to healthcare.

I designed the course to be Writing *About* Health rather than Writing *for/in* the Health Professions. The preposition “about” rather than “in” or “for” makes clear that the course did not aim to prepare students for narrow, specialized professional situations, as some writing-in-the-disciplines courses do. Instead, the course moved students to consider how they could negotiate a range of writing contexts beyond the classroom, especially as they prepare for professional situations. Focusing on healthcare is an especially effective way to model this type of work for students because the healthcare field has a “dynamic, unpredictable nature” with “evolving challenges” that require writers to be adaptable (Arntfield & Johnston, 2016, p. 2).

With this philosophy, I did not position Writing About Health as a service course that would teach students how to write like nurses or write like dentists. I wanted students to understand that taking one course would not necessarily prepare them for every situation they could encounter in future professions. Grounded in this philosophy, Writing About Health taught students how to think like writers. In this way, the course fits with Stephen John Dilks and Ntombizodwa Cynthia Dlayedwa’s (2015) call to teach students how to “communicate with, and to challenge, people in similar disciplines, professions, and cultural contexts *and* how to communicate with, and to challenge, those in different disciplines, professions, and contexts” (p. 10). To meet this goal, they explained how they designed their general education writing and communication curriculum: “We deliberately avoided the goal of teaching engineers how to write like engineers, nurses to write like nurses, chemists to write like chemists. Instead, we set ourselves the goal of teaching students how to figure out what kinds of writing and speech are necessary to any given context” (Dilks & Dlayedwa, 2015, p. 10). Writing About Health guided students to understand how to draw from what they know in order to be effective writers as they enter a range of professional contexts and write in a range of different genres, including those not covered in the course. The course therefore supported students as they worked toward rhetorical flexibility. I explained to students that rhetorical flexibility involves “knowing different writing tools and strategies, and being able to choose the best tools and strategies to create and communicate your meaning for any given context and in different modes” (Dartmouth University Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, n.d., para. 2).

Anne Beaufort (1998) described the value of incorporating pedagogies that foster “rhetorical flexibility” in general professional writing courses (p. 182). When moving into workplace settings, students will encounter new aspects of writing, such as new genres, new environments, and new norms, that present difficulty “adapting to a variety of writing situations” if writing courses do not prepare them to be flexible (p. 182). In this way, understanding how to be a rhetorically flexible writer is important in preparing for transfer. Kain and Wardle (2005) also established the importance of teaching for transfer in order to prepare students for writing in future workplaces. Kain and Wardle pointed to Richard E. Mayer’s useful definition of transfer: “*transfer* is the ability to use what was learned to solve new problems, answer new questions, or facilitate learning new subject matter”; in this way, transfer “requires students not only to remember but also to make sense of and be able to use what they have learned” (qtd. in Kain & Wardle, 2005, p. 116). Instructors of professional writing and communication courses need to guide students to prepare to use what they have learned in writing courses in future workplaces. One way to do so is by focusing on the rhetorical moves that writers make whenever they approach writing tasks.

Beaufort (2012) highlighted the connection between rhetorical flexibility and transfer in a later study, explaining that instructors can teach toward transfer “by showing students ways of thinking about writing as an activity, rhetorically situated” (para. 5). Students must understand rhetorical tools and strategies and then apply them to new contexts, including future professional contexts. They need to learn how to approach problems by making effective rhetorical decisions.

Strategies for Teaching Rhetorical Flexibility and Transfer

Driscoll (2011) and others noted that students can have difficulty with transfer. Stephanie Boone, Sara Biggs Chaney, Josh Compton, Christiane Donahue, and Karen Gocsik (2012) summarized research about the “challenges of transfer” and the difficulty that students have anticipating future work (para. 2). These challenges can be especially pronounced when students have little familiarity with professional contexts. Despite these challenges, researchers such as Beaufort (2012), Driscoll (2011), Rebecca S. Nowacek (2011), and Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak (2014) argued that instructors can and must teach for transfer. Drawing from this body of research, I designed Writing About Health around the following strategies for teaching for transfer:

1) *Discuss transfer frequently throughout the course.*

Beaufort (2012) emphasized the importance of regularly discussing transfer as she guided instructors to “bring up the issue of transfer of learning and explicitly get students thinking about what from this course they can apply in other writing contexts” (para. 3). Driscoll (2011) provided the following guidance: “Do not assume that transfer occurs—always address transfer issues through explicit teaching” (p. 21). In a similar way, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) argued that instructors must “be explicit” when discussing transfer (p. 138).

2) *Incorporate several metacognitive reflection exercises.*

Driscoll (2011) argued that instructors must “encourage students to engage in metacognitive reflection about their writing and learning” (p. 19). Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) also explained the value of incorporating reflective practices in providing the following advice for instructors: “build in metacognition . . . Given the success we see in supporting the transfer of process, there is every reason to expand our use of reflection” (p. 139). Sarah Read and Michael J. Michaud (2015) made a similar case for including metacognitive reflection in order to move students to think about transfer (p. 434). Such advice accords with Beaufort’s (2012) argument that instructors must “build in metacognitive thinking throughout the course on what is being learned and how” (para. 2).

