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PR Writing: Helping Students Launch their Careers with a Professional, Relevant Writing Portfolio

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Grammatically correct content seems like a lost art form. Layer in persuasion techniques, consideration for the target audience, and understanding of the primary artifacts generated by public relations professionals and writing falters even more. This PR Writing course teaches students how to develop the content that supports a typical PR campaign while also honing AP Style, grammar, and concise writing techniques. Rooted in the belief that writing proficiency comes with practice, students leverage instructor feedback, peer reviews, and self-critiques to develop inventive portfolios that demonstrate strategic thinking and creativity, and professional writing to help them launch their PR careers. This paper details the structure of my course and offers PR instructors ideas for how to incorporate advanced PR concepts, a social media component, and some of the soft skills employers seek to help students standout in a highly competitive job market.

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According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, writing proficiency is the most desired attribute sought by employers (Moore, 2016). Perhaps this is because many employers discover writing deficiencies among college graduates. In fact, one report surveyed 63,924 managers who ranked writing proficiency as the top skill lacking among graduates (PayScale, 2016). Another report ranks it among the top five skills graduates lack (Ikaiddi, 2017).

This is concerning considering the importance of written communication to the PR profession. Survey participants of one study reported that writing accounted for 71% of their PR job responsibilities and ranked it as important or extremely important (Hardin and Pompper, 2004). Writing is so important in the PR profession that, in fact, it can determine a PR practitioner's success. Those with writing deficiencies typically do not advance (Guiniven, 1998). White (2016) agreed. He wrote, "To succeed as a PR pro, it's vital to have a passion for writing and communication, and to be committed to excelling in both. You're bound to fail if you don't."

Yet, the challenge of how to effectively teach PR students writing skills continues to plague professors as employers assert that PR graduates' writing skills are abysmal. When Haberstroh (1995) reached out to hundreds of PR counselors seeking writing exercises he could incorporate in his PR courses, he received hundreds of insightful responses. For example, Susan Sterns, president of Stern Associates, wrote "If our experience is typical, writing is one of the very weakest areas of most new graduates. That's probably being kind…'appalling' is what's really crossing my mind" (p. 1).

These realizations, combined with my 20-year PR career, helped shape my PR writing course that teaches students how to develop the content that supports a typical PR campaign while also honing AP Style, grammar, and concise writing techniques. Rooted in the belief that writing proficiency comes with practice, students leverage instructor feedback, peer reviews, and self-critiques to develop inventive portfolios that demonstrate strategic thinking, creativity, and professional writing to help them launch their PR careers. This paper details the structure of my course and offers PR instructors ideas for how to incorporate advanced PR concepts, a social media component, and some of the soft skills employers seek to help students standout in a highly competitive job market.

THE PORTFOLIO

This PR Writing course teaches students how to write public relations materials that an entry-level PR practitioner is expected to produce. During the first week of class, students write a one-page proposal detailing their campaign elements. Students must select a for-profit company, such as Nike or Coca Cola. Students then imagine a new product or service that their chosen company realistically could sell, but currently does not offer. This allows students to demonstrate their creative and critical thinking skills, which are highly desired skills employers seek (Ikaiddi, 2017). Asking students to imagine a new product or service enables students to personalize their campaigns which I have found results in deeper student engagement and commitment to the class and to the quality of their campaign portfolio.

Additionally, students identify a nonprofit organization that their for-profit organization could realistically partner with to develop a corporate social responsibility campaign to launch the fictitious product or service. For example, one student chose Pet Smart, created Pet Booties and partnered with The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Another student chose Under Armour, developed UA Vital Gear, clothing that tracks biometric data much like Fitbit, and partnered with the American Heart Association.

By employing these three criteria: a for-profit company, a fictitious product or service, and a logical nonprofit partner, instructors can teach how to develop PR content while also explaining: 1) what a CSR campaign is, 2) what considerations play into the development of a CSR campaign and choosing CSR partners, 3) the impact of PR and CSR campaigns on consumer buying decisions, 4) how to develop messaging for a new product or service, and 5) how to communicate those messages to the target audience.

Once students determine the parameters of their PR campaigns, students spend the semester learning how PR professionals produce written communication to educate their target audiences by practicing various forms of writing that ultimately result in campaign portfolios. Portfolios include executive bios, fact sheets, press releases, media pitches, briefing sheets, blogs, and contributed articles. These deliverables are applicable and relevant to all PR students regardless of whether they secure employment at a PR firm, with a corporate in-house team, or at a non-profit organization.

