Writing Spaces

Assignments & Activities Archive

Proposal for Change on Campus

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Overview

The purpose of this assignment is three-fold: 1) it helps students execute prior knowledge about genre so they are able to effectively compose unfamiliar genres of writing; 2) shows students how their writing skills are useful in professional and not only academic contexts; and 3) teaches students how to write collaboratively as part of a team.

When I teach this assignment, it is the second part in a 2-assignment sequence (the first part is "Genre Analysis of Project Proposals," also found in this Assignment and Activities Archive) in a first-year writing course. This assignment could also work effectively after another project where students develop an understanding about genre and rhetorical situations. This project could also be adapted to include elements of genre analysis, as a way of extending students' prior genre knowledge.

This proposal engages students by asking them to identify problems on our campus, research possible solutions and the specific local stakeholders who have the power to make these changes, and propose a solution to the problem they've identified. In doing so, they learn how writing works to make change, and they see first-hand how the genre conventions they've learned help writers compose more efficiently and effectively. They also learn and practice collaborative writing skills. This project includes a fair amount of in-class writing time for the groups to work. I do this purposefully, in part so that I can offer just-in-time support, and in part because most of my students must have employment, and giving them time to work together helps make group work more accessible for all of my students, regardless of their commitments outside of their classes.

Time Commitment

5-7 weeks (around half of the semester)

Materials

Students will need access to the sample proposals they examined in Project 1, and they'll want to have access to their Project 1 drafts that define and explain how the genre of proposals works for readers and writers.

I use Eli Review, a peer review platform, to help my students learn to give and use feedback. This project can be completed just as easily by using the peer review feature of your Learning Management System (LMS), or by using a series of handouts or class activities to help guide students as they develop feedback literacies.

Class time can be used more effectively if at least one student in each group has a laptop or tablet.

Assignment Process

- Introduce the assignment to your students and lead them in a review of what proposals are and how they work for readers and writers, using their final drafts of Project 1 to guide the discussion. In the same class meeting, have them discuss problems they see on our campus—I usually do this as a whole-class discussion. Students are most often *very* engaged in this discussion, but I work to keep it fairly light-hearted and not too critical. Common problems that first-year students often identify include dining hall complaints, policies about the hours of various campus resources, and a lack of what students feel are sufficient resources for physical and mental health.

- Before the next class, students complete their first Building Block (small scaffolding assignment). For this, they develop their guiding question for the change they'd like to see happen on campus. I usually ask them to write 3-5 possible questions, explain why they think these questions are important, and then identify their best two questions.

- In the next class meeting, I have students do an "Academic Speed Date" to discuss their research questions and the problems they've identified on campus. To do this activity, have students line their desks up in two horizontal rows, facing one another. Name the row closest to the instructor "Row A" and the other "Row B." Tell the students that the person they are facing is their conversation partner, and they're going to take turns telling one another about their research questions and the problem they see on campus. Person A will get two minutes to explain, and as they do, Person B should engage them—they may ask questions or make small comments. Then Person B will explain and Person A will engage them. I usually set my phone timer for two minutes then tell them to switch. After both Person A and Person B have had a turn, I tell the students to jot down what they're thinking now about their idea. Then I tell Row A to move down one seat to their right, so they have a new conversation partner. We repeat the two minutes for each person, and then I ask them to reflect on how their explanation and discussion was different this time than it was the first time. They take some notes. I usually repeat this several times, and students get more and more animated each time they hone their explanation of the problem. Often, students will discover other people have the same or a similar problem as they do, which is ideal! Once we've completed this "speed dating" activity, I ask students to put themselves into groups and to determine what problem their group would like to solve. Usually, they cluster by "problem

category"—all of the "dining hall" problems get together, all of the "athletics" problems get together, and so on, and they start to narrow their problem and research question together.

Before the next class meeting, students read "A Student's Guide to Collaborative Technologies" (Barton and Klint), and they brainstorm a list of technologies they want to add to this reading and how they use those technologies. They bring this list to class with them.

▪ In the next class meeting, the team completes what I call a "Team Charter," which is the next piece of scaffolding. This document asks them to pre-emptively plan how they'll communicate (and on what platform), what specialty each person can contribute, what ways each person is comfortable leading, what they'll do if someone doesn't do their fair share of the work, and the timeline each person prefers to work on (who likes to work well before deadlines versus who prefers to work right up until the deadline). They also usually have conversations about their other responsibilities and the times they're available to meet outside of class. Students who are in-season athletes have conversations with their groups about when they'll miss class and how they'll make up the work they're going to miss. You may find other common issues in your student population that you would want to add to your Team Charter Assignment—this is just a list of the issues that have arisen most frequently in my own student population. Their first task is to review all of their Project 1 (Genre Analysis) Final Drafts and come up with a "team understanding of proposals" together, which they will submit on our peer review platform. If you aren't doing a genre analysis, then students will need to identify common features of proposals and discuss which of those features they'll need to include in their own proposal. See "Making Your 'Move': Writing in Genres" (Jacobson et al.) for a

helpful explanation of how to identify the features of a genre.