3) *Emphasize key rhetorical terms and concepts as a way to help students think and talk about writing across diverse contexts.*

Beaufort (2012) argued that instructors need to “build in lessons that teach the big concepts essential for transfer of writing skills: discourse community, genre, rhetorical situation, writing process knowledge” (para. 1). Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) provided a compelling

argument for incorporating extended discussions of key rhetorical terms: “Key terms, fully conceptualized and reiteratively learned and used in the classroom, offer students a vocabulary with which they can articulate learned writing knowledge and which is available for use in other rhetorical situations. In sum, such a vocabulary contributes to the passport students need to transition to new contexts” (p. 101).

- 4) *Provide many opportunities for students to learn about the writing they may have to do in the future.*

Driscoll (2011) noted that it is important to “encourage students and instructors to learn about future writing contexts and connect learning to these contexts” (p. 20).

- 5) *Introduce students to many types of writing.*

Driscoll (2011) urged instructors to “ask students to practice skills in various contexts and encourage them to understand how skills can be generalized and applied across contexts” (p. 21).

- 6) *Encourage students to think about previous knowledge and experiences in order to think critically about transfer.*

Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) provided the advice to “tap prior knowledge and concurrent knowledge” (p. 138), while Driscoll (2011) argued that instructors should “not dismiss prior writing knowledge” but “instead, work to connect it to current writing practice” (p. 22).

These strategies are helpful in teaching for transfer and encouraging students to gain the rhetorical flexibility required to adapt their writing. A focus on health provided an especially effective way to address some of these strategies by moving students to think about connections between several contexts and fields.

Health and the Health Humanities: Aids to Teach These Strategies

A focus on health can highlight the importance of transfer and rhetorical flexibility. Writers in healthcare professions will need to respond to diverse situations that require them to be effective writers who are adaptable and thoughtful about their writing. For example, Heidi Estrem (2015) relayed an observation from a kinesiology professor who “contends . . . that students need a strong sense of rhetorical flexibility if they are to be successful writers within the discipline” (p. 98). Robert J. Bonk (2015) pointed out that healthcare professionals will need to interact with and write for “increasingly diverse users,” and they will have to write in a wide range of genres (p. 15). A course that teaches students to adapt their writing to these different situations can help them confidently approach such a wide range of future writing tasks.

A focus on health can also enhance some of the strategies researchers recommend for supporting students with this work. Indeed, scholars of the health humanities and RHM point out that health is a diverse field with a wide range of genres, audiences, and situations more broadly. Writing About Health has the potential to engage students across campus in conversations about the diverse writing they will have to do in future professions. Research on the health humanities and RHM highlights the following areas, which can aid in teaching toward rhetorical flexibility and transfer:

- The fields are interdisciplinary and focus on making connections between diverse fields and illuminating diverse perspectives that different audiences may have on an issue.
- There are a wide range of types of texts related to health.
- Students can have an interest in health, which can help them draw from prior knowledge, anticipate future situations, and engage in metacognitive reflection.

In their introduction to a special edition of *Technical Communication Quarterly* Elizabeth L. Angeli and Richard Johnson-Sheehan (2018) described the connection between technical writing, the health humanities (also called the medical humanities), and RHM. Those working in the health humanities approach health through the lens of “the humanities and liberal arts, such as history, philosophy, ethics, literary studies, sociology, and political science” (p. 2).⁴ RHM is a related interdisciplinary field. RHM scholars examine health-related discourse from a rhetorical angle, and they “are interested in describing, developing, and teaching the rhetorical strategies used in health and medicine by healthcare’s various stakeholders, including providers, patients, and caregivers” (Angeli & Johnson-Sheehan, 2018, p. 4). Scholars in these fields show how health-related texts are diverse and span a range of disciplines and contexts.

The interdisciplinary nature of the health humanities and RHM can enhance classroom discussions about communication and writing. In discussing their approaches to health communication courses, Jamie Landau and Davi Johnson Thornton (2015) highlighted this key feature in arguing that the health humanities “establish interdisciplinary connections within and beyond the classroom” (p. 528). Students talk about how health is related to many fields and majors across campus. Such an approach is important in preparing students for forward-reaching transfer outside of the writing classroom, such as in professional contexts where workers communicate with people from different fields. Rubens (2017) also highlighted the value of this interdisciplinary nature in explaining how it helped students in her composition course with skills such as “tolerating ambiguity” and “cultivating critical reading and writing skills” (p. 362). These skills can help students prepare to approach new and complex writing situations. This work is thus integral to being rhetorically flexible and anticipating transfer to as yet unknown professional situations.

Catherine C. Gouge (2018) explained that the health humanities’ interdisciplinarity helps students understand how to approach various writing-related problems. Students have the opportunity “to write about different health/illness related subjects and write for different audiences” when examining various issues (p. 27). This kind of exposure to different texts, approaches, perspectives, and fields moves students to think about how they will need to write for and communicate with different audiences and stakeholders in health-related as well as other professions. Offering a range of texts allows students to consider that aspects of writing differ depending on situations while other aspects—such as attention to audience and purpose—carry across all forms of writing. This interdisciplinarity provides a way for students to understand how to apply a writing vocabulary across diverse fields. In other words, it shows them how to think about writing that happens outside of the writing classroom.

