12 Public Writing for Social Change

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Overview

This essay challenges students to use public writing to embrace their role as an "academic citizen" (i.e., someone who takes the writing and research we do in college and puts it to practical and civic use in our communities in the hopes of contributing toward positive social change).* Beginning with invention and how to find an exigent public issue, the chapter moves students through important steps of planning to write for a public rhetorical situation, such as defining and researching a public audience, genre of writing, and context for eventual publication or circulation. The essay provides a brief introduction to public sphere theories to help students move beyond thinking of their audience in public writing as "the general public" and instead embrace a more specific audience within the multiplicity of publics for their writing. With examples from a broad range of genres and styles that fall under the umbrella of public writing, the essay offers support for more traditional public writing assignments (e.g., the op-ed or letter to a representative), as well as digital or multimodal assignments (e.g., blogs, social media campaigns, or digital stories).

Can a tweet—a genre of public writing—cause social change? There's an article I like to teach by Malcom Gladwell that explores this question. In "Small Change: Why the Revolution Won't Be Tweeted," Gladwell recounts the story of four freshmen from North Carolina A&T who sat down at a Woolworth's lunch counter in 1960, sparking a series of sit-ins and protests. Being skeptical of the impact of social media,

Gladwell reminds us that all the events of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s "happened without e-mail, texting, Facebook, or Twitter." On one hand, Gladwell's critiques may be warranted when we think about isolated instances of what some people call "clicktivism" or "slacktivism"—things like clicking a "like" button, changing a profile picture's frame to support a cause, or signing an online petition. On the other hand, Gladwell wrote this article in 2010, and we have since witnessed the power of groups to use social media and online tools to organize broader movements, such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and many others.

While just one tweet or letter to the editor isn't going to lead to sweeping social change by itself, using public writing to respond to the exigences of our current times can help us tap into networks that may advance a cause one step at a time. As Julius Bailey and David Leonard note in their study of the Black Lives Matter movement: "The expressions of black love, the creation of spaces of protest, the demands for justice that follow, *each can gather momentum* and spread to become *large-scale social movements* that can no longer be ignored" (emphasis added, 77). Sometimes public writing can be a small snowflake contributing to the momentum of a growing snowball, but it can just easily melt without having much effect. For writing to have the potential of a public impact beyond our personal thoughts on the page, beyond our peers in the class or the teacher assigning a grade, we have to successfully engage with a public rhetorical situation for our writing, finding ways to connect with the efforts of broader publics and counterpublics.

Writing for a public rhetorical situation means planning ahead by choosing a timely and relevant public issue, as well as anticipating the ways we will publish and circulate our writing to reach the public audiences who can help effect change. In this essay, we will walk through important components of planning, writing, and publishing to consider when composing public writing for social change. A first step in the process, though, is to understand the possibilities and privileges of your role as an academic citizen.

Academic Citizens

Take a minute and brainstorm a quick list of characteristics or words that come to mind when you, separately, think of the word "academic" and the word "citizen."

Table 1: Brainstorming Characteristics of "Academic" and "Citizen"

Academic	Citizen
•	•
•	•

Under your list of characteristics for "academic," perhaps you brainstormed words like "school," "books," "research," or "teachers." You might have listed characteristics like "smart" or "intellectual." You might have approached the list by describing what you envision as *not* academic, by listing things like "not personal" or "not practical," whether you agree with those designations or not. For the column of characteristics and words for "citizen," did you list words like "government," "voting," or "civic duty"? You might have brainstormed your own role as a citizen by thinking about your local "community" or your "country of origin."

Now that our creative juices are flowing, let's put these two words together. In what ways is it possible to bring together what we do as writers and researchers in college with what is expected of us as citizens? For me, being an academic citizen means taking the scholarly work we do in college and putting it to practical and civic use in our communities in the hopes of contributing toward positive social change. All the work you do as a student to research issues and write about them in persuasive ways has the potential to shape the world around you, but only if you circulate your writing to reach public audiences beyond your school.