- Next, I do some instruction on research for this project. Sometimes I bring in the librarians as additional support. As a class, we brainstorm what kinds of research might be helpful for this kind of writing, and I guide students to understand that peer-reviewed articles are just one kind of research for a proposal like this. We talk about different kinds of universities and work through how students might find information about how other colleges and universities have solved similar problems on their campuses. We also talk about audience, and students determine what person or people on campus have the ability to make the decision they're requesting. We're on a small campus, and I'm friendly with many of our decision-makers, who enjoy interviewing with my students (they love hearing the students' ideas!), so part of the research process is often them going and talking with the different offices on campus who are responsible for these decisions. Your institutional context will likely dictate what this step of the process looks like for you, but the goal is to get students to realize that there are real people who would read a proposal like this, and that they need to make rhetorical choices that will be effective for those specific audiences.

  The students complete an audience analysis for their proposal, and peer review the other groups' audience analyses. They read a chapter from *Writing that Works* about proposals (Oliu et al.) and add information from that to their "team understanding of proposals" from their Project 1 drafts.

- I teach students about the idea of storyboarding as a drafting strategy, using a "mini-documentary" on storyboarding from Pixar to guide our discussion and pictures of past student

storyboards. Some groups like to make physical storyboards with different colored sticky notes, while other groups prefer to make digital storyboards using either PowerPoint or a digital whiteboard. Their first draft is a storyboard of their proposal, with annotations about what they need to fill in and their plan for doing so. The goal here is to show them that there are multiple ways to write a first draft, so that they're thinking about how to develop a writing process that works for them. Storyboard drafts are often very successful with reluctant writers, or with apprehensive writers.

- Groups submit their Storyboard Drafts. They peer review one another's drafts, and then complete a revision plan as a group, using all of the feedback they received. I use a peer review platform for both the peer review and the revision plan, but you can also have students complete these tasks on paper or through your LMS. For the revision plan, students should identify what feedback they've received, what they think of that feedback, and how they'll use it (or not!) in their next draft by describing specific and actionable plans. The group has time to work in class to create this revision plan and assign tasks to group members.

- Groups submit a "Pre-Conference Draft", and they come to class for a workshop day. While they're working in their groups, I conference with each group in turn, moving around the room. While I'm not conferencing with them, they can continue working on their project together with their class time. Sometimes I assign each group a time slot to be in the classroom and tell them they can work wherever they want until that timeslot, while other semesters I ask them to come to class as usual—it depends on that semester's particular alchemy and how the groups are working together.

- Students then create a revision plan and work on their "Post

Conference Draft." I reteach writing skills and concepts as indicated by the drafts I've read. Usually, this means circling back to audience awareness, and reminding them of how to pull concepts about the genre of proposals from their genre knowledge and use those to write more successful proposals.

- We finish the semester with a Gallery Walk of their projects, show-and-tell-style, and students have the opportunity to share their proposals with their intended audience or invite those decision-makers to our Gallery Walk for them to see the proposals first-hand. Sometimes those decision-makers come and use the students' ideas to improve life on our campus!

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Analyze rhetorical situations in order to act within them

- Compose a successful proposal to address a problem on campus

- Develop an understanding of the values, goals, and needs of an audience, and make writerly choices to meet these needs

- Devise a plan to write collaboratively, and contribute fairly to the work of their group

- Engage in an iterative revision process, using feedback from others to write more effectively

Learning Accommodations

- Students can work within their groups to assign roles that depend on their individual strengths and expertise.

- Students can use a multimodal approach to create their

storyboard drafts.

Works Cited

Barton, Matt, and Karl Klint. "A Student's Guide to Collaborative Writing Technologies." *Writing Spaces*, vol. 2, Parlor Press, 2011, pp. 320–32, writingspaces.org/past-volumes/a-students-guide-to-collaborative-writing-technologies-2/.

Jacobson, Brad, et al. "Make Your 'Move': Writing in Genres." *Writing Spaces*, vol. 4, Parlor Press, 2022, pp. 217–38, writingspaces.org/make-your-move-writing-in-genres/.

Oliu, Walter E., et al. *Writing That Works: Communicating Effectively on the Job*. 12 edition, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016.