When introducing a new piece of content, I explain: 1) the intent of the piece, 2) why and how it's used to reach the target audience, 3) how it has evolved in the past few years, and 4) the formula for writing it. We categorize content by what is written in first-, second-, and third-person. Students also receive a variety of real-world examples they can refer to as they write drafts.

Executive Bios

Most executive bios follow a standard formula written in third-person that I break into three paragraphs: 1) Start with one or two sentences that summarize the person's strengths. This could focus on many years of experience, vast experience, or working with marquee brands. 2) Detail career experience in reverse chronological order. This means starting with the most recent employment, citing the name of the organization, the person's title, and a brief description or summary of major achievements in that role. 3) The third paragraph lists education background, volunteer or board experience, involvement in industry-related organizations, and/or book authorship.

I walk students through this formula and underscore that bios are written in third-person. Students then shout out well-known brands, I pull up the management team websites of those brands, and as a class we apply this formula to the executive bios. This solidifies how the formula applies and gives students the opportunity to analyze similarities and differences to avoid confusion when they begin to write their bios.

The process for developing a bio in this class is two-fold. Students bring their resumes to class, partner, and interview each other. Using their interview notes and a resume, students write a bio about their partner following the prescribed three-paragraph formula. Students then give their partner the bio they developed, and each student uses that draft to complete their own bio. Thus, the bio in the portfolio is their own. I advise students to use a version of this bio for their LinkedIn profiles and to help them think about how they'll want to talk about themselves, their strengths, and their experiences during job interviews.

Fact Sheets

Fact sheets have evolved from hard copy inserts in press kits to oftentimes visual representations of company facts and key accomplishments. I show students a variety of fact sheets posted on company websites, and students analyze the similarities and differences. As a class, we make a list of the must-have content, such as a brief explanation of the organization, the year founded, location of company headquarters, information about products and services, insight regarding the management team, the website address, and the ticker symbol if the company is publicly-traded. Additional information may include CSR activities, accolades, and financial details.

Students then research their chosen company and develop a fact sheet that maintains third-person voice. If the organization already has a fact sheet, students must rewrite it, add more information, and reorganization the content to make it more readable. We only focus on the content, not the visual elements.

Press Releases

Here we spend some time discussing the inverted pyramid model and how social media has influenced the standard press release format and content. We discuss executive quote development to ensure students avoid meaningless phrases, including, “We are pleased…” or “We are excited…” We focus on how to emulate the voice of an executive and write meaningful quotes that will resonate with the target audience and catch the attention of the media.

We discuss writing press releases in third-person and switching to first-person when writing the executive quotes. We also explore the tone of information to avoid sounding sensational or using industry jargon. We also learn about the back and forth editing process, when to push back, and when to allow clients or executives to make the final decision. This provides a glimpse into review processes and managing expectations.

Students are assigned to write two press releases. The first is to announce the new product or service. The second press release announces the partnership between the for-profit and the nonprofit organization. I provide examples of both. Students analyze similarities and differences, and then develop outlines for both. They pair-share outlines and obtain peer feedback before they begin writing.

For both press releases, students must include the following: 1) a headline, 2) a subhead, 3) the dateline, 4) first paragraph that includes the who, what, where, and when, 5) second paragraph that offers a quote from a company executive, 6) third paragraph that addresses the how and the why in more detail, 7) a fourth paragraph that offers more detail about the product service, or a second quote from another executive or a credible third-party, 8) the boilerplate, and 9) PR contact information.

Media Pitches

We delve slightly into media relations. Our PR curriculum offers a semester-long course that explores media and influencer relations, so I focus less on how to conduct media relations and more on the basic formula for writing a media pitch, which is: 1) Open the pitch with an ice breaker. The best approach is to cite a recent article written by the reporter and briefly explain why it captured your attention. Then clearly state your reason for reaching out. 2) The second paragraph summarizes the story idea in a problem/solution format. Include statistics to emphasize the problem or to validate the solution. 3) The third section is the call-to-action that explains what the PR professional wants to happen next. Typically, the call-to-action is to schedule an interview or for the reporter or editor to consider a contributed content idea.