The concept of an "academic citizen" is not entirely new; many scholars believe in a broad role for education that is tied to democratic ideals, as well as a more public conception of intellectuals. For example, writing in his *Prison Notebooks* in the 1920s and '30s, Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci argued that all people are intellectuals, whether they become an intellectual through advanced schooling, social status, or life experience. Gramsci sees school as central in developing a working-class group of intellectuals—what he calls "organic intellectuals"—that will critically question the traditional structure of how knowledge is produced (Hoare and Smith 131). Building on some of the foundational ideas of Gramsci, Henry A. Giroux has written about the importance of public universities and colleges making a commitment to address society's problems. Similarly, Ellen Cushman argues that "public intellectuals" should use their research "to address social issues" and improve "under-served neighborhoods" (329).

The concept of an organic or public intellectual has a lot in common with what I mean by being an academic citizen.

In the next few pages, I hope to convince you that making a slight shift in how you think about your role in higher education can help you move toward these more public and civic goals and to start a journey toward becoming an academic citizen. Instead of only thinking about yourself as a student doing work for the teacher, begin thinking about the potential for your academic work to contribute toward efforts to address social injustices in your community, state, or country. While one single letter or 280-word tweet is unlikely to cause a sea change, writing that is publicly circulated has the power to tap into broader networks, movements, and efforts that, when combined, can help us move one step closer to social change, even if that step is small. I would like to invite you to think about how some of the academic research and writing you do for school can become something more than just a grade—whether that's through your contributions to your church bulletin, for example, or a letter you send to your state representative.

Finding an Issue: Invention and Exigency

Being an effective public writer starts with having a good issue. When you think of all the many things you *could* write about, what does it mean to have a good issue? And, how can you find one? I recommend you choose an issue that meets the following criteria:

1. public—in other words, it's discussed and debated in the public realm or has implications for public audiences and communities,

2. personally relevant—it should ideally be something that you care about or that interests you, and

3. timely—it's relevant to this specific moment.

Choosing a public issue does not mean you need to ignore personal concerns. In fact, it can present an opportunity to make the personal public by using your interests, experiences, and beliefs to help fuel your public writing and arguments. To aid in your public writing journey, let me tell you about two rhetorical concepts: invention and exigency.

Invention—one of the five rhetorical canons (the others are arrangement, style, memory, and delivery)—is a valuable rhetorical tool; it involves a process of discovery that can help you figure out what to say or write. Invention is meant to be generative. In other words, it's meant to

help you generate lots of ideas that could be useful in your writing and research. Eventually you will need to narrow those ideas down for your argument, selecting and arranging the ones that help you most persuasively make your case. However, during invention, "you are trying to come up with as many ideas as the situation and topic will allow. So turn your judgment down to zero while inventing. Keep an open mind" (Pullman 112).

As you are trying to find a public issue and decide what you will say about it, you might try various invention strategies, like the "Writing on Location" activity explained below, to help you generate more ideas.

An Invention Activity: Writing on Location

Choose a local, public location—an actual, physical spot or site—where you can observe and write for a short amount of time—whether that's with pen and paper or typing on your phone, tablet, or laptop. Consider a spot with some interesting visuals or bustling activity that will prompt you to brainstorm or freewrite ideas related to your assignment. While visiting your location, find a spot to sit, stand, or lie down where you can write for a few minutes. Compose a freewrite or reflection that informally captures whatever comes to your mind while you are actually, physically in the location. What do you see? What do you hear? What is intriguing? What seems surprising? You are encouraged to take pictures and/or videos that will help capture your experiences in this location at this moment and may serve as evidence in digital, multimodal assignments. (When taking pictures or videos in public, you should be particularly respectful of the privacy of people around you and protect their anonymity.)

When I assign students to write on location, they often end up with relevant and timely public issues. There is something about being physically present in a public space that helps writers begin to form a reaction. One of my former students, for example, chose to write on location at a historic cemetery near her apartment. She was distressed to see the many broken and cracked tombstones and dilapidated conditions at the cemetery. This eventually led to her composing a public blog about how local residents could (and should) get involved with the efforts of a cemetery preservation and restoration society. Another student wrote on location at the university's library late in the evening and became frustrated when the library began closing. She used some of the notes from her "Writing on Location" freewrite to help develop a public letter to the library's Dean to extend the library's hours.