Health’s connection to interdisciplinarity also means that it is a useful way for students to consider diverse perspectives. Rubens (2017) explained that “the health

humanities encourages appreciating issues from multiple, competing perspectives” (p. 363). Indeed, she pointed out that “health and healthcare issues require multiple perspectives for problem-solving” (p. 366). Such work can aid students in approaching complex tasks by making connections and considering new ways to examine problems, including writing-related problems. Gouge (2017) made a similar point in arguing that the scholars in the health humanities emphasize: “the value of understanding and evaluating multiple stakeholders and their perspectives to problem solving” (p. 21). Students can contemplate how people with different backgrounds interact when approaching problems related to health. Such an idea is at the core of audience awareness and writing for various audiences. For example, students can examine a particular health issue from the perspective of a patient through education materials, a family member through memoirs, and a physician through research articles. Or they can examine a particular health issue from the lens of different fields. Students can track how they write about and think about an issue, which can emphasize the value of making connections between disciplines and related areas while considering how writing works across these contexts.

In addition to this connection to interdisciplinarity, a focus on health can move students to consider their prior experiences. Researchers who study transfer discuss the importance of considering prior writing and learning experiences when approaching new situations, and health can provide a natural way for students to start making these connections because they have past experiences related to health, medicine, illness, or wellness. Students can think back to health-related scenarios in their lives to begin making connections and thinking critically about them. They may even consider the role that writing played in these experiences. This background also has the potential to deepen their engagement with the course and writing more generally. Rubens (2017) highlighted this aspect in arguing that “students are poised to approach topics in the health humanities with interest and a wealth of prior experiences to nourish their curiosity” (p. 362). Here, she means interest as a “cognitive state” where a student feels a sense of engagement with a topic or material (p. 368). This kind of interest could deepen students’ engagement with and understanding of key concepts, as Rubens argued that “in composition courses, the health humanities’ relevance and familiarity can trigger or initiate interest by allowing students to ‘find a connection between prior experience’ and the course’s reading and writing activities” (p. 364). Students’ interest in a topic has a strong connection to transfer, as Rubens explained that this type of interest can influence their “ability to transfer their knowledge from one context to another” (p. 364). She noted that students’ interest in health usually extends outside of the writing classroom as they draw from prior experiences and anticipate future work in health. With such an interest, they may be more inclined to explore writing in these professions, think critically about the writing, and start to anticipate the type of transfer they will have to do when they enter these fields.

Institutional Context and Course Design

Writing About Health was offered in the Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition at Roger Williams University, a small private comprehensive university with a liberal arts general education program and some professional schools. The university does not have a school devoted to the health sciences, although the School of Social and Natural Sciences offers some pre-professional advising and a growing interdisciplinary public health program. This course was offered as a 200-level special topics writing course in Fall 2017

with plans to make it a regular offering in the future. The only prerequisite was passing an introductory 100-level expository writing course required for all students at the university. Writing About Health fulfilled a second university-wide general education requirement in writing, and most students took the course to fulfill this requirement. A smaller number of students took the course as part of a minor or concentration in Professional and Public Writing.

As a general education course, Writing About Health drew students from a range of majors, including education, business, psychology, engineering, marine biology, communications, dance, and public health. The course description stated that students did not need a background in the health sciences in order to enroll. Most students conveyed a general interest in health but did not have plans to enter a profession closely related to clinical settings such as dentistry, medicine, or nursing. Some students shared interests in non-clinical healthcare jobs, such as positions in accounting, fundraising, management, or human resources at non-profit community health organizations; positions as educators or administrators at hospitals; or positions in government as policy makers. Others did not have plans to enter a field related to health.

The Department of Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition emphasizes rhetorical flexibility in its program outcomes and design. The department website announces that its writing courses help students “explore rhetorical situations” and “create the atmosphere in which students can acquire rhetorical knowledge and strategies” (Roger Williams University, n.d.-a, para. 1). The department also gestures toward transfer in explaining that “students will write purposefully, imaginatively, and persuasively in, across, and beyond their college courses” (Roger Williams University, n.d.-b, para. 1). The department maintains an outcomes-based approach, and I designed Writing About Health to meet the following outcomes:⁵

- understand, analyze, and apply rhetorical concepts that writers use to make arguments about health and wellness (context, audience, purpose, kairos, exigence) (**rhetorical knowledge**)
- engage in thoughtful, reflective practices while producing documents in health writing genres (**meta-cognitive knowledge**)
- employ a variety of effective genres in response to academic, public, and professional situations related to health and the body (**genre knowledge**)
- analyze, engage with, and document sources in accordance with discourse community expectations and standards (**discourse community knowledge**)
- engage complex subject matter by considering readings about health discourses (**subject-matter knowledge**)
- apply sophisticated revision strategies to achieve paper or project goals (**process knowledge**)
- consider connections between health discourses and other fields/academic disciplines (**anticipating transfer**)

Guided by these outcomes, students worked towards becoming thoughtful and confident rhetorical decision-makers preparing for future professional work. Indeed, the course privileged professional writing as it shifted away from academic essays to user-friendly

documents linked to professional contexts. Students assumed the role of professionals in the healthcare industry, read about healthcare issues, and worked on healthcare-related projects so that they could begin to think about ways they may draw their writing skills into a wide range of workplaces.

The course also introduced students to what Suhasini Sharma (2010) called “General Knowledge and Skills” required for writers in healthcare, which include sentence-level clarity, ethical considerations, research skills, and effective presentation of data. Christina Zarcadoolas, Andrew F. Pleasant, and David S. Greer (2006) included a similar list of “guidelines” to help writers produce texts that are “linguistically and culturally appropriate” (p. 287). Students also gained practice with collaborative writing and working in teams, understanding how technology influences writing, and project management. These skills share similarities with those that Kenzie and McCall (2017) described for their healthcare writing course, which they connect with the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication’s guidelines (p. 6). While these points are especially relevant in healthcare writing, they can apply to other fields as well.