The challenge is for students to write a media pitch using no more than three sentences per section, nine sentences total. This forces them to write concisely using powerful action verbs and to be precise with their word selection. Since this is one-to-one communication, we practice writing in first-person using professional language, void of slang or social media shortcuts, to craft the media pitch.

Students are required to research and identify a local media contact, a trade media contact, and a national media contact and write one story pitch for each. This means students must learn the difference between outlet types and consider how the story must morph to align with the target audience per outlet.

Briefing Sheets

Students imagine they secured an interview with all three media contacts on behalf of the CEO of their chosen for-profit organization. One responsibility of PR professionals is to prepare spokespeople for interviews. To do this, PR professionals develop briefing sheets that provide background on the reporter and the media outlet and offer interview details, so the CEO understands what story he or she is expected to share with the reporter. The company spokesperson should know before he or she enters a media interview who he or she is speaking with and what should be discussed. The briefing sheet is the tool PR professionals use to deliver this information in writing to the spokesperson.

We walk through the sections of a briefing sheet, and students must develop a briefing sheet for each of their three media targets. The interview details should coach the spokesperson to tell the story that was promised in the media pitch. Here, the background information about the reporter and the publication are written in third-person, and the interview details, more conversational in tone and considered one-to-one communication, switch to first-person.

Blogs

PR professionals are often tasked to write blog content. We discuss how organizations leverage blogs for content marketing and brand awareness building purposes. Students read an article about which person (first, second or third) to use and we discuss the proper voice depending on the nature of the organization.

To best illustrate how to approach blog writing, I assign two articles, and students then research and analyze a variety of blog sites that I provide to identify similarities and differences. Students are reminded of the power of an outline to organize the main point and supporting facts. Students are assigned to write a 300-word blog post.

Contributed Articles

The contributed article is the longest form of writing assigned in this PR Writing course at 800-words. As we transition from blogs to contributed articles, students must understand the difference between the two forms of writing. Students read an article and compare blogs to contributed article examples I provide. Students also review publication guidelines for contributed articles to understand the parameters media outlets define.

Students discuss in small groups how their blog posts need to change to become a contributed article. Students are assigned to turn their 300-word blog into an 800-word contributed article so they can clearly understand the difference between the two forms of writing.

WRITING EXERCISES

To develop the portfolio elements described above, students must hone grammar and AP Style. We begin every class practicing these skills. With the help of teacher's assistants, I have developed a variety of writing exercises that enable students to practice active verbs, active voice, essential and nonessential clauses, parallel structure, punctuation, transitions, verb consistency, word elimination, and concise writing techniques.

I also develop grammar worksheets throughout the semester based on students' work. This is explained further below. Students take six AP Style quizzes throughout the semester and have the option to work independently or collaboratively on all grammar lessons and AP Style quizzes.

AP Style

Collaborative work on AP Style quizzes was not a concept I supported until recently. Students in one class were not performing well on their quizzes even though they used their AP Stylebook or the AP Style app. I asked if they had ideas for how I could help them, and they suggested allowing collaborative work on the quizzes. I decided to allow it to see if it would make a difference, and it did – on two levels.

First, students scored better on their quizzes. Surprisingly, they did not always submit the exact same answers, which leads to the second difference – students actually collaborated. They started talking to each other and forming friendships. They worked together to try to figure out the answers and debated when answers weren't obvious. By talking and contemplating possibilities out loud, they gained a deeper understanding of the basic rules of AP Style. Their scores and the classroom dynamic improved dramatically.

Students are encouraged to use their AP Stylebooks to complete the quizzes because PR professionals, even those with 20 years of experience, still look up AP Style rules. Rather than try to memorize all the rules, my goal is for students to be able to identify what requires AP Style treatment.

Grammar

Reading students' initial portfolio proposals, I identify students who struggle with grammar. I flag them early and encourage them to make appointments with me and with our campus writing center, which offers a variety of intensive support services, to hone their understanding of proper sentence structure.

To make the connection with the writing center, I invite one of the instructors to class to provide a brief overview of grammar basics. This gives the representative the opportunity to share contact information and helps familiarize students with the writing support available to them on campus. I then reinforce grammar basics by presenting a second slide deck that reviews the most common grammar mistakes I've noted among PR students.

As we move through the semester, I pull grammatically incorrect sentences from students' drafts and use them as grammar exercises for students to correct. I select a sentence from every student's work to ensure no student feels unfairly targeted and create a worksheet. Student names are not cited next to their grammatically incorrect content. The more often I do this, the greater the effort among students to produce quality drafts. Students spend a few minutes correcting each sentence and as a class we discuss the grammar issues and correct each sentence together.

