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Writing for the Web: Twitter as a Starting Point for Breaking News

Sue Burzynski Bullard

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, sbullard2@unl.edu

Michelle Carr Hassler

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mhassler3@unl.edu

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Bullard, Sue Burzynski and Hassler, Michelle Carr, "Writing for the Web: Twitter as a Starting Point for Breaking News" (2012).

Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications. 99.

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Best Practices in Teaching Writing Across Media



**Sponsored by
The Teaching Committee
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and Mass Communication**

Thursday, August 9, 2012
10 to 11:30 a.m.

AEJMC 2012 Conference
Chicago Marriott Downtown
Chicago, Illinois

Best Practices in Teaching Writing Across Media

This booklet contains the winning entries of the 2012 Best Practices in Teaching Writing Across Media competition, sponsored for the seventh year by the AEJMC Elected Standing Committee on Teaching.

Winning entries, 2012:

First Place: *Mapping Your Childhood Neighborhood: Reconstructing Details and Scenes for a Narrative Essay*, **Carol B. Schwalbe**, University of Arizona

Second Place: *Festival Fiasco: Teaching Students to Plan, Think and Write Across Platforms*, **Roxanne K. Dill**, Louisiana State University

Third Place: *Writing for the Web: Twitter as a Starting Point for Breaking News*, **Sue Burzynski Bullard** and **Michelle Hassler**, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Honorable Mention: *Public Relations in the Digital Age: Using Issues Management Principles to Teach Effective Multiplatform Writing Skills*, **David L. Remund**, Drake University

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See previous "Best Practices" booklets at:

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Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication

234 Outlet Point Boulevard, Suite A, Columbia, SC 29210

Ph.: 802-798-0271 | FAX: 803-772-3509 | E-mail: aejmcq@aol.com | www.aejmc.org

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FIRST PLACE

Mapping Your Childhood Neighborhood: Reconstructing Details and Scenes for a Narrative Essay

Carol B. Schwalbe, University of Arizona

Abstract: In our fast-paced world of Tweets and instant messages, drawing a map with crayons and writing with a pen on paper provide a welcome change of pace in a magazine writing class. By starting the semester with something familiar (a childhood neighborhood), this activity motivates students to find their writing voice and tap into their creative spirit. In a fun, relaxed way, they learn to reconstruct relevant details and scenes for the narrative essay they'll write for their first assignment.

Explanation of the activity

This activity takes less than two hours.

1. Give each student a large sheet of paper and a few crayons. The students will be surprised because they probably haven't colored since grade school. Ask them to sketch a colorful map of the earliest neighborhood they can remember. Include as much detail as possible. Artistic ability doesn't matter. A rough sketch with stick figures is just fine.

- Who lived where?
- Where were your friends' houses?
- Where did you play?
- Where did the weird people live?
- What were your secret places?
- What places were off-limits?

2. After 10 minutes, ask students what they noticed while drawing their map. Did memories come flooding back? The map is a good way to access memories the students might not have thought about for a long time. It works for anything — a house, a school or a workplace.

3. Ask volunteers to explain their maps. Point out how the story they tell isn't really about the place. It's about the people and what they did there.

4. Now that some memories have been dislodged, ask the students to write a story from their map that holds special meaning. Don't try to explain the whole neighborhood, but pick one scene that happened in one place. Before writing, take a few minutes to really *see* it. Deepen the image by asking yourself these questions:

- What do you see?
- What's the light like?
- What do you feel on your skin?
- What do you hear?
- What do you smell?
- What do you want?
- What do you taste?
- What do you think?

5. Next, students free-write — not on a computer, but on paper. They write as fast as they can without stopping, going back, crossing out or changing anything.

6. After 10 minutes, ask the students if other things occurred to them as they were writing. Invariably, they talk about other memories. When writing about personal experiences, free-writing is a good way to deepen those memories. Explain that one of the hardest parts of writing about personal experience is silencing our internal editor. It's our editor that drags us

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back over what we've written. The editor has an important purpose, but it can get in the way of the creative process. Free-writing helps separate the creative stage from the editing stage.