Invention activities like writing on location may be especially helpful at the start of your process. However, invention can happen "at any stage

of the writing process" (Trim and Isaac 108). You shouldn't hesitate to go back to the generative, brainstorming work of invention if you become stuck, even if you have already started writing or revising a draft. Writing on location may not work for all of your interests, but give it a try and see if it helps you work to find a public issue for your writing. (For suggestions of other invention activities and practices, read Trim and Isaac's "Reinventing Invention.")

As you are discovering new ideas through invention, I would also like to encourage you to keep in mind possible exigences related to your issue. Doing so will help ensure your issue and public response is timely and relevant for your targeted audience. Rhetorician Lloyd F. Bitzer argued that any rhetorical situation has three constituent parts: an exigence, an audience, and a set of constraints (6). The exigence is the sense of urgency that demands or invites a rhetorical response, whether that's the delivery of a speech, the submission of a college essay, or the painting of a mural on the side of a building, for example. You may see the exigence as the assignment that your teacher has asked you to write; it certainly is urgent that you complete the assignment if you want to succeed in the course. Even though our audience or exigency may get us going with writing, "the force which drives composing is the writer's own set of goals, purposes, or intentions" (Flower and Hayes 69). The exigences for your writing can and often are a combination of personal intentions and school-initiated assignments.

When you write for a public rhetorical situation (even if it is pulling double duty as a class assignment), it is important to establish a public exigence for your issue. Exigences can work in your favor if you can frame your issue and stance in a way that shows the urgency of the matter for your audience. To help situate your issue within an exigence, you might put yourself in the shoes of a skeptical reader and ask: why this issue? And, why now? For example, a student in one of the civic writing courses I taught selected to research and write about a bill that would allow local governments to relocate monuments. He was able to situate that issue and frame it within current events news stories at the time that were related to the removal of confederate monuments; this helped him build urgency and establish timeliness for the issue, even though the bill did not explicitly mention confederate monuments. Establishing an exigence can hook your readers and keep them reading. Speaking of readers, who are your readers? In the next section, we will explore options for engaging a realistic public audience for your writing.

ENGAGING REALISTIC PUBLICS: PRELIMINARY RESEARCH AND PLANNING

The parts of a rhetorical situation are connected in ways that can make it difficult to make some decisions—like discovering your issue and defining the exigence—without also considering other components—like the audience or genre for your writing. As you narrow your public issue and consider its relevance, you should also begin thinking about who you will write to and in what form. This section provides strategies for how to research possibilities for your public rhetorical situation by understanding which publics you are addressing.

When you think about the audience for a piece of public writing, what first comes to mind? Easy—the general public, right? The general public seems to cover most any audience for writing that is meant for someone other than oneself (like a personal journal) or the teacher (for class assignments). Everything else tends to be lumped in with "the general public"—like the people out there who read newspapers or your Instagram followers. Here's the problem. There's really no such thing as *the general public*. In fact, my quick list of audiences above should already suggest to you that each of those groups has a set of distinct characteristics, even if newspaper readers and your Instagram followers share some things in common. What kinds of evidence they may find convincing or how you might be rhetorically persuasive in your arguments is impacted by your selection of audience. Trying to write to an amorphous, generic mass of people would set you up for challenges. To further demonstrate this point, let me take a quick aside to frame the significance of "publics" and the public sphere.

Researchers who study and write about the public sphere—that space where the so-called general public comes together to discuss, write about, and debate issues that they have in common—help us understand how we can be more effective public writers. For example, Jürgen Habermas conceived of the public sphere as an idealized space accessible to all. Habermas examined how people in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries came together in places like Britain's coffee houses and France's salons to debate civic issues. This marked a shift from the typically personal or private conversations people had in their homes. While Habermas's conception of the public sphere was foundational, his work has been criticized for being overly idealized. If you were not a White male with property, you were not able to participate in civic debates in the public sphere.

