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## Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Literature-Based Professional Writing: An Oxymoron Whose Time Has Come

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# Professional Writing in the English Classroom: Literature-Based Professional Writing: An Oxymoron Whose Time Has Come

## Abstract

The article discusses a study regarding the integration of professional writing in English classes. It mentions the proposal of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in its annual convention on associating professional writing with literature. It also states that connecting literature with technical writing in English classrooms provides students with opportunities to absorb real life writing experiences.

## Keywords

English writing, technical writing, literature, classroom activities

## Disciplines

Educational Methods | English Language and Literature | Rhetoric and Composition

## Comments

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# Professional Writing in the English Classroom

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Sometimes things just fall in your lap. While reviewing proposals for the NCTE Annual Convention last January, we each noticed the same intriguing proposal about connecting technical writing with literature. We were enthused by what we saw: Not only did the proposal show a powerful example of the ways that professional writing can enhance teaching and learning, but it also offered classroom perspectives and experiences from secondary teachers. We're pleased that the authors have agreed to share their ideas here with *EJ* readers.

We have a firm belief, based on our own teaching and scholarship, that professional writing can be successfully integrated into all aspects of high school and middle school English language arts—not only in composition, but in literature as well. That said, while we are both generalist English educators, we are also more closely tied academically to writing studies than to the teaching of literature. It was exciting for us, then, to learn how this excellent group of teachers interprets professional writing concepts in a literary context—and to see how they use the genres, processes, and structures of professional writing to enhance their students' experiences with texts, both traditional and explor-

atory. We hope that you will see the same value in this work.

Let it be a spark to help you imagine how you could enrich your classroom with these (or similar) ideas for integrating professional writing with literature studies. Let it embolden you, too; if you have creative ideas for integrating professional writing in your classroom, please contact us with your inquiry, submission, or idea for a future topic for the column.

## Literature-Based Professional Writing: An Oxymoron Whose Time Has Come

Kelley R. Newhouse, Michele L. Propper, Ruth M. Riedel, and Barbara S. Teitelzweig

An oxymoron is a simple contradiction, a juxtaposition of two inharmonious terms, such as “fiend angelical” in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. At first glance, literature and professional writing seem to be polar opposites; however, when we view them together, we can see unique, often interesting possibilities that add depth and richness to classroom lessons. As English teachers, we are compelled to help students appreciate and understand literature, to see the beauty and stark

realities of common experiences that unfold in literary texts. As educators, we must also provide our students with the necessary tools to effectively communicate and collaborate in an increasingly digital world. This gap creates an opportunity: Creative teachers can integrate professional writing with literary study of a variety of classic and traditional texts. Merging these two skills requires a paradigm shift. Instead of viewing them as separate skills to be taught and nurtured in the English classroom, we can combine professional writing with literature to enrich students’ understanding and cultivate their ability to communicate succinctly, directly, and effectively.

Some forms of professional writing are already familiar to students. In their daily lives, students rely on multiple digital modes to converse with family, friends, and teachers. Many of the messages are pointedly direct and definitely audience-centered. Yet composing a text message, tweeting, or updating a status on a social networking site differs significantly in terms of content and syntax from other writing that may be required in work-related communications. Businesses and postsecondary institutions report that many high school graduates cannot meet the

high demands of various types of writing sometimes required in jobs and universities (such as proposals, analysis reports, or letters of inquiry). According to the results of a 2009 survey conducted by ACT, high school teachers and postsecondary educators disagree appreciably in their perceptions of student readiness. Specifically, 91% of high school teachers believed that students were prepared to meet the challenges of college requirements within the discipline, compared to 26% of postsecondary instructors. They did agree, however, that skills needed in postsecondary institutions and the workforce “overlap” (ACT). In an effort to address the deficits in student skills, many states have developed college readiness standards and courses in reading, writing, and math. Because of the increased expectations placed on high school graduates and renewed attention to college readiness and national standards, educators must provide rigorous but relevant assignments that provide ample opportunities for students to improve their comprehension and writing skills.

This leads us to some questions: How might we reconsider some of the writing we currently do in our classrooms to incorporate professional writing? How can we integrate professional writing into our literature instruction?

### **Professional Writing: Purpose and Audience Matter**

Professional writing conveys the writer’s purpose with a clear and concise voice; it focuses on the reader, who is expected to perform

some action as a result of the text. For example, an analytical report provides information to be evaluated by the reader, and a proposal often requests the reader to make a decision. This need for action, whether that action is to donate money to a worthy cause or determine the next step in the war on poverty, becomes the purpose of the text, and the reader must be considered if that purpose is to be accomplished efficiently and effectively.

**By juxtaposing the characters and events of literature against real-world situations, the teacher not only reinforces the significance of literature to our contemporary culture but allows the students to explore those relationships in ways that are practical and relevant to their present or future endeavors, whether academic or business.**

Consequently, in professional writing, it is imperative that the writer establish the audience and purpose for the text *before* engaging in the writing process. Although this is an *implicit* part of the text, it must become an *explicit* part of the writing process. All too often teachers provide writing prompts with a minimum amount of direction as to audience and purpose. Students are left to assume that the teacher or their peers are the intended audience. While this assumption might work in the academic world, it is not practical for the business world. Without this guidance, it is almost certain that students’ professional writing will lack appropriate focus

and direction. When the purpose of the prompt dictates a response, it is imperative that the response be clearly defined by the prompt. When teachers provide prompts for professional writing based on literary texts, they must address a particular audience and provide a specific purpose for the response as would a supervisor’s request to a subordinate in the business world. Just as a workplace memo requesting action is relevant to the worker and his or her area of responsibility, the literary prompt should be relevant to the reader as well as to the literature.