7. Next, the students fashion their writing into a scene. Reinforce the importance of showing instead of telling. Rather than saying your parents were poor, describe the worn couch, the peeling wallpaper in the bathroom or the Ford pickup with faded paint, ripped upholstery and taped-together taillights. Include details that reveal character, setting and social standing.

- Is the coffee table polished mahogany or unfinished pine?
- Are the trees outside sugar maples or ponderosa pines?

Explain how people's possessions say something about them. Describing the contents of a room, for example, tells us about the people who live there.

- Is the kitchen cluttered with ceramic chickens, or are the granite countertops bare?
- Are clothes scattered all over the bedroom, or is there a collection of pressed, perfectly spaced Armani suits hanging in the closet?
- What's in the bathroom vanity?

8. After writing for 15 to 20 minutes, ask volunteers to share their scenes. Talk about the vivid details, dialogue and setting that make readers feel as though they're *in* the scene.

9. Finally, ask students to read facts from their scenes. If a student recalls June 12, 1990, as cool and rainy, discuss how she could verify that information. If another student remembers hearing a nightingale sing at night in Berkeley Square, where could he make sure that 1) nightingales sing at night and 2) frequent Berkeley Square? Emphasize that journalists must verify facts with research and experts, even in narrative essays.

Rationale

Because today's workplace demands employees who can solve problems creatively, we need to encourage students to think in novel ways.¹ This activity fosters creativity and appeals to a range of learning styles — visual, read/write, aural and kinesthetic. ² In addition, it's fun, easy and interactive.

Outcomes

Activities that spur creativity also promote learning and improve student performance. ³ In end-of-the-semester feedback, this is by far the students' favorite activity. It develops their writing voice. The narrative essay they write for their first assignment grows out of this activity. Each semester, half their essays have appeared in professional literary journals.

Students can also use this technique when reconstructing scenes from the past for profiles and in-depths. For example, ask the interviewee to draw the boardroom where the fight took place or to sketch the marina where two sailboats collided.

¹ Cris E. Guenter, "Fostering Creativity through Problem Solving," in *Changing College Classrooms: New Teaching and Learning Strategies for an Increasingly Complex World*, ed. Diane F. Halpern (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), 64–73.

² Neil D. Fleming and Colleen Mills, "Not Another Inventory, Rather a Catalyst for Reflection," *To Improve the Academy* 11 (1992): 137–55.

³ John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996).

SECOND PLACE

Festival Fiasco: Teaching Students to Plan, Think and Write Across Platforms

Roxanne K. Dill, Louisiana State University

Abstract: This project incorporates different styles of media writing by asking students to play the roles of newsmakers, media professionals and reporters. The assignment integrates speaking, listening, problem-solving, interviewing and writing skills. The project involves a film and music festival scenario in which students who are public relations and political communication professionals conduct a press conference for sports writers, advertising copy writers and reporters for print, broadcast and the Web. Students write appropriate press releases or news stories corresponding with their festival scenario role.

Explanation of the activity

This project works best with groups of 15-20 students who have beginning practice in writing for print, broadcast, public relations, the Web and advertising.

Scenario background

The Riverwalk Hotel and Convention Center annually hosts the New Orleans Blues Music and Film Festival, which features original music scores and films that highlight the flavor of the Deep South. In this seventh festival, Simone LaFleur, world-renowned New Orleans' blues artist and ukulele virtuoso, is expected to receive the award for best original score in the 2010 remake of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Riding with her in the limo is her escort, New Orleans Saints kicker Bart Dropkick, who holds the NFL record (65 yards) for the longest field goal and is looking forward to the Saints' division play-off game in two weeks. LaFleur's mentor and long-time friend U.S. Rep. Stanley Neverworthy, of Louisiana, is also accompanying the musician. Neverworthy is escorting actress Joan Sharnell, nominated for the best actress award for her role as Maggie in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof."

