Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

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ELON UNIVERSITY | CENTER FOR Engaged Learning

A FRAMEWORK FOR DESIGNING EFFECTIVE WRITING ASSIGNMENTS IN PUBLIC HEALTH

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Public health students must develop writing skills that support their ability to advocate for health resources, conduct and disseminate research, develop policy, correspond through media, and influence health behaviors, all with the common goal of promoting population health. The Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) underscores the significance of written communication for public health professionals as part of their accreditation criteria (CEPH 2016). Students of CEPH-accredited public health degree programs across the United States and in Canada are expected to meet the competency "Communicate audience-appropriate public health content, in writing" through didactic learning, experiential work experiences, and a capstone project.

Writing assignments, underutilized in some public health programs, provide a variety of opportunities for student growth (August et al. 2019; Beard 2018). For example, writing assignments that deeply engage students in a public health issue, challenge them to tailor their communication style to the intended readers, and prompt them to decide which information is most relevant to include will help them to sharpen their critical thinking skills and further develop their professional identity. Public health instructors may not have the tools to create such assignments as they are not explicitly trained in how to teach writing.

This chapter provides instructors with a framework for developing their own writing assignments; the recommendations we present can be adapted to a wide range of disciplines, but we present them in the context of public health education. We also offer an example that embodies our framework: The Real–World Writing Project (Anderson and August 2020a). This ongoing project connects students with partners in the community to develop written products used in the "real world" to promote public health. The recommendations and the Real–World Writing Project are further described below.

Our framework includes eight recommendations for developing effective writing assignments (Anderson et al. 2019; Anderson and August 2020b; August and Trostle 2018; August et al. 2019) (figure 12.1). We compiled the first six (August and Trostle 2018) from research by experts in writing studies, including the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College, a joint project of the Council of Writing Program Administrators and the National Survey of Student Engagement, and they are consistent with writing scholarship and best practices (Adler-Kassner 2015; Anderson et al. 2015; Bean 2011; Light 2001; Pace 2004; Soliday 2011; Wiggins 2009). The first six recommendations include the most relevant advice from writing studies experts for public health instructors. We developed two additional recommendations (figure 12.1) to offer advice that is specific to public health instruction that was not addressed in the writing studies literature.

The Eight Recommendations

The eight recommendations for public health writing assignments are listed in figure 12.1, and we elaborate upon them below.

1. Present a Real-World Disciplinary Problem to be Addressed through Critical Thinking

Characterize the problem that the writing should address, for example, the challenges that elderly people with low incomes face in achieving diabetes control. Writing about topics specific to the public health discipline helps students to build their professional

8 Recommendations for Writing Assignments

1. Present a real-world disciplinary problem to be addressed through critical thinking.

2. Describe the purpose of writing.

3. Identify the intended readers.

4. Require a document format used in the workplace.

5. Allow for a process to support sriting through specific tasks.

6. Explain the assignment's requirements and criteria for evaluation.

7. Require a visual element.

8. Require a thoughtful title for the document.

Figure 12.1. The eight recommendations for public health writing assignments

knowledge and identity (Bean 2011; Light 2001; Pace 2004), and it sharpens their critical thinking skills (August and Trostle 2018; August et al. 2019).

2. Describe the Purpose of the Writing

Clearly explain the purpose of the writing. For example, the purpose may be to convince teenagers to become more physically active or to explain why informed consent is essential to health research; this information gives the student a goal and both student and instructor a benchmark for understanding whether the student's writing was successful.

3. Identify the Intended Readers

Define a target readership to whom students should write; for example: cardiologists; urban, low-income mothers; or high school basketball players. The intended readers may not actually read the student's work, but identifying a target readership is essential to

help students understand how to craft an appropriate tone, style, language, and use of jargon and to identify which information is important to include, to which values they should appeal, and the complexity of the information. Of course a target readership will often emerge once a student identifies a professional writing format. For example, choosing a target journal for a research paper will define the intended audience.