Peer Reviews

After each grammar lesson or AP Style quiz, we focus on a form of writing. Students produce a quality first draft and conduct peer reviews. Writing can be personal, making peer-reviews uncomfortable for students. I've found the greatest success when I structure the peer review process. Therefore, I review basic peer editing steps: 1) compliments, 2) suggestions, and 3) corrections to help guide a positive exchange of constructive feedback (ReadWriteThink, 2004).

Students then incorporate peer edits and submit a proposed final version in hard copy for review by a pre-determined date. If students miss the deadline, I will not provide feedback. PR professionals live by deadlines, so implementing strict rules around meeting deadlines in the classroom will only help students be successful in meeting deadlines in their career.

I review and provide detailed edits. Students then incorporate my feedback and turn it in again for my second review. As the course progresses and students grasp new techniques, they are encouraged to revisit each final draft multiple times to incorporate what they've learned.

Social Media

Recently, I also added a Twitter engagement activity to encourage students to learn the platform and practice communicating using only 240 characters, hashtags, and visuals. The intent is to demonstrate the need to become a life-long learner as PR professionals must continuously investigate the new communication platforms and figure out how they may be able to leverage them to communicate in new or more effective ways. To start, students collaboratively develop a social media policy for how they will engage as a class on Twitter.

I provide the Associated Press's social media policy as an example and request students research and locate additional examples to identify similarities and differences. From this research, the class develops an outline in Google Docs. Under primary headings, such as Etiquette and Engagement, and Confidentiality, I include links to examples of how organizations approach these sections.

To develop the policy, each student must contribute a minimum of two points to the social media policy marked with their initials. We create a class hashtag (#MSUDenverPR), research the university's brand guidelines to ensure we maintain brand accuracy, list appropriate tags to include in our posts, and agree on parameters of post topics and rules of engagement. Each student is assigned a day to live tweet during class. The assignment requires a minimum of five original posts. At the end of the semester, students download their Twitter analytics and are evaluated on metrics that require students to follow a minimum of five new people each week and post three original tweets per week. Retweets and comments are not considered original tweets. For example, in an 11-week period, students are required to follow a minimum of 55 people and post 33 original tweets.

Adding the collaborative quizzes and this Twitter engagement activity have significantly improved the level of comfort and trust students develop. This is important, because as previously stated, writing can feel very personal, even when employing a business professional writing style. Students are reluctant to share their work with peers and peers are reluctant to offer constructive feedback. Building a rapport among students has made a valuable difference in the level of feedback they provide each other. Throughout the semester and beyond, students engage with each other outside of class and develop closer relationships by learning more about each other's interests and perspectives.

EVALUATION AND GOAL SETTING

This course meets twice per week for 16 weeks. Each class runs 75 minutes and begins with a 15- to 20-minute grammar lesson or AP Style quiz. Final grades evaluate Twitter engagement (10%), AP Style quizzes (30%), final portfolio (40%), a final exam (10%), and attendance and participation (10%).

Portfolio content is not evaluated for a grade until the final portfolio is submitted at the end of the semester. When students turn in their portfolio, they have had the opportunity for two rounds of peer reviews and two rounds of detailed instructor feedback.

During the first week of class, students complete the SparkPeople SMART Goal-Setting Worksheet (https://www.sparkpeople.com/resource/SMARTgoalsWS-NN.pdf) and submit them. Half way through the semester, students schedule an individual conference with me and complete a mid-term self-evaluation that asks students to consider their progress compared to course objectives, course content, course engagement, and reflect on their progress and any adjustments they want to make to enhance their learning experience.

I conduct one-to-one meetings over the course of two classes. During this time, students are assigned to edit the portfolio content developed to date and bring revised drafts to their conference that we review together. To prepare for these conferences, I review the initial goals and the self-evaluations to determine if I believe the student is on track to meet their goals. I also note areas of strength and weakness in their writing and offer suggestions for honing specific skills.