The limo lurches forward and taps the bumper of the limo in front, just as LaFleur steps onto the curb. She falls onto hotel management intern Nevil Wonder, tears her designer gown and scrapes both hands on the pavement. Both Neverworthy and Dropkick jump from the limo and try to help her, but they become entangled in the equipment of E! Magazine photographer Jack Jackson and other reporters. Dropkick breaks his right foot, and Neverworthy suffers a mild concussion. The equipment swings and hits E! Magazine reporter Teresa Tiddlywinks, who is treated for a broken front tooth and a one-inch gash in her forehead. Sharnell is devastated and faints in the back seat. The hotel intern becomes a hero for breaking LaFleur's fall. Dress designer Maurice Marion replaces LaFleur's gown with his own original design and provides New Orleans-style jewelry. She appears later at the awards ceremony with her hands wrapped in black and gold, Saints-themed bandages, but she is expected to heal.

Assignment details

Students select their preferred area of media writing and are assigned a corresponding role. Public relations and political communication professionals each represent one of the sce-

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nario characters by writing a press release explaining his/her character's involvement and speaking at a press conference about the event. Characters also include the hotel and limousine service, which the poli-comm students often choose to represent. Broadcast, print and Web writers, as well as sports reporters and advertising executives, comprise the audience. They receive copies of the releases prior to the press conference. Reporters are expected to ask questions of the PR professionals and then write stories on the scenario for their appropriate medium. Advertising students may write either a copy platform for the dress designer or hotel or a Web summary of the event.

Part 1

A week before the red carpet press conference, the instructor meets only with the public relations and political communication students who receive a copy of the festival fiasco background and its characters so that they understand what happened that evening. Each student receives a fact set detailing one character's bio and his/her specific involvement in the scenario. This information is most likely what the professional would want the public to know and what would be included in the press release. The fact set also includes some unsavory or compelling information that will be withheld but that the PR professional should be prepared to discuss if a reporter asks. For example, the hotel intern said he smelled marijuana just before the limousine lurched forward and initiated the red carpet fiasco. Also, advertisers will not know unless they ask about details of the replacement gown, which was created for Princess Diana before her death. No one but the PR/poli-comm professional knows the details of his/her client. Students write their press releases, which will be copied and given to the reporting/advertising audience the day of the press conference. The audience also receives a basic explanation of the event.

Part 2

The press conference is conducted by the PR/poli-comm students, who introduce themselves and explain their client's role in the festival fiasco. Reporters can ask questions for clarification or to delve more deeply into the event. (The instructor can hint that more information might be available if anyone asks.) Allow about an hour for the conference. Reporters have the next hour to write their medium-appropriate stories on deadline. Advertisers have the same deadline.

Rationale

Most entry-level media writing classes cover writing for broadcast, print, Web, public relations, political communication and advertising. This project, which is best completed toward the end of the first semester of media writing, provides an opportunity for students to see how all of these skills can function together. The assignment allows students to incorporate speaking, problem-solving, listening and writing skills in a real-life setting and to experience what communication might look like in their desired media profession. The project also gives students the opportunity to better understand how the media interact with one another in communicating the same event.

Outcomes

Each student is graded on his/her writing assignment. PR and poli-comm students write their press releases, which are submitted before the press conference and copied by the instructor for the reporters and advertisers. Writing assignments submitted after the press conference include those for print, broadcast and Web; any of these can be hard news or sports-related. Advertising students write a copy platform for the dress designer or the hotel.

Advertisers can also write Web summaries for the two clients but with an advertising spin. Each form of writing should follow the appropriate style for its medium. Print, Web, PR/pol-comm and advertising writing must adhere to Associated Press style. Without exception, this project produces some of my best writing submissions because students are enthusiastic about the subject and because it mimics what they might encounter in the professional world. Most importantly, it's a lot of fun.

THIRD PLACE

Writing for the Web: Twitter as a Starting Point for Breaking News

Sue Burzynski Bullard and Michelle Hassler,
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Abstract: Students enrolled in a multimedia reporting course use Twitter to cover breaking news events as they unfold, capitalizing on the immediacy of the social media network and the Web. Using cellphones or laptops, they learn to tell stories 140 characters at a time. The second half of this assignment requires students to build on their Twitter stories by posting follow-up stories and photographs to a class website. The follow-ups, written within six hours of events, must include additional reporting. The assignment marries traditional writing and reporting skills with digital tools increasingly being used in the real world.

