

# Writing Matters

For instructors at the University of Hawai'i

From assessment studies conducted by The University of Hawai'i Manoa Writing Program

## Teaching Your Field's Forms of Writing

Some good news: Students tell us that they really value assignments that involve “special” kinds of writing, particularly in their chosen majors. By *special*, students mean any *form* or *genre* of writing that “specialists” in a field use—the “lab report” in chemistry, the “care plan” in nursing, the “literature review” in sociology, the “letter of transmittal” in law and business. Students know that proficiency in the forms of writing of a particular field will help them get work in that field.

The bad news: **Professors often find that students aren't very “good” at writing in special genres.** “More than half of my class couldn't write a decent 200-word abstract,” a professor of educational psychology commented recently. “What will their case-study reports look like?” A student in the class also got frustrated: “I followed the format and APA style exactly as the professor said, but I still got a C. What's up with that?”

The best news: Professors really can help their students to become proficient at writing in particular genres. You begin by accepting the fact that many students don't recognize key characteristics, even after having read several articles in a genre. Without help in identifying key characteristics, most students will merely make their drafts “look like” the form by

imitating section headings, the number of pages, etc. They won't understand the underlying analytic processes that the various parts of the form reflect.

**You can promote effective writing in a particular form with these steps:**

- 1) provide samples of the form and help students identify and analyze key characteristics;
- 2) create a “form guide” that students can use to assist them in composing; and
- 3) offer students several opportunities to write in the form.

### 1) ANALYZE MODELS

Finding good **professional models** for your students is not a problem: check professional journals, textbooks, the workplace—or your own hard drive.

**Student-authored samples** can be found on the web or taken from your files.

What students need is your help in analyzing models to understand the methodology behind the form. That “help” often comes through class discussion or homework assignments (see the suggestions in the box below and at the top of the next page) that guide analysis of the model before students try their own hand at writing in that form.

### HOW TO ANALYZE A PROFESSIONAL MODEL

Analyzing professional models provides a window into how professionals “write up” their research and findings. Say, for example, that an instructor in a management class wants students to write effective personnel-evaluation reports. She could distribute an actual workplace report and

- Ask students to outline the model.
- Have the class construct a chart that lists *purpose*, *necessary information*, *key components*, and *format* for each section of the model.
- Have students answer a list of homework questions about the sample report. Questions might include:
  - ▶ What's the primary purpose of the report? What are possible secondary purposes?
  - ▶ Who is the audience? What assumptions about the audience does the report author seem to have?

- ▶ What is the logic behind the overall organization?
- ▶ What is the function or purpose of each part?
- ▶ What information do you need to write each section? How do you get it?
- ▶ What do you notice about the language, style, and length of each part?
- ▶ How do the features of this report compare with features of other forms of “special” writing that you have written or read?
- ▶ How does the author refer to outside sources? What documentation is used?
- Have students work in small groups to compare their responses to the homework questions. (If the samples are long or involved, ask each group to focus on a different section or aspect of the model.)

See box at the top of p. 2 for more activities.

**HOW TO ANALYZE A STUDENT-AUTHORED SAMPLE**

In addition to providing professional models, many WI instructors like to use student-authored samples of a particular form. Student samples are often “good but not perfect” and show students what they can achieve.

Here are several possible teaching strategies:

- Have students discuss what works well and what could use more work in the student samples.
- If you use more than one sample (or both student and professional models), ask students

to compare the two: What are the similarities? What are the significant differences?

- Have students revise a particularly problematic student-authored sample and then discuss the results. (Such an assignment works best with shorter samples. For longer samples, assigning work on a specific part may be more fruitful.)

Your insights and tips (*do's* and *don'ts*) throughout these activities can greatly aid students' understanding and ability to work with their own material.

**2) CREATE A “FORM GUIDE”**

After students have read and analyzed one or more models, they will be in a better position to do the writing assignment and also the reading, data collection, and analyses that the focal genre requires.

At this point you can often help students move forward by summarizing features of the form's assumptions, methods, and structure. If you've engaged in the activities already described, you have already identified many of the features. Now's the time to pull them all together as a “form guide” for writing in the particular genre.

You may want to create the form guide (sample in the box below) as a class activity—this gives you one more opportunity to offer professional tips. Once created, the guide can help students while they write and after they complete the assignment. You can require students to use the guide as a template or checklist for self assessment that they hand in with their first draft. If you have students critique one

another's drafts, you may want to use the guide as the template for peer responses. The guide can, if carefully designed, even be your primary means of giving students feedback on their drafts.

**3) OFFER SEVERAL OPPORTUNITIES TO DEVELOP PROFICIENCY**

To know is one thing; to apply is another. Genres are typically complex; learning to use them is not the sort of thing one masters the first time around. You'll probably want to have your students revise after having gotten responses to first drafts. You may want to have your students write in the form several times. If the form is both complex and significant in your field, you may want to work with your colleagues to be sure that students have multiple opportunities for guided instruction with the form in different courses.

**SEEING DIFFERENTLY**

We end with a story showing how one professor learned to teach genre. Several years ago he told a colleague, “I stopped asking my students to write movie reviews because I got tired of all the poor writing.” In defense of the students, the colleague noted that reviews are tricky to write: you have to comment on plot elements, characterization, casting, acting, costuming, music, camera angles, lighting, and sometimes much more. She suggested that the professor focus on only a couple aspects of the full review and then have students write a mini review. The professor tried that approach, and now has the students write 3 mini reviews, first with 2, then 4, then 6 elements. He reports the writing “much improved.”

The professor may not have realized it, but he is teaching a special form of writing. And his students are beginning to see movies with professionally trained eyes.

**FORM GUIDE FOR A REVIEW ARTICLE**

The introduction:

1. Defines and identifies your topic.
2. Points out trends in what has been published about your topic.
3. Identifies conflicts or gaps in the research.
4. Establishes your reason for reviewing the literature.
5. Explains the criteria used in analyzing and comparing literature.

The body of the review:

1. Groups research studies into clusters or subtopics (they are not presented chronologically unless there is a compelling reason to do so).
2. Emphasizes the main findings or arguments (using quotations sparingly, if at all).