I communicated the course’s goal to privilege rhetorical flexibility and transfer, early and often in the semester, in the syllabus, assignment sheets, and class discussions. The course description noted, “in this course, students become familiar with rhetorical concepts by analyzing and producing texts about health, nutrition, illness, and the body.” I explained that the course would not cover every aspect they will ever need to know about healthcare writing. Students would instead learn how to approach new situations with confidence and learn about some of writing they will work with in future professional contexts.

With these goals in mind, I drew from research on transfer to design the course around the following strategies:

- 1) Discuss transfer frequently throughout the entire course.
- 2) Incorporate several metacognitive reflection exercises.
- 3) Emphasize key rhetorical terms as a way to help students talk and think about writing across diverse contexts.
- 4) Provide many opportunities for students to learn about the writing they may have to do in the future.
- 5) Introduce students to many types of writing.
- 6) Encourage students to think about previous knowledge and experiences in order to think critically about transfer.

Some key ways Writing About Health carried out these strategies included

- promoting frequent reflection about rhetorical decision-making and connections to transfer;
- working with a textbook focused on approaching writing problems from a rhetorical approach;
- incorporating low-stakes assignments that required students to seek out, analyze, and reflect upon a diverse range of texts related to health writing;
- providing students with many opportunities to learn about writing in a range of professions related to healthcare;

- including opportunities for students to write about and discuss prior experiences with health and health-related writing;
- designing major assignments that allowed students to practice writing in different genres, writing for different audiences, and writing with different purposes; and
- designing major assignments to connect with professional situations.

The main assignments moved students to understand how they can use writing to solve problems related to health (see Table 1).

Table 1 *Major Assignments for Writing About Health*

| Assignment | Key goals: (related to strategies for teaching for transfer) | Short description |
|---|---|--|
| Health in the news presentation <i>Low-stakes assignment</i> | -Identify and understand rhetorical concepts; practice using rhetorical terms -Gain exposure to a wide range of types of writing -Learn about writing they will do in the future | Students provide short presentations about key rhetorical features in health-related texts they find. They discuss writers' rhetorical decisions in terms of audience, purpose, and related aspects. |
| Rhetorical analysis <i>Major assignment</i> | -Identify and understand rhetorical concepts; practice using rhetorical terms -Learn about writing they will do in the future | Students perform a rhetorical analysis of two health-related documents: (1) a journal article for a specialist audience and (2) a patient education brochure for a non-specialist audience. |
| Health education project (website or brochure) <i>Major assignment</i> | -Apply rhetorical concepts -Work with different types of writing -Learn about writing they will do in the future | Students design and write a website or brochure to educate college students about a health issue and persuade them to adopt healthy habits. |
| Health education project (website or brochure) reflection report <i>Major assignment</i> | -Reflect upon and anticipate transfer of rhetorical concepts -Practice using rhetorical terms | Students explain and defend their rhetorical decisions. |
| Health education website (or brochure) reflection video <i>Major assignment</i> | -Reflect upon and anticipate rhetorical concepts -Practice using rhetorical terms | Students present an argument persuading the director of the university health center to use the website or brochure. They do so by discussing their rhetorical decisions. |
| Healthcare writing grant | -Reflect upon and anticipate transfer of rhetorical concepts | Students write a grant that makes an argument about how they could benefit from professional development to learn |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| <i>Major assignment</i> | -Learn about writing they will do in the future -Discuss transfer explicitly | more about healthcare writing because of its relevance to their academic and professional goals. They research the types of writing they may have to do in future jobs. |
| Rhetorical knowledge and skills reflection <i>Low-stakes assignment</i> | -Reflect upon and anticipate transfer of rhetorical concepts -Practice using rhetorical terms -Discuss transfer explicitly | Students reflect on rhetorical knowledge and skills that they may be able to transfer to situations outside of the writing classroom. |

The course used a textbook that prioritizes rhetorical awareness and rhetorical decision-making. Zarcadoolas, Pleasant, and Greer’s (2006) *Advancing Health Literacy: A Framework for Understanding and Action* features case studies that helped students practice shifting their writing based on different situations. The course drew from the introduction’s emphasis on making “appropriate” decisions: “A key objective [in health communication] is to construct linguistically, culturally appropriate, and innovative communications” (p. 5). The introduction discusses why audience awareness is critical to healthcare writing, especially with the high stakes of healthcare. A later chapter highlights how there is “tremendous variability in how people understand health messages,” so students must consider perspectives different from their own, especially with regard to non-specialist audiences (p. 47). Students learn that writers must analyze a situation and make decisions about responding to it by considering the audience’s “context, circumstances, needs for information, and abilities to comprehend that information” (p. 70). The case approach emphasizes how these aspects translate across different situations and types of writing, as the textbook circles around the same rhetorical concepts in each case study. *Advancing Health Literacy* also spotlights professional healthcare contexts, which helped students learn more about the type of writing they will need to do in future professions. This attention to professional writing in healthcare begins in the preface when the authors discussed the challenges of writing in healthcare contexts. It also features writing from a range of professions and types of organizations.