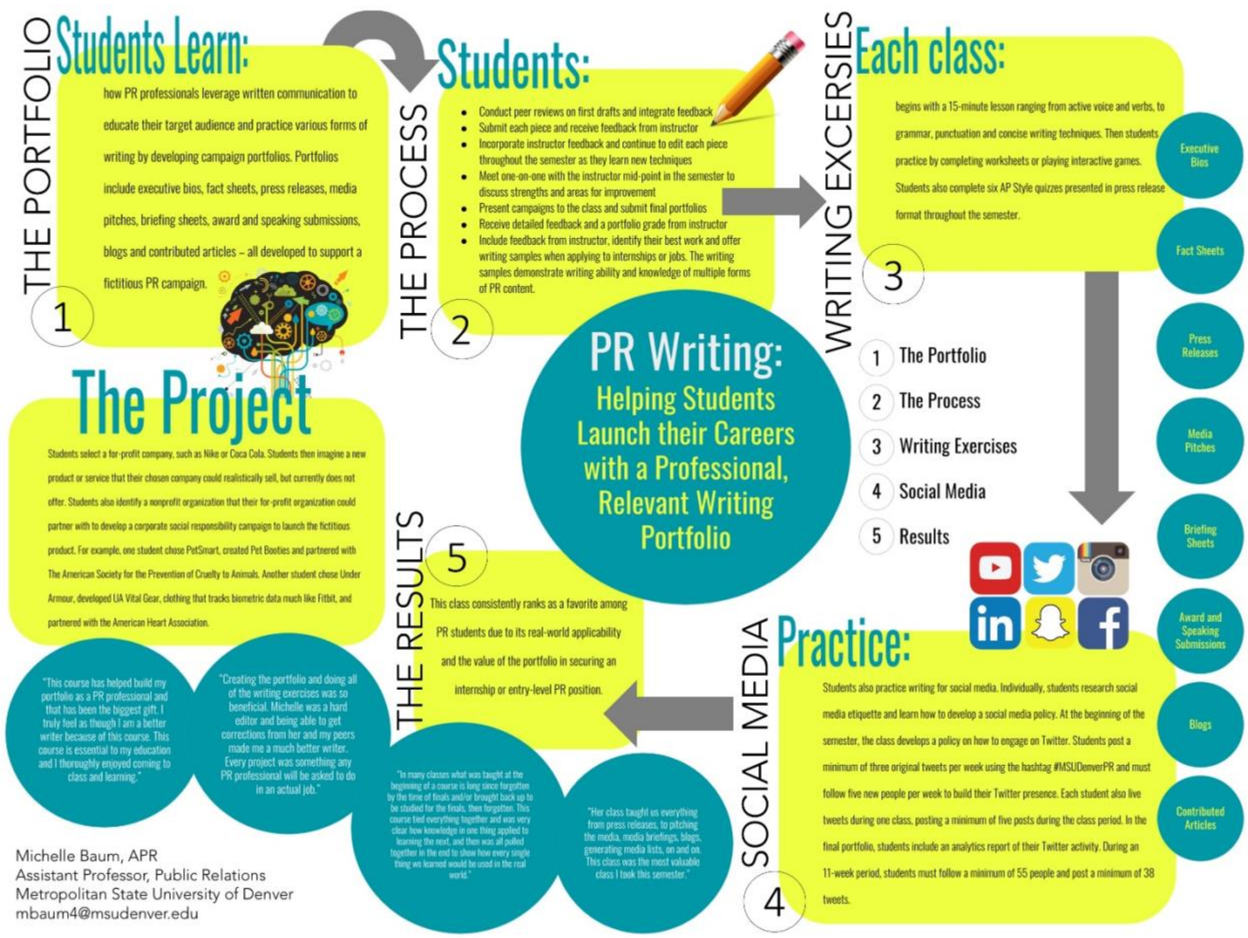

Figure 1. Pedagogy structure of this PR Writing course. Note that the contents of the portfolio can expand to include additional materials as time allows.

CONCLUSION

The goal for students in this PR writing course is to achieve proficiency in written communication expected of entry-level PR professionals. The objectives required to achieve this goal are: 1) To understand the needs of media markets and audiences, 2) To write clear, concise copy that is logically organized and accurate, 3) To know how to find and use reliable information, 4) To understand the requirements of different forums and formats of writing, 5) To learn to work with the needs of a client in preparing written material, and 6) To make oral presentations concerning this written material.

At the end of the semester, students submit their final portfolios and present their campaigns to the class. This class consistently ranks as a favorite among PR students due to its real-world applicability and the value of the portfolio in securing an internship or entry-level PR position.

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