Nancy Fraser and others have argued for a more nuanced conception of publics—yes, the "s" on "publics" is important. Fraser studied "coun-

terpublics"; historically, these were public spheres that existed alongside the coffee houses and salons. Counterpublic gatherings and clubs gave opportunities for women, the working class, and others without money or privilege and who were excluded from dominant public spheres to develop "alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (Fraser 62). The takeaway here is that to conceive of a singular public sphere—or *the* general public—is inaccurate; there is a "plurality of competing publics" and counterpublics (Fraser 61).

Take a minute and think about the different public and counterpublic spheres in your own life: where do some of your family, friends, or community groups gather? What do you talk about? Are there some topics that are taboo or off-limits? Are there certain styles and ways of speaking that you use with those groups? The answers probably vary depending on which public or counterpublic spheres you are envisioning. Recognizing a multiplicity of publics means acknowledging and valuing the way our differences can challenge us to alter and expand our views of the world.

Defining and Researching Your Public Rhetorical Situation: Considerations of Audience, Purpose, Genre, and Context

I invite you to take a few minutes to brainstorm the parts of your public rhetorical situation. We've already been exploring exigent issues and publics/counterpublics, but now it's time to narrow to a more specific audience, define your purpose, select your public writing genre, and select the context for publication/circulation. Because these parts of your writing are connected, you may find it helpful to complete the following "Planning for Your Public Rhetorical Situation" activity, which asks you a series of questions about each. (Some of these questions have been adapted from Louise Dunlap's "Audience Analysis Grid" (127).)

Activity: Planning for Your Public Rhetorical Situation

As you prepare for a public writing situation, I invite you to use the following prompts to help you explore potential audiences and to analyze the relationships among issue, purpose, audience, genre, and context.

Issue and Purpose: Write a few sentences about how you understand your issue at this point. What do you already know? What do you need to know? What are your goals for public writing? What do you hope to accomplish?

Possible Publics: Make a list of at least 5 possible audiences you *could* address through public writing. Why do they (or should they) care about your issue? Can they effect the kind of change you are asking for?

Narrowed Audience: Circle one audience from your list above that you'd like to explore in more detail. Conduct some preliminary research and begin analyzing this possible audience. What does the audience already know about the issue? How have they been engaged with it (if at all) already? What do you think they need to know? What are their attitudes, beliefs, or values? How might you be able to find common ground with this audience?

Genre: What genre would be most fitting and persuasive for your selected audience? How will the genre impact the way you communicate your message? What are the typical conventions (style, structure, tone, use of visuals, etc.) of the genre?

Context for Publication: How will you "go public" with your writing to reach your intended audience? What publication venues—print or digital, formal or informal—would be appealing to your audience and fit with your message? What genre options are available to you within the possible site of publication? How will you circulate your writing?

As you work through this set of questions, I hope you will begin to narrow and define not only your public issue but also the essential components of your public writing situation.

A common challenge student writers face with public writing is thinking of the public as ambiguous (Weisser). Writing studies researcher Christian Weisser advocates for students to "locate strong publics where their voices can lead to action," so that public writing has a greater chance of leading to "significant, tangible, immediate results" (Weisser 109, 111). To locate strong publics for your writing, you must understand that there is a plurality of publics and then begin to narrow to the specific public or counterpublic communities you will target as your audience. You begin that process by brainstorming very specific kinds of readers who are impacted by or would be interested in your public issue. For example, you could consider demographic groups (e.g., age, gender identity or sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, geographic location, etc.).

As you are thinking of potential public audiences, you could also let the potential place of publication help define your audience. For instance, if your final piece of public writing will be a Facebook post to your account, your audience would be defined by your Facebook friends (in which case

you might begin brainstorming the mix of publics and counterpublics that exist within your own set of friends). Or, if you want to try to publish your writing as an op-ed in your school's newspaper, you would want to define your audience through the students at your school and the diverse sets of peer groups they represent; perhaps you want to tailor that audience to be even more specific, so you are speaking directly to LGBTQ+ students at your school. As you make progress on selecting your issue or audience, consider how other components like your genre or place of publication may afford new opportunities or present new constraints in how you compose your public writing.