This sort of scenario can help us (and our students) to develop a more comprehensive understanding of two key ideas: context and audience. Who is the audience? What does he or she need to know? Where and when will the audience read the text? Why does the audience need the text? How will the audience use the text? Distinguishing between what the audience *needs* to know and what the writer *wants* the audience to know also helps the writer to focus on the overall purpose of the paper (Johnson-Sheehan 40–41). By juxtaposing the characters and events of literature against real-world situations, the teacher not only reinforces the significance of literature to our contemporary culture but allows the students to explore those relationships in ways that are practical and relevant to their present or future endeavors, whether academic or business.

At this point it may be stressed that the operational patterns for professional writing do not differ greatly from those of academic writing. Once audience and purpose have been established, the

overall purpose of the writing still guides the writer to frame the text appropriately. A procedure or methodology report is simply a chronological listing of events; an analytical paper compares and contrasts or details the cause and effect relationships of the given topics; a proposal sets up a problem/solution situation; and technical definitions and descriptions are similar to expository essays. Therefore, student responses to literature can still meet the prescribed standards set out by the state while tackling issues that will confront them in real-world writing situations.

### Literature and Professional Writing: Classroom Application

Let's examine literature as a bridge to professional writing, using Mary Shelley's great Romantic literary work *Frankenstein*. The book begins with a series of letters from Captain Robert Walton to his sister back in England. These letters frame the story and let the reader hear it from Victor Frankenstein himself, who has been rescued from the icy waters of the Barents Sea. Teaching the differences between personal and business letters is an obvious connection between this literary work and the workaday world.

However, there are some much larger issues that can be raised by studying this novel, including psychosomatic illnesses and debates on the ethics involved in cloning or transplantation. These issues in the novel about ethical dilemmas in the world of medicine and science are tantalizing topics. Corporations, educational

institutions, and medical facilities are achieving scientific and technological breakthroughs that affect all of us, and we are learning that there is no room for complacency about life. Professional writing provides a powerful means of grappling with these issues. By putting students in the shoes of business, medical, and education leaders who must set policies about ethics in their environments, we give them a head start on their future career demands.

In *Frankenstein* we can examine more closely how possibilities become reality when we synthesize literature and professional writing. In our classrooms, we began with an anticipation guide before reading to help students clarify their personal opinions. During the reading, students discussed the ethical issues inherent in the story and either rejected their previous opinions or solidified their views. Their post-reading assignment was to research issues connecting either to cloning experiments from the last 15 years or to transplantation of body parts (focusing especially on recent facial transplants). In addition, students read a modern version of the Hippocratic Oath. After making a list of pros and cons on the subject of either transplantation or cloning, they were asked to prepare a policy statement that would specifically address whichever issue they chose.

For students to understand their audience, we looked at some policy statements issued by the local hospital board. Its audience was not the usual literary essay audience (teacher or unknown generic person); rather, its policy statements were written from the

perspective of the hospital board and for the general public to view. The purpose of the writing was ensuring the best possible health care outcome for the community. Students mastered this shift away from teacher-focused writing fairly quickly and felt empowered to be engaged as professionals in ethical issues. They found the subject matter in *Frankenstein* to be surprisingly relevant, considering that it was published nearly 200 years ago.

Although literary analysis has its place in academia, it remains primarily a narrow focus. The thought of combining literary and professional writing should not be a daunting prospect. It only requires zooming out, widening the scope of the topic under consideration. For example, a strictly narrow focus would be tracing Victor's traumatic experiences, observing how each event led to a prolonged illness and recovery, and then discussing how these physical ailments affect the reader's perception of the character and create suspense in the novel. Zooming out to include professional writing connections, we arrive at an assignment that looks slightly different: Examine Victor's experience with traumatic events and the resultant illnesses. Then read a review of the book *They Can't Find Anything Wrong* by David D. Clarke, MD (<http://stressillness.com/overview.php>). Using information from the book review, write a press release by a fitness center giving information to the public about stress-related illnesses.


Further examples of ethics-related topics that can be expanded from literary works are

governmental intervention/privacy issues (“Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut); treatment of the disabled (*The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson), human rights issues (*Night* by Elie Wiesel), or personal/economic loss (“Abandoned Farmhouse” by Ted Kooser). In blending literary and professional writing, students still explore text and examine characters’ intentions, but the application is both practical and theoretical.

### Relevancy in Writing

“Workplace literacy is the latest literacy crisis that high school and college language arts educators are being asked to solve” (Jolliffe 7). How do we accomplish this task? As many writing assignments are perceived to hold little or no relevancy to most students, we have found that it can be difficult to engage them with this cogni-

tively demanding task. Pairing literature with professional writing assignments allows students to engage in real-world writing experiences. Students need to learn how to write clearly and concisely and effectively communicate ideas for the workplace. Annotated bibliographies, memos, emails, and lab reports are all examples of technical writing assignments that require that students learn to summarize and that can be used to foster concise and clear writing. Other technical writing pieces such as position papers, progress reports, and proposals are more process-oriented. The students learn to draft, edit, and revise their work through these types of technical writing activities. If students are given relevant writing assignments and encouraged to hone their writing craft through collaborative workgroups, they will be better prepared to meet the chal-

lenges of the future. “Good writing may be the quintessential 21st century skill” (NCTE). We are convinced that teaching technical and professional writing, integrated within literary study, can be a valuable means of accomplishing this goal. 

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## Call for Nominations: James Moffett Award

NCTE's Conference on English Education offers this grant to support teacher projects inspired by the scholarship of James Moffett. All K–12 classroom educators who teach at least three hours or three classes per day are eligible to apply for the grant. See <http://www.ncte.org/cee/awards/moffett> for more information, including how to apply. Proposals must be postmarked by **May 1, 2012**.