Project 3: Professional Writing Guide

English 3840J - Writing, Reading, and Rhetoric in the Professions

Introduction

In the first article we read for the course, Anne Beaufort stressed the importance of social context knowledge for writers. This project, accordingly, is meant to help you understand and study the community-context knowledge necessary to be a successful writer in your field. In a sense, we're "zooming out" (from the genre analysis and resume projects) in order for you to get a sense of the lager community of your profession. In order to do this, you're going to perform ethnographic research on your professional community to learn more about how writing works in your field. As the study of local culture and social groups, ethnographic research is a great way to get a better handle on how social contexts (community values, goals, norms, etc.) influence the various "rules" or conventions for writing within a profession. Ethnography allows us to go beyond the text on the page to see writing (and any form of communication) as thoroughly embedded in social and material circumstance. Furthermore, the concept of "discourse community" allows us to see that norms, genres, and values of the community are always operating on and influencing the writing we do in those communities. While we've been introduced to some of these ideas, the readings for this unit will challenge you to examine the concept of discourse community and the importance of local knowledge further. We'll also learn about ethnography and primary research and read some examples of ethnographic studies of professional communities.

A Guide to Writing in [Your Profession Goes Here]

So while we're going to continue to use some of theoretical, "academic" concepts and methods as a common language to talk about how writing works in our various professions, what you produce for this project **will not** be an academic product. Rather, the guide you create should be directed to a general audience of novices and professionals that are interested in learning about writing in your field. Accordingly, this document should be designed and written differently than an academic essay. One of the major ways in which this project should be different from most academic writing is in terms of the visual layout and language choice or style. Keep the following principles in mind as you create your Guide. It should be **accessible**. Avoid jargon and technical terms to create a document that is easy to understand and approachable. It should be **visually appealing.** You can use white space and maybe even visuals when appropriate to create an inviting document. It should be **efficient**. You need to help readers easily find information with section headings, bullet points, lists, etc.

Organizing the Guide

What sections should you include in your Guide? I want to give you some freedom to decide what's important about your profession and how you want to organize your Guide. However, you need to keep in mind that you should be engaging with the concepts and readings in the course. The following section headings and descriptions should give you an idea of how to do this. The following, then, is one possible organization:

Introduction: While you don't need to cite specific research, this section needs to introduce the idea that learning how to write in a specific field requires social knowledge of the community: (its values, goals, norms, conventions, genres, roles, etc.). You might also choose to introduce the profession or field you're gearing the guide toward. Finally, this section should do some forecasting of the rest of the guide and explain how it might best be used or navigated.

Community Goals and / or Community Values: What function does writing serve in this community? How does that connect to the larger goals of the field? What values (political, cultural, etc.) does the field share? How does these influence the writing the community produces?

Roles or Identities: What are some of the different and most common roles within a professional community? How do these roles or identities determine and or influence writing? How, conversely, are social roles shaped or constructed by writing or other signifying practices?

Authority or Credibility: What should a new member of this specific community do to become an effective writer in that community? What conventions does a writer need to follow to be respected as a credible member of the community? How does he or she gain authority in the community?

Specialized Language or Lexis: Every profession has its own set of specialized language that is specific to that community. What terms, acronyms, concepts, etc. does a new member of the profession need to know to be accepted into the community? Using a list to identify terms and definitions here might be especially helpful.

Tools and/or Technologies: What are the physical and/or technological conditions for writing in this community? What computer programs or writing tools are commonly used? How do these influence and constrain how writing is produced in the community?

Genres: What genres are common in the community? What function do they serve? How are they typically written? What conventions do they typically include? How do they reveal the community's values or politics? You've already done some of this work. You'll just need to condense and translate it for the purposes of the guide.

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*Note: Each section should also briefly explain why the category itself is important in understanding writing in the community. For example, a lexis section might begin, "Membership in a community often involves demonstrating knowledge of a particular way of speaking or writing and the usage of a particular set of words or concepts."

Research

Research for this project *must* include primary field work. This is where ethnography comes in. You can choose to use any of the following primary research methods, but you are required to at least conduct an interview.

- Interview members of the professional discourse community. Don't wait on this! Start contacting possible interviewees immediately. We will do an in-class workshop to help you develop interview questions, but it's very important that these questions are guided by your central research questions and that you take use appropriate tone and diction that your interviewee can understand.
- Observe the discourse community first-hand, taking detailed field notes about communication and writing practices, social roles, etc. You might contact an individual to "shadow" in a specific workplace or make observations at a more public event.
- Collect and analyze "artifacts" from the discourse community. This might include textual genres and materials used in the discourse community as forms of communication. You may choose to use some of the materials you've already collected for Project 1, but keep in mind that you need to do new and substantial analysis on these materials to translate your findings for the guide.

You may also choose to do secondary research into your field by examining books and articles on the subject of writing in your field. If you choose to do this, you need to limit your secondary research so that the majority of the content in your final Guide is coming from YOUR primary research (field work).

Steps for the Project
1. Write a proposal in which you outline your goals for the project, how your guide will be organized, and the primary research you will conduct to accomplish this.
2. Conduct field work (primary research), keeping your project goals in mind.
3. Analyze and organize the data you gather in order to determine how it might be helpful in your guide.
4. Begin Drafting, paying attention to form/design as well as content
5. Finish a draft to show a peer, to gain feedback for improving the document.
6. Turn in the final draft of the guide to the instructor for additional feedback.

My Criteria for the Guide
- Teaches the reader about writing in the author's field or discipline.
- Demonstrates engagement with course material on discourse community theory, ethnography and visual design to produce an effective guide that forwards a social view of writing; i.e, to be an effective writer, we need to understand social contexts.
- Demonstrates thoroughness of primary research (interviews, observations, etc) and detailed research plan.
- Is well-organized with appropriate and useful section headings. Utilizes other textual design strategies for ease-of-use and readability (white space, lists, visuals, etc.)
- Uses appropriate tone and style for the situation. Avoids writing studies jargon but deals with some of the same ideas. Is accessible for an audience of novices in the field being studied.
- Includes an Appendix with any notes or recordings of your field work (interview questions and transcripts, observation notes, etc.)

- Includes a References page that provides citations for any primary sources (such as interviews) and secondary sources (books or articles).
- Meets length requirements.
- Is free of grammatical and spelling errors.

Project Proposal

Your project proposal (300+ words) should include

- A brief description of the professional discourse community you're examining and how you want to define that community (organization, location, general field, etc)
- Your research plan, such as who you will interview and when, what kind of observations you will make and when, and how you will do this field work (e-mail, phone, in-person, etc.). What do you want to learn about the writing in your community?
- How you think your research plan will help you organize and compose your Guide.

Reflective Essay

As in the reflective essay for the previous project, this is a chance for you to talk to me (the instructor) directly about the difficulties and gains you encountered in this project. Which readings were most difficult? Which ones did you learn the most from? What have you gained in terms of metacognitive knowledge that will help you become a better writer in your field? You'll also want to discuss your process of gathering (primary) data. What most surprised you about these methodologies? How were they helpful (or not helpful)? Overall, what did you learn from the project. Finally, provide an agenda for feedback. What do you think is working in your essay and what do you need or want help with from me? Remember, again, that the work you do now on this will help you write your final (more substantial) essay that will reflect on the whole course. (500-700 words)

Formal Requirements

Project Proposal: 300-500 words

Reflective Essay: 300-500 words

Essay: 2100-2500 words, (7-8 pp.)

Important Dates

10/21: Project Proposals due

11/4: Project 3 drafts due

11/6: Final draft due