Zarcadoolas, Pleasant, and Greer (2006) included several case studies about topics such as prenatal care and infant health that helped students understand key rhetorical moves related to health. In addition to covering these topics and other contemporary health issues throughout the semester, *Writing About Health* focused extensively on a central topic: healthy sleep habits. It featured readings and projects related to sleep, which is a particularly relevant issue on college campuses and a topic that all students can discuss. Many university health centers have online and print resources designed to help students, and numerous media outlets frequently report that college students do not regularly get enough sleep.⁶ Focusing on one main topic allowed students to encounter a variety of documents with different audiences, purposes, genres, and goals. They learned that the rhetorical situation—and not the topic—shapes the choices they will have to make. It also provided a way to frame assignments as professional tasks rather than classroom assignments.⁷ The first major assignment, the rhetorical analysis, focused on texts about sleep. When working on the

assignment, students expressed a great deal of interest in sleep, although I understood that focusing so much on one topic could lead to a sense of fatigue. To prevent this sort of fatigue, I selected documents that addressed different facets of sleep, including connections to mental health and exercise. I also provided students with the option to write about sleep or another topic when working on their educational websites or brochures. While the course focused a great deal on sleep, I presented sample documents that touched upon other subjects throughout the semester, and I encouraged students to bring in documents about topics that interested them for the “health in the news” low-stakes assignment.

The course also provided a brief introduction to RHM, especially through the lens that Judy Z. Segal (2014) provided in the introduction to *The Rhetoric of Health and Medicine*. Segal explained how persuasion, attention to audience, and other elements of rhetoric apply to many medical interactions, such as in conversations between patients and physicians or in public health campaigns. This introduction reinforced key rhetorical concepts that students learned in introductory writing courses and showed students how to apply them to health and medical situations.

The course began by introducing and interrogating key rhetorical concepts such as *audience awareness* and *attention to purpose*. Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) noted the importance of providing students with a lexicon in order to facilitate transfer: “Without a curriculum explicitly based on a writing vocabulary or set of key terms, students often leave the classroom unsure of what they did learn; they then leapfrog to earlier knowledge and practice that may be more or less helpful, rather than employing a writing-rich language model of curriculum as an approach to understanding and responding to new writing situations” (p. 101). Specifically, they identified “several terms that facilitate transfer” such as “rhetorical situation, audience, context, and genre” (p. 134). This focus reflects concerns of medical and healthcare writers, with Sharma (2010) having argued that effective medical writers have the “ability to understand the purpose and requirements of the project” and “ability to write at a level appropriate to the target audience” (p. 36). Writing About Health taught students about these key concepts so that they gained practice analyzing contexts, adapting their writing in order to provide an appropriate response, assessing their writing to understand its effectiveness, and using appropriate vocabulary to describe their writing.

Writing About Health first addressed these elements with “health in the news,” a low-stakes assignment that asked students to find a health-related document and discuss it from a rhetorical perspective. Students presented for a few minutes at the beginning of classes throughout the semester. In these presentations, they discussed rhetorical decisions that writers make and the effects these decisions have on the writers’ ability to reach a specific audience with a specific purpose. The goal was to have students discuss a wide variety of genres from various fields so that they could get a preview of some of the work they may be doing in this course and in future professional situations. Students discussed health education videos, medical forms, public health fliers, news articles, press releases from hospitals and non-profits, online health quizzes, and grant applications.

In the course’s first major assignment, students wrote a rhetorical analysis of two documents in order to explore rhetorical decision-making more deeply. This assignment fits with one of Elizabeth Wardle’s (2007) strategies for teaching for transfer and promoting “*meta-awareness about writing, language, and rhetorical strategies*” by “assigning students to write rhetorical analyses of various types of texts across the university” (p. 82). Such an assignment highlights how key concepts emerge in different types of writing, so students

have an opportunity to think critically about connections outside of the writing classroom. I introduced and modeled rhetorical analyses by working with students to analyze several texts, including a university healthcare website, resources for physicians provided by the Center for Disease Control, advertisements, and grants. Students then wrote analyses of two documents related to the course theme of sleep: (1) a peer-reviewed psychology article written for specialist audiences about the relationship between sleep and mental health in college students and (2) a patient education document about practicing better sleep habits written for a non-specialist audience. Students discussed writers' decisions and began to consider why writers may have made these decisions and what effect these decisions may have. These rhetorical analyses helped students understand, analyze, and describe how writers make a series of choices when responding to a certain situation.

The next major assignment required that students make rhetorical decisions and reflect upon them as they plan, write, and design an educational health document. Students had the option to create a website or brochure, and their main objective was to make decisions that would be persuasive to a specific audience (in this case, students at our university). Students worked in small teams to use writing to respond to a health-related problem on the university's campus. I presented them with a request from the director of the campus health center to create a document that would (1) educate students about the benefits of sleep and the problems that may arise from a lack of sleep and (2) present an argument that will persuade students to adopt healthier sleep habits. Students also had the option to select a different issue relevant to the campus community. I explained that they could choose a topic that interested them, although they were required to meet with me to discuss whether it would be feasible within the scope of the assignment. While most students wrote about sleep habits, others selected topics such as HIV testing, healthy exercise habits, healthy eating in the dining hall, and limiting caffeine. I designed the project to fit with the theme of sleep in order to further show students how the rhetorical situation shapes writers' choices, but I also wanted to have students feel invested in a topic that interested them. Given the nature of the assignment, students still wrote different types of texts across the website, so they could practice shifting their writing and making appropriate choices. Local circumstances meant that, in this particular semester, the project was a simulation with no actual connection to campus health services, but such a project could be designed as a service project where students work directly with similar offices or organizations.