One of my preferred ways to define a public audience is by selecting an actual person or organization with a name and actual address (whether a physical address or email address). Writing to a specific person takes some of the guessing game out of trying to understand a large and complex group of people. You can and should "analyze your audience to learn where their views differ from yours" contends Louise Dunlap in her book *Undoing the Silence: Six Tools for Social Change Writing*; then turn that audience analysis into a "communication strategy" (120). This becomes a bit easier when your audience is a specific, actual person. Students in my classes have researched, written, and mailed letters to the university president, state and national representatives, directors of non-profit organizations, celebrities, athletes, and CEOs of businesses—just to name a few single-person audiences.

Keep in mind that successfully meeting the needs of your audience may result in changes to the style, structure, and tone of your writing compared to the kind of writing you typically submit for your college classes. Compared to lengthy research essays, most public writing genres should be concise, clear, and direct—free of jargon that would be unfamiliar to the audience. It would also be inappropriate to include parenthetical MLA citations or a Works Cited list for most public genres. To let your audiences know where you found your information, shift to using attributive tags—identify sources by title, author, year of publication, and/or place of publication within your writing. Finally, while the kind of peer-reviewed sources you typically use in college can provide good evidence in public writing, a compelling personal story may be more effective and convincing to some public audiences—a combination of personal evidence with research-based evidence can be ideal.

I often encourage students to create lists of public genres just to get an expansive set of ideas for the range of options they have; here are a few public writing genres that have been popular with students over the

years—many of which were combined as a series of posts or as a digital, multimodal project.

- meme
- infographic
- podcast
- editorial
- digital story
- newsletter
- map
- email
- photo essay
- blog
- website
- social media post
- business letter
- flyer/poster

This list is certainly not exhaustive. What other examples of public writing genres can you think of?

Considering Digital Publics

Today, we encounter much of the public writing we read in digital public spheres. Digital writing offers writers a unique set of affordances and challenges when communicating your message. You have the opportunity to compose in multiple modes, incorporating visuals or audio with your writing. Many multimodal texts allow for experimentation, creativity, and even disruption of the status quo in ways that may be compelling for your argument. In my classes, students have created Google Maps, posted to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, composed blogs, and circulated online petitions. For example, in a Digital Writing and Publishing course I teach, one student paired a Google Map of the best skateboarding locations around town with a blog that made a public argument for transforming vacant parking lots into legal skating locations. Digital public writing can present new opportunities to communicate our messages in ways that challenge traditional styles of knowledge production and textual circulation.

With these new opportunities, though, comes a set of expectations for being intentional with issues of visual design and layout. Alex Reid notes in "Why Blog? Searching for Writing on the Web" that we should con-

sider issues of "design and layout" as interrelated to "questions of content" when composing a blog post (315). Effective digital design often means embedding media and/or incorporating hyperlinks to external sites (Carroll). Savvy online readers expect well-designed, interactive online content.

One of the benefits of situating your writing in digital online publics is the opportunity you have to reach a broad and diverse set of online readers and to connect with broader social movements. In her research about a digital campaign to stop violence against women, Jennifer Nish concluded that digital publishing increases the reach of activism, making the spread of material "more visible than some print-based forms of activist communication" (240). Similarly, you can increase your reach on social media platforms through the use of hashtags to more effectively reach a specific audience. When used effectively, the hashtag itself carries rhetorical weight and can help communicate a host of positions within just a word or phrase (Langford and Speight).