Explanation of the activity

Today's journalists must be nimble writers as they increasingly are required to produce content for a variety of platforms. They must understand the goals, style, principles and limitations of each medium. This assignment introduces Twitter as another communication method for students to master in a growing multimedia tool kit. Although students know about Twitter, few understand how to use it effectively for journalism. Through a lecture, using a PowerPoint packed with real world examples, students learn how journalists use Twitter to get news out quickly. Whether it's the Austin *American-Statesman's* coverage of a shooting on the University of Texas campus or Twitter's initial reporting on the death of Osama bin Laden, students begin to see how the social media platform captures a sense of immediacy, engages readers and provides sources for stories. The lecture and a reading assignment expose students to Twitter fundamentals and etiquette, as well as tips for covering breaking news on Twitter. Students learn what kinds of assignments might work best on Twitter: speeches, sporting events, public forums, government meetings or press conferences. They study the feeds of journalists who routinely live tweet. And they learn what Twitter shares with other journalistic forms: concise, clear writing; the need for a beginning, middle and end in stories; the need to be discerning by including only relevant information; solid grasp of grammar; and an engaging style.

They also learn Twitter's limitations, which is why the assignment includes reporting and writing a follow-up story for the website. They must get reaction to a speech, comments from the coach or players after a game or the response from stakeholders after a government meeting to write a more detailed news report. Essentially, they must quickly pivot from the real-time reporting best done on Twitter and turn their bare bones breaking Twitter stream into a fuller and more traditional Web report. And because this is still breaking news, they have to post the follow-up story in a timely way.

Students are given a practice assignment first. After the class lecture, they brainstorm in small groups about what upcoming events might be appropriate for live tweeting and then individually develop a story pitch. The class discusses those ideas in a pitch session, which is an excellent place to discuss potential problems, such as logistics, attribution, hashtag selection and events that might not work for live tweeting. After their practice assignment, students discuss in class what worked and what didn't. They then trade print copies of their tweets, "grade" them according to a rubric and offer written feedback. The class discussion and feedback exercise reinforces their knowledge of the rubric, which outlines the key principles of live tweeting and Web writing, and leads to a best practices guide as they embark on the graded assignments.

Rationale

Twitter is fast becoming an important way to distribute journalistic content, and students need to know how to write breaking news using the application. A 2011 study indicated 47 percent of journalists use Twitter as a source for news. This assignment demonstrates both the value and limitations of Twitter as a storytelling platform. It also gives students hands-on experience covering breaking news, which is published both in a Twitter feed and on a class-produced website. The assignment allows students to learn and use traditional reporting skills in a creative way. And it demonstrates how writing must differ for different mediums. Finally, the need for writing agility in today's multimedia world is further reinforced through the course of the assignment as students post their live tweets to Twitter, post the stories and photos to a content management system (WordPress), write Web headlines and excerpts, and create effective links.

Outcomes

Students are graded for this assignment using a rubric that measures reporting skills, readability, focus, mechanics and accuracy for both the live tweets and the follow-up Web story. Several learning outcomes are addressed by this assignment: covering breaking news using mobile tools and technologies, understanding the nuances of communicating on Twitter, learning to write clearly and correctly for Twitter and the Web, conducting research and gathering information for Web stories, and becoming proficient in the tools and technologies used on the Web. Through this assignment, students also are able to get experience in deadline writing using two mediums. Students, who complete both pre-class and post-class surveys, say they learn much about using Twitter as a journalistic resource, posting text and photos to the Web and producing online stories. Said one student in a post-course evaluation: "Having to do stories in different mediums is a great experience for me and makes me a more versatile journalist."

HONORABLE MENTION

Public Relations in the Digital Age: Using Issues Management Principles to Teach Effective Multiplatform Writing Skills

David L. Remund, Drake University

Abstract

Public relations professionals must understand emerging issues and write about them for multiple audiences and across many types of media. Drawing upon feedback from young professionals and established public relations leaders, a public relations writing course was re-engineered using the principles of issues management. Students now learn different types of public relations practice, rather than just different types of tactics. Assignments are based on issues currently happening in the world. Notably, students are now required to write for two different types of audiences and media for each assignment. Their confidence is soaring, as measured by formal survey.