All students decided to create websites, and they used Google Sites and other free resources to do so. These websites included scholarly research, tips, interactive features to engage audience (such as questions, charts, diaries), profiles of students' stories, resources and contact for additional information, and references. The website connected with class discussions of rhetoric and rhetorical decision-making framed by Judy Z. Segal's (2009) argument that "internet health is a complex rhetorical situation" (p. 352). This assignment provided students with practice responding to this complex situation. Students spent a great deal of time performing audience analyses that examined college students' values, interests, likes, and motivations and making decisions about the website based on these aspects. They then connected these aspects with their rhetorical decisions and tracked the decisions they made throughout the writing process. They conducted usability tests throughout the process and made changes to the websites based on user feedback.

The health education website project provided students with the opportunity to assume the role of a health professional. Specifically, they assumed the role of health

educators. In their study of a public health course linked with a writing course, Irene L. Clark and Ronald Fischbach (2008) explained how important assuming a role is in helping students anticipate the work they will do in future jobs. They explained that “entering a profession or field requires playing a professional role, one which may be quite different from the role of student” (p. 25). For instance, Clark and Fischbach described how students in their courses worked to “assume a new ‘role’” as “Public Health professional” in order to “gain insight into the rhetorical situation inherent in the field of Public Health Education” (p. 18). As students assumed the role of professional health educator during my course’s health education project, they focused on moving away from academic essays to understanding how to write professional documents that are clear, user-centered, and easy to scan. In other words, it led them to research and practice the type of writing they would need to do as professionals. It also helped them understand how to approach a writing situation that they had never before encountered. Most students had never written materials for a website, but I wanted them to understand how they could transfer what they already know about writing and learn about new genres to feel confident encountering entirely new writing situations. Class discussions explicitly mentioned transfer and guided students to draw from previous writing they had done while also reflecting on when they may have to make similar moves in future writing tasks.

In addition to creating the website, students also wrote a reflection report explaining and defending their rhetorical decisions and recorded a video presentation convincing the health center director to use the campaign on campus because they had made effective decisions that would appeal to their audiences. This aspect was key in helping students think about and articulate how they (and writers more generally) make decisions and apply strategies to a range of situations. This reflection report fits with Driscoll’s (2011) strategy for promoting transfer by providing students with opportunities to reflect on transfer: “One reflective activity is asking students to complete a reflection piece for each assignment in which they are asked to make connections and reflect upon their learning and writing process” (Driscoll, 2011, p. 19). Students used a writing vocabulary to make their case, and they focused on how they made appropriate decisions to meet their goals.

The next assignment required students to reflect on transfer and rhetorical concepts by writing a grant using a template from the university’s student research fund application. This assignment introduced students to this important resource on campus and encouraged them to reflect on connections between healthcare writing and other contexts. The assignment required that students make an argument to request funding to attend a local health humanities conference. The conference focused on strengthening communication skills for those who work in different areas of the healthcare field. Students were not required to actually submit the request for funding or attend the conference. Again, local circumstances shaped this aspect, but a similar course could encourage students to follow through to submit the request.

To prepare for the grant, students read articles and watched videos about healthcare writing and the health humanities in order to begin to consider how writing, reading, and listening skills can be helpful outside of the writing classroom. They needed to draw from these readings and videos in order to explain how learning about health-related communication could help them in future contexts. As such, they identified skills and experiences that could be gained at the conference and explained how these skills and experiences may transfer to future work they may do on campus or in the workplace. They

learned about the genre of the grant, but the assignment emphasized how to shift their writing to this new context and make strategic decisions informed by an analysis of audience and purpose. They researched information about the faculty members and administrators awarding grant funds and crafted strategic arguments based on these findings. They presented strong arguments that made a case for how they could transfer health-related writing skills and experiences to other contexts. Students wrote about connections to future work as teachers, physical therapists, social workers, accountants, and other positions. This aspect helped students reflect on transfer and anticipate the work they would have to do in the future so that they could draw from knowledge and skills learned in this course.

The course concluded with students writing a final reflection on the rhetorical skills and knowledge they felt more confident in after working on course projects. This reflection allowed them to consider how they may be able to apply these skills and knowledge to other contexts, which may involve health-related jobs, internships, and projects or activities not related to health. The first part of the reflection asked students to revisit writing goals that they set for themselves at the beginning of the semester by considering which writing-related concepts they feel more confident with after taking the course. This part took the form of a self-confidence survey listing rhetorical concepts covered in the course, such as adapting writing for different audiences and approaching new genres.⁸ Next, an open-ended question asked students: “What are you most proud of at the end of the semester [in this course]?” Students wrote about a range of practices, such as incorporating arguments, working with evidence, understanding how to examine their writing objectively, designing scannable professional documents, and working with related concepts. It is important to note that this reflection exercise did not ask students specifically about mastery of specific genres or health knowledge. Students felt confident in discussing sleep, creating websites, and writing grants, but I wanted them to understand that the course provided them with writing knowledge and skills more generally. In this and several other end-of-semester reflective assignments, students expressed having more confidence understanding rhetorical concepts, shifting their writing depending on a range of factors, and thinking about future writing tasks.