Digital publishing often allows for a multimodal mix of genres to help you communicate your public message effectively. In one of the Civic Writing classes I taught, a student researched a series of state-level education bills. For her final public project, she created infographics that helped break the education bills in layman's terms, explaining how they would impact the state if passed. To follow through with circulating her message, this student posted a series of tweets with links to her online infographics. Here's one example tweet: "For anyone interested in #EducationPolicy, here are 5 bills that are currently sitting on @GovernorDeal's desk waiting to be signed into law. #GaEdYouthCmte #GaHigherEdCmte." Here you can see how the student used a mix of hashtags to connect with public audiences who may be interested in her issue and @-ing the Governor who ultimately would make the decision of whether to sign them into law. She also effectively uses exigence by noting that the bills were sitting on the Governor's desk waiting to be signed.

While this section has only scratched the surface of digital public writing, I hope it gives you a preview of some of the opportunities and additional expectations that arise when you situate your writing online.

Going Public with Writing: Publication and Circulation

You may be wondering about the most important part of public writing—the act of going public through publication and/or circulation of your writing. Some students who are assigned public writing for a class go through

the motions but then ultimately submit their writing only to the teacher for a grade. I would like to challenge you to follow through in actually going public with your writing, to actually reach the audiences you have worked so hard to persuade. Of course, how you go public with your writing will depend on all the pieces of the rhetorical situation puzzle you have already planned for: your audience, genre, purpose, and context. When I teach public writing through business letters, I have a letter mailing party in class where I bring envelopes and stamps (and cookies!); students write in the addresses, sign their letters, and mail them off. Whether it's "snail mail" or email, posting a public flyer or publishing a blog post, I challenge you to circulate your message and reach your public audience.

Of course, circulating your writing within some public spheres could be risky, and you should think about the implications of "going public" with your writing. For example, maybe you have taken up the cause of LGBTQ+ rights in your public writing, telling a personal story of your experiences with coming out to be persuasive. If you were not yet ready to tell your family about your sexual orientation but decided to publish your writing on Facebook—and you have family members as Facebook friends—that may put you in a tricky situation. Many of us have become careful with curating our social media audiences, but you have to be equally mindful in other publication venues—maybe your editorial in the school newspaper stating your views about the death penalty will cause you to lose credibility or friendships. In some cases, you may feel so strongly committed that the rewards of publishing your positions outweigh other risks, but you should take a moment to assess the ways your issue, audience, genre, and publication venue are all interconnected within the complexities of your public rhetorical situation.

Conclusion

In the article "Going Public" by Peter Mortensen, I have a favorite passage that I often call to mind when I am writing for a public audience: "we must go public. And we can" (182). Mortensen is asking writing studies researchers to write for increasingly public audiences "outside the profession, beyond the academy" (182); he's asking his colleagues to embrace the role of public intellectual that I mentioned at the start of this essay. What I love about the line is how it communicates in just a few words the necessity, urgency, and possibility that comes with public writing. Whether you are a university researcher used to writing to other researchers or a first-year college student used to writing only for your teachers, writing for pub-

lic audiences and in public genres can seem daunting, but, as Mortensen reminds us, we must go public, and we can. As academic citizens of the world, we have a responsibility to ourselves and to the publics around us to use writing to improve our communities and address injustices. Not every piece of writing that goes public will change the world, and we often do not get to see an immediate impact; indeed, the kind of social change that addresses deep injustices often takes time and far-reaching efforts beyond a single email or blog post, but these small rhetorical acts can begin to gather momentum and move toward change in small steps.

When you arrive at your graduation day, I hope you will recall what it means to be an academic citizen. Listen for the moment just before the commencement speaker has you move your tassel from the right to the left. They will confer your degree and say: "with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities appertaining thereto." In the celebration of your accomplishments, remember that obtaining a higher education is a privilege that comes with responsibilities to your community and society. Being an academic citizen simply means using your education for good in the world, and public writing can help you accomplish those goals.

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Teacher Resources for Public Writing for Social Change

"Public Writing for Social Change" represents a compilation of my best advice for students who are writing for public audiences and contexts based on the lessons I've learned from teaching public writing for over 15 years. Public writing assignments require rhetorical sophistication, genre awareness, and targeted research toward a specific audience, context, and exigence. The essay addresses some of the common pitfalls I have seen from students who struggle with public writing, such as choosing an issue that does not have a public exigence, conceiving of one's audience too broadly, or not following through by actually "going public" with their writing.

