

# *Writing Spaces*

## Assignments & Activities Archive

### Communication Guide Assignment

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## Communication Guide Assignment

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### Overview

First-year students often enter introductory writing courses with a wide range of language experiences and backgrounds. To develop critical language awareness, as Shawna Shapiro writes, it is important to help students “recognize the variation within their own linguistic repertoire—no matter how many languages or language varieties they use” (63). Research has shown that such recognition “is an important starting point for shifting negative attitudes towards the languaging of others” (63). This assignment is intended to help students make this critical shift.

The communication guide asks students to consider a familiar space where communication breakdown has the potential to occur and create a guide focused on language usage for outsiders of the community to successfully enter that space. Students must choose a language community that they consider themselves an expert in, such as language used with friends, family, or other contexts. In addition to creating a guide, students present a mini-lesson to the class, where they teach something about the language in their community. This combination of a guide and the mini-lesson facilitates a sense of community within the classroom, validates an area of expertise students bring to college, and recognizes the value of linguistic diversity. Such community building, validation, and recognition is especially valuable for first-year students transitioning to college.

Within the communication guide unit, students engage with a variety of texts that help them understand ideas around linguistic variety, discrimination, and ideology such as: “Talk American” from *Code*

*Switch*, “What Makes a Language...a Language?” from *TED X*, “There is One Correct Way of Writing and Speaking” from *Bad Ideas about Writing* by Anjali Pattanavak, “Why does everyone on TikTok use the same weird voice?” by Alice Hall, “How did words like periodt, GYAT, cap and drip come to be? All about the Black history of slang” by Alex Portée, “What Should Colleges Teach? Part 3” by Stanley Fish, “Should Writers Use They Own English?” by Vershawn Ashanti Young, “What’s Anti-Blackness Got to do Wit It?” by April Baker-Bell from *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, “The Rise and Fall of ZuckTalk” by John Herrman, and “From Upspeak to Vocal Fry: Why are we ‘policing’ young women’s voices?” from *Fresh Air*. More information about these texts can be found in Further Reading below.

Previous students have shared that they think this assignment works best early in the semester, as it allows them to get to know one another.

### Time Commitment

3-4 weeks

### Materials

To help students develop an increased understanding of their linguistic diversity, especially if they identify as using only English, consider having them complete a dialect quiz from the *New York Times* or BuzzFeed:

- <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/upshot/dialect-quiz-map.html>
- <https://www.buzzfeed.com/andrewziegler/dialect-quiz>

Students who are more visual comment that they prefer the *Buzzfeed* version because it relies primarily on images. It can also be helpful to have students look at sample communication guides, which you can find online and are listed in Further Reading, such as: *Vanity Fair*

Slang School, “A Reference Guide to American English Idioms,” “Pittsburgh Speech and Society,” “Mwoh about Boston,” and *Dictionary of American Regional English*.

If you choose to incorporate the “cultural and linguistic identity self-portrait” listed below in week one, you will need enough blank paper, crayons and/or markers and/or colored pencils for the class.

### Assignment Process

- In week one, students begin to think about and reflect on the various types of language they use and in what contexts. This is done through completing and discussing their experiences with the *NYTimes Dialect Quiz* and *The Buzzfeed Dialect Quiz* with attention to the assumptions the quizzes make about someone’s linguistic background and what aspects might lead to these assumptions. They also complete a “cultural and linguistic identity self-portrait” (Zhang-Wu), which asks them to think of their family history and language usage with family and friends.
- To help students generate ideas for the guide, they freewrite a list of all of the languages they speak, with who, and in what contexts. Instructors can encourage students to think broadly and consider terms and phrases they may use with friends and family that may be unfamiliar to others. Students then share their lists in small groups, which helps them better understand how unique or shared their communication practices are.
- Next, students review sample communication guides (see those listed under “Materials” above) in small groups with a focus on the rhetorical situation and genre conventions before sharing their observations with a class; they also begin work on their proposals. The proposal asks students to explain what their chosen community is and why, what

information they plan to include, who their intended audience is, what form they have chosen for the project, why they have chosen this form, and any questions they have. Since students create the project for an audience of their choice, they are given flexibility in what form their project takes (written, video, and/or audio). Students benefit from sharing their proposals with peers to get feedback on what is working well and what gaps may exist, as they often find they make assumptions about audience knowledge when writing about a community they're deeply familiar with.

- In week two, students complete a rough draft of their communication guide. Students who choose to complete a project in a non-written form (such as a video or audio), submit a detailed plan, which should include the platform they plan to use for their project, a script of the content, any visuals they plan to include, a timeline for when they are going to complete the project, as well as any questions they have. Written communication guides need to function as an actual guide and include a cover, table of contents, introduction, and then the relevant information. Oftentimes, students list key terms and phrases, provide original definitions, and then provide sample sentences. For the introduction, students need to explain who the guide is for, how that audience might use the guide, why the guide is necessary, and what makes the student an expert on the community. Instructors can then provide holistic feedback on the drafts and plans.
- Also in week two, students read “What Should Colleges Teach? Part 3” by Stanley Fish and “Should Writers Use Their Own English?” by Vershawn Ashanti Young. Students then translate selected passages from Young’s piece into standardized American English; the class can discuss the students’ processes for translation and level of difficulty

experienced in this process. Students typically describe having little to no difficulty with the process, which creates space to discuss Young's point that it's attitudes about "other people usin' they own language" that causes linguistic discrimination and oppression (110).

- In week three, students begin working on their communication guide mini-lessons. The mini-lesson is a 5-10 minute presentation where students teach the class something new about entering their community. The lesson needs to be interactive, and students provide a lesson plan to the instructor on the day they are scheduled to present. The plan should answer the following questions: What is the goal of your lesson? What would you like students to learn or be able to do by the end of it? What activity or material will you use to teach this information? How do you think this activity and/or material will teach this information? Why is this an effective and engaging way to teach the information you would like in this lesson? How much time do you think each part of your lesson will take?
- To prepare for the mini-lesson, the class can review the assignment expectations including an example of the communication guide lesson plan, and then discuss what students consider engaging activities to help them generate ideas for how they can make their lessons interactive. If students are struggling, instructors can encourage them to think of what instructor activities and techniques keep them most engaged in current or former classes.
- Students then begin drafting their mini-lesson plan in-class and share their ideas with peers for feedback. Students have often done a range of activities in their mini-lessons like teaching the class salsa dance moves, using role play to practice ordering in a bodega, having students fill-in a blank

map with places they reviewed, and bringing in props to complete activities, like basketball moves.

- In week four, students begin their mini-lesson presentations and by the end of week four submit the final version of their communication guide. If instructors are using a portfolio format for the course, they can also have students submit a finalized version of the guide at the end of the semester in their final portfolio.

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Develop critical language awareness
- Analyze, reflect on, and respond to how language functions rhetorically
- Foster an understanding of technical writing and communication through the creation of a usage guide
- Develop rhetorical awareness in the composing process
- Understand writing as a process

## Learning Accommodations

- Students may complete the mini-lesson with a partner; if they choose to do so, the mini-lesson should be 10-15 minutes instead of 5-10.
- Students may choose the form of their guide that best meets their project goals with attention to the rhetorical situation. Helping students think critically about audience can help them make this decision, focusing on audience aspects like knowledge level, background, age, technology usage, etc.
- Students may complete freewrite and idea generating activities through drawing or creating visual representations. For the “cultural and linguistic identity self-portrait,” you

can provide students with outlines of a person, or they can draw their self-portrait freehand.

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