Course Findings: Students’ Confidence in Adapting and Transferring

I received approval from the university’s Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) to ask students for permission to refer to their writing in reflections on the course. The study was not designed to produce empirical results but rather offer some insight into how these students thought about writing after taking a course that used health-related material to enhance teaching for transfer and rhetorical flexibility. I asked for consent after the course ended and final grades had been recorded. 11 students granted permission to refer to their writing. Respondents represented a range of majors, including biology, accounting, public health, psychology, political science, management, and educational studies. I examined the reflection-based artifacts from the second half of the semester: (1) the final course reflection, (2) the grant, and (3) the reflection report (and accompanying video) at the end of the health education project (website). These artifacts shed some light on what students learned throughout the course. While these responses may not necessarily be representative of a larger population, they highlight how these students felt confident that they could transfer writing knowledge and skills to future writing tasks because they understood a great deal

about choosing strategies based on their understanding of audience, purposes, genres, and situations more generally.

Attention to students' confidence in writing skills and knowledge can show how familiar students are with a concept or how much they believe they understand a concept. Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle (2007) argued that "gaining confidence in and perspective on one's own writing abilities and perspective" is an "important criteria for success in writing courses" (p. 576). Drawing from research on learning assessment, Regina Eisenbach, Vicki Golich, and Renee Curry (1998) explored the value of measuring students' confidence in courses across the university, including writing-based courses, in that it can show how students understand course concepts. Several researchers indicated that confidence and self-efficacy can play a role in students' writing ability. Ed Jones (2008) argued that these types of "self-beliefs appear to play a very important role in writing achievement" (p. 233). He explained the value of measuring "self-efficacy" through students' self-assessment. Self-efficacy is "composed of confidence in the ability to accomplish particular tasks or perform particular skills" (p. 230). Graeme Stewart, Tricia Anne Seifert, and Carol Rolheiser (2015) surveyed a body of literature that "indicates a strong connection between self-efficacy and academic outcomes," including "better writing strategies" (p. 4). Although it is difficult to measure students' confidence, examining this aspect can provide some insight into how familiar they are with rhetorical concepts.⁹

I observed patterns in how students described their confidence in metacognitive reflections. I saw students showing familiarity with rhetorical concepts and discussing how they may be helpful in future contexts. Such an approach, though, has its limitations, which means that these findings are not necessarily generalizable. The study focuses on end-of-the-semester self-reflections and self-assessments. As such, it has similar limitations as those Wardle (2007) described in her study of examining student writing and reflections when assessing transfer. For instance, examining students' perceived confidence differs from examining their ability to actually do this work. In other words, these reflections do not measure how successful students ultimately are in adapting to contexts. Driscoll (2011) discussed a similar limitation in her study of transfer after first-year composition courses: "perhaps the most challenging limitation is that the study results are based on self-reported data; that is, students' perceptions of transfer rather than some external transfer measurement" (p. 9). A future longitudinal study could provide insights into how students apply these concepts after the course ends. Since all students were in my course and hoped to receive a strong course grade, they may have provided answers that they thought would earn a higher grade or more favorable opinion rather provide an accurate account about their learning. In a similar way, my role as the students' instructor could also influence my understanding of student writing. The sample size is small and includes a relatively homogenous group of students around the same age with similar academic preparation. Additionally, the study only considers writing from one semester. Even with these limitations in mind, patterns in these reflections can provide some insight into how these specific students think about writing after taking this course.

The patterns suggest that the course may have helped these students become more aware of the idea that they will have to transfer skills and knowledge in future work. In the course's final reflection assignment, all students in the sample reflected on writing skills and knowledge rather than specialized disciplinary healthcare knowledge or genre conventions. In response to the open-ended question asking what they learned in the course, students

repeatedly wrote about their confidence in writing for a wide range of situations inside and outside of the Writing About Health classroom. They revealed that they were more confident writers who focus more on making effective rhetorical decisions, especially in terms of audience awareness and shifting their writing for different audiences. For example, William highlighted how confident he is in understanding how to assess parts of writing that are effective or ineffective based on changing contexts: “I feel like I learned to be more confident in my writing in general. I can trust what is effective and ineffective.”¹⁰ Mary expressed a similar feeling of confidence: “I am most proud of how confident I am with my writing now [than] before.” She anticipated connections between the course and her future work as a lawyer.

Like Mary, many students recognized that writing will be important in many different contexts, especially in future careers, even if they are not similar to the situations they worked with in the course. Biology major Miranda highlighted the value of writing and communication skills and anticipated how these skills can help her when she “goes to graduate school for genetic counseling.” Students not planning on going into health professions also identified ways that they could apply the skills and knowledge from the course to non-medical contexts. Jacob, a business student, explained that he could apply information from the Writing About Health course to other fields not related to health: “I learned how learning about health can actually relate to actually other non-medical careers.” Lindsay, an accounting student, anticipated that her other courses and future job will require her to write a great deal, and she felt confident that she could do so: “This class provided me with a lot of confidence in my writing and made it easier for me to be able to write and complete other class assignments.” Allie reflected on how she already transferred concepts from the course to other courses this semester: “I have been able to apply what I learned to other classes, such as word choice and knowing the audience.”