Even with the many benefits, assigning public writing can be tricky if the goals of one's writing courses or programs are solely based within academic writing styles and genres. Without delving too deeply into the perennial debates about what the "content" of first-year composition courses should be, I would like to encourage instructors interested in teaching public writing but also concerned about preparing students to write for academic purposes and contexts to situate and frame the public writing you assign within the academic goals of your courses. Public writing pedagogies are deeply enmeshed with academic literacies, such as research skills, clarity and coherence in communication, having a clear thesis or main idea, and supporting one's argument with convincing evidence. To meet the needs and expectations of writing programs, students, and the broader academic community, you may need to make these connections between academic and public writing explicit, while also highlighting how the differences between them can help develop rhetorical sophistication as students shift from one style to the next.

An ideal way to build into your course design this lesson about the relationship between academic and public writing is to preface a public writing assignment with a more traditional academic writing assignment. For example, when I assign public business letters on social justice issues, students first conduct academic research on the issue in advance, and I have, in some courses, assigned an academic research essay, rhetorical analysis, and/or annotated bibliography as the project immediately preceding the public writing assignment. I have also taught public writing as part of a "remix" or "re-mediation" project after a research essay; in this scenario, students transform their traditional research essay into a public and/or digital, multimodal piece of writing. Students have to consider how a change from academic to public audience, purpose, genre, and/or context might

impact their argument, evidence, or approach to persuasion and rhetorical appeals. Yet another course progression I have used starts with the personal, then moves to the academic, and ends with the public, asking students to hone and develop their rhetorical understanding with each assignment. Ideally, students pull a thread of personal interest from the first assignment (a literacy narrative, for instance), then conduct academic research on the topic and write in an academic genre, and, finally, situate that personal topic as a public issue to then use a mix of personal and academic research to persuasively argue one's stance to an audience who can effect change.

I continue to teach public writing because of the powerful ways it bridges academic literacies with civic purposes to address social justice issues—all within public genres that will serve students in their careers and lives post-graduation. I hope this essay offers support for you to pursue this pedagogical work, too.

Discussion Questions

1. The opening of this chapter asks "Can a tweet—a genre of public writing—cause social change?" Read Malcolm Gladwell's article "Small Change: Why the Revolution Won't Be Tweeted" and offer your reaction to Gladwell's perspective. Do you think social media writing—like Twitter or Facebook posts—as a kind of public writing can lead to meaningful social change? Give examples from current events and/or your life experiences to support your stance.

2. Based on the brainstorming you did in Table 1, how would you define an "academic citizen" in your own words? Can you think of any examples of academic citizens or public intellectuals from popular culture or from among your teachers or peers? What do those individuals do that make them academic citizens or public intellectuals in your view?

3. Try the invention activity "Writing on Location," and then write a reflection about your experience. What was your reaction to writing on location—helpful, distracting, surprising, upsetting, exciting, a mix of reactions? What ideas, writing, pictures did you create that may be useful in your public writing assignment? How might you use those items in your public writing?

4. The section of the essay on "publics" highlights debates among public sphere theories about whether there is a singular public sphere or whether there are multiple publics and counterpublic spheres. What is your opinion in this debate? Give examples from your experiences or from public culture to support your position.

5. What have been your prior experiences with writing in digital public spaces, and what have you learned about writing in general from writing in digital contexts? Give a specific example from your experience, such as posting to a social media site or commenting on a website, and explain what unique considerations you had to account for in terms of the style of your writing, how you conceived of audience, the type of writing, or the context in which it was publicly viewable. How was this writing similar to the writing you do for school? How was it different?

6. This essay invites you to "go public" by publishing and/or circulating your writing to reach an audience who can effect change. Brainstorm a list of possibilities for going public with your writing; include a mix of digital and print publishing contexts and consider how to circulate (i.e., distribute or share) your writing with others. For example, you could "publish" your writing by printing it to a flyer, but you would need to consider where to post or hand out your flyer to "circulate" it to your targeted audience.