Explanation of the activity

The traditional way to teach public relations writing is to introduce a different type of writing or public relations tactic each week. For example, students may first learn how to write a news release. The next week, students may learn how to write a blog post. The following week, students may learn how to write a newsletter article. This is a logical way to structure the course; indeed, students do need to know how to write for a variety of different audiences and media.

However, the traditional method for teaching public relations writing provides students with a false impression of the true competencies needed as a professional. It is rare that a public relations effort involves only one tactic or form of writing. Most programs, campaigns and even single projects involve writing for at least several types of audiences and for several different types of media, including traditional news media, social media and a variety of other digital, printed and interpersonal communications. Teaching students how to write in a sequential, disjointed fashion limits their ability to write effectively across multiple platforms, while also hindering their ability to understand public relations as the dynamic, multi-faceted practice that it is.

The structure of a public relations writing course was re-engineered and the assignments dramatically changed. First, the course was re-structured to provide, upfront, a month of fundamental skill development regarding news media, social/digital media and interpersonal communications (think employee communications, etc.). This included coaching on the principles of issues management, a facet of public relations practice that involves monitoring the industry within which an organization operates and learning to proactively address emerging issues through strategic communication. For the remainder of the semester, a different type of public relations practice was covered each week. For example, one week focused on government relations. The next week focused on investor relations. Current events are incorporated into in-class exercises so that students have a hand at trying to address real-time events. Each week, a specialized tactic is introduced that builds upon the foundational skills. So, for investor relations week, a student may learn how to write an earnings statement or part of an annual report, or even executive talking points, for an organization currently in the news. The students draw upon prior discussions about writing for traditional media, social/digital media and interpersonal communications.

The vital change, though, has been to the assignments. Each assignment now requires that at least two tactics be developed: the one being learned that week and one learned previously in the

semester. So, for crisis communications week, a student may write an update for the company website (new tactic), along with a media statement (previously learned tactic). The beauty of this approach is that one of the tactics (the new one being learned) is assigned and the students are required to pick the second tactic for the assignment from the arsenal of tactics they have learned up to that point in the semester. This requires students to use their critical thinking skills, plus enables them to strengthen their skills on a type of tactic that they may not have felt as confident about earlier in the semester. In the past, students may have had only one—or at most, two—chances to write a certain type of tactic. In this new format, a student could write a news release or blog post as many as 12 times during the semester, on a variety of topics, and always in conjunction with a second and different type of tactic, involving an entirely different medium or approach.

Assignments involve three steps: formative (group) feedback from the instructor on working drafts, peer review based on formative feedback, and a final version submitted for grading and feedback.

Rationale

In early 2011, a review was conducted of formal student feedback from past PR writing courses, informal feedback from recent alumni regarding their professional responsibilities, and perspectives gathered from a professional network of senior leaders of corporate communications departments and agencies. The evidence seemed clear that a different approach was necessary to maximize student learning and, ultimately, the performance of young professionals about to enter public relations careers.

In mid 2011, evidence was gathered from two convenience samples: a 12-person panel of young professionals with less than 10 years of experience and a 12-person panel of established professionals with more than 10 years of experience plus some degree of people management responsibility. These 24 professionals were located across the United States and they reflected diverse aspects of public relations practice. Although the data did not provide a representative sample for statistical analysis, the findings from the online survey on their insights were enlightening. The primary concerns expressed by both panels were the need for students to understand the significance of an issue facing an organization (or an issue the organization wishes to promote) and the need to be able to write effectively about that issue across multiple platforms and for multiple audiences.

Outcomes

Through this newly restructured course, students are gaining tremendous confidence and a much deeper understanding of public relations practice. At the start of the semester, only two of 23 students (all sophomores) had even heard of issues management. Midway through the semester, 19 of the 23 students agreed or strongly agreed that they “understand the role issues management plays in public relations practice.”

Moreover, 22 of the 23 students agreed or strongly agreed that they are “able to effectively develop public relations messages for multiple communication channels and audiences.” Finally, 19 of the 23 students agreed or strongly agreed that this class “provides a safe environment in which to explore one’s writing potential.”