In addition to helping students feel more confident about their writing, the course helped some students write in situations outside of the classroom, such as in clubs, jobs, and internships. In the grant assignment, Hannah wrote that “better communication skills will aid me in my role as a math tutor, while strengthening my writing skills will immediately aid me in my role as secretary of the Pre-Health Club.” She explained that the Pre-Health Club requires her to address different audiences in writing “emails and documents to club members” and identify a clear purpose for her writing by being “persuasive when writing to a potential presenter who we wish to speak to our club.” Hannah discussed a genre—the email—not covered in the course, but she anticipated ways to transfer knowledge from this course to this different situation. Vanessa expressed that she is proud that she understands “writing for different types of genres” such as a “memo, email, illness narrative.” She then highlighted her confidence in working with rhetorical concepts and terms such as audience, purpose, and genre to produce effective documents. Like Vanessa, several students reflected on their ability to adapt their writing and choose strategies and tools in response to specific audience needs. Nicole wrote, “I felt like I learned a lot more about audience and really learned how to write for different audiences.”

Students made similar remarks in their reflection reports for the health education project website. Teammates Aria and Lindsay showed that they learned how to determine and assess what rhetorical decisions are effective in meeting this goal. They focused extensively on explaining how they made decisions with a specific audience—students on campus—in mind. They described how they created “an effective website to appeal to our

subject audience” and maintained a goal “to reach our audience in an effective way.” They then gave insight into their rhetorical decision-making process: “The most important part of creating this website was constantly asking ourselves ‘What are students going to be looking for?’ and ‘How can we connect with them personally.’” Jacob, Miranda, and Nicole, another group of teammates, argued that their website was effective because they considered audience and purpose: “We were able to effectively reach our target audience and achieve our purpose [listed below].” They then offered a detailed discussion of how they thought about audience and purpose and a rationale for their decision-making process. For instance, they explained how important it is to establish a “personal connection” with the audience by relating as fellow students or by providing research on the connection between sleep and academics, which the group felt would be most persuasive to other students. They thought about rhetorical elements when making writerly decisions, and they were confident when doing so.

Teammates William and Vanessa—like several other groups—mentioned rhetorical elements in the title of their reflection; William and Vanessa titled their reflection “Rationale for Rhetorical Elements of [website name].” Their opening sentence prioritized attention to audience and purpose in relation to their rhetorical decision-making: “We composed our website . . . with effective rhetorical strategies meant to persuade freshmen to adopt healthier sleep habits.” They described their decision-making process and the steps they took to meet the audience’s needs such as by doing an “audience analysis” and performing usability testing. In the accompanying video presentation, William and Vanessa similarly emphasized how they used a range of “rhetorical strategies” to make an effective website. It is noteworthy that these students did not focus on mastering the website genre but rather showed how they made decisions based on audience, purpose, and other factors.

These reflections suggest that the Writing About Health course helped some students become more confident in making effective rhetorical decisions about audience, purpose, genre conventions, and other aspects of writing in order to adapt to different contexts, whether they are directly, indirectly, or not at all connected to healthcare situations.

Conclusion

Writing studies scholars continue to emphasize the importance of teaching for transfer and preparing students to be rhetorically flexible writers who are confident approaching yet unknown future writing tasks. A health-focused professional writing course can facilitate teaching about transfer and rhetorical decision-making. Writing About Health intersected with students’ interests in health while also helping them prepare for writing in other courses, extracurricular activities, and professional situations, whether they are related to health or not. The course helped some students become more confident writers, capable of making strategic decisions about how to best address a specific writing situation. This confidence will be essential as they write in a wide variety of contexts they have not yet imagined. Writing About Health provides one approach to teaching writing with an eye toward transfer, which is a key aspect of writing programs preparing students to enter diverse fields inside and outside of healthcare.

Notes

¹I use the term “healthcare writing course” to refer to undergraduate writing courses related to the health professions offered through writing programs, writing departments, or

English departments. While medical schools and other disciplinary programs may have writing courses, they are outside the purview of this study. Kenzie and McCall (2017) discussed the increase in undergraduate healthcare writing courses (p. 1).

²For instance, Kenzie and McCall (2017) worked with “students on a clinical track” who were preparing “to seek postgraduate education in fields such as medicine, dentistry, optometry, nursing, and speech pathology” (p. 5). Mary K. Assad (2013) described a course that “offers practice and training in writing for the health professions (e.g., medicine, nursing, dentistry)” (p. 130).

³Driscoll (2011) drew from Gavriel Salomon and David N. Perkins’s (1989) discussion of “high road transfer,” which can be “backward-reaching” or “forward-reaching” (p. 4).

⁴Some in the field prefer to use the name “health humanities” rather than “medical humanities” in order to “reflect the reality that health involves more than what happens in hospitals, clinics, doctors’ offices, laboratories, or medical schools” (Angeli & Johnson-Sheehan, 2018, p. 3). Such a shift in name establishes the value of expanding healthcare writing courses to prepare students for non-clinical professions.

⁵These outcomes stem in large part from Anne Beaufort’s (2007) “conceptual model of writing expertise” (p. 17–19).

⁶Students pointed out that *Huffington Post* has a “College Sleep Culture” feature with dozens of articles to connect with its 2016 “College Sleep Tour,” and *The New York Times* published a 2017 article on “The Science of Adolescent Sleep.” Between 2016 and 2017, *NPR*, *CNN*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post* published articles on college students’ sleep.

⁷Assad (2013) explained the value of framing assignments this way (p. 128).

⁸See Regina Eisenbach, Vicki Golich, and Renee Curry’s (1998) description of student confidence surveys: “This technique measures student content knowledge at the beginning and end of a course” (p. 61).

⁹Raffaella Negretti (2015) discussed “metacognitive awareness” as related to students’ ability to “adapt their writing strategies” (171).

¹⁰Some names have been changed in accordance with the Human Subjects Review Board protocol.

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