4. Require a Document Format used in the Workplace

Ask students to write in a format used in the public health workplace rather than a generic one; for example, a journal article that adheres to the author guidelines of a specific academic journal rather than a generic "research paper." Writing an article for a disciplinary public health journal, for example, will allow students to better understand how knowledge is created and disseminated in public health. Writing in a discipline-specific format helps students develop a deeper understanding of the activities, values, professional roles, and context of their discipline (AAC&U 2019; August and Trostle 2018; Graves, Hyland, and Samuels 2010; Leider et al. 2018; Light 2001; Quitadamo and Kurtz 2007; Soliday 2011; Wiggins 2009).

5. Allow for a Process to Support Writing through Specific Tasks

Include scaffolded activities to appropriately support the writing process. Activities, such as brainstorming, peer evaluation, and/or allowing for multiple drafts will support students in learning about and actively engaging in the writing process (Horstmanshof and Brownie 2013; Parkinson et al. 2007). Scaffolding provides students multiple opportunities to observe strategies for an effective writing process, to shape the writing for the intended reader, and to receive and respond to expert or peer feedback resulting in the creation of a meaningful product versus simply completing a task. Faculty can also include instruction for specific writing assignment recommendations; for example, through a short lecture or in-class activity, instructors can teach students what constitutes an effective title (see recommendation #8).

6. Explain the Assignment's Requirements and Criteria for Evaluation

Provide expectations for the assignment and how each component will be graded. For example, an instructor could provide a quantitative rubric including point values for each component, such as three total possible points for a compelling title or five total possible points for a visual element. The rubric should also explain the expectation for receiving full points for each component. If instructors explicitly provide this information, it will set students up for success.

7. Require a Visual Element

Require a visual element such as a figure, diagram, map, or infographic. Visual elements are a critical component of public health communication, and many types of public health documents rely on visuals to reinforce main points, present data in a compelling and efficient manner, and entice readers to review the rest of the document (Anderson et al. 2019). Requiring students to incorporate at least one visual element into their document will help them learn how to create persuasive non-textual arguments. These visuals should be tailored to the audience; for example, photographs and infographics may be most suitable for patients or other non-scientific audiences. On the other hand, detailed charts or graphs may work best for a scientific readership. The visual element should be tailored to the medium through which it will be distributed. For example, a visual designed for an electronic medium (e.g., a webpage) will need to be designed differently than one that will be used in a paper handout. An electronic document may offer such affordances as color presentation whereas a paper document may not be printed in color, and that should be considered when designing the visual element.

8. Require a Thoughtful Title for the Document

Require a compelling title. Titles are crucial to the success of grant proposals, journal articles, and other documents because after reviewing the title, readers decide whether to read the rest of the document. Students should be aware of the importance of

titles and practice writing effective titles. If the document is a fact sheet or a similar document, a "headline" can replace a title. For this recommendation to be most effective, the instructor should provide criteria for a good title that matches the document type. For example, fact sheet headlines should be simple and informative, but a journal article title will need more detail. The instructor should also consider awarding points for a good title. If an instructor indicates that three points will be given for a descriptive title, then the student will understand the significance of a title for the writing assignment.

Writing assignments that follow these eight recommendations will allow public health students the opportunity to develop an identity as a public health professional who can effectively communicate public health content; deepen their disciplinary ways of thinking; develop an appreciation of how knowledge is created in the field of public health; and understand how disciplinary conventions shape discourse and public health knowledge (August et al. 2019). Asking students to write in and engage with a variety of formats provides an avenue for students to connect their documents to activities, values, and various public health roles and intended audiences.

The Real-World Writing Project

The Real-World Writing Project (Anderson and August 2020a) requires public health students to create a written product, for example, a fact sheet, short report, or series of social media posts, for an external public health practice partner. Partners include nonprofit agencies, government programs, local farmers, hospitals, and others. The overall purpose of the project is specific to the needs of the external partner, and students identify those needs through an initial meeting with their practice partner contact.

The Real-World Writing Project embodies our eight recommendations for public health writing assignments. The project presents each student with a public health problem to address and a writing purpose. For example, a student who develops a fact sheet for a local health department promoting breastfeeding practices to low-income women of childbearing age is addressing low

breastfeeding rates within a vulnerable population. Each problem is presented by the student's external partner with all the complexities that exist in the real world.

Students write to their intended readers and need to decide how much background information to provide, which content is most relevant to their audience, the writing style, the writing format, and the amount of jargon that will work best for this readership. For the fact sheet on breastfeeding, for example, students would need to gather additional information about their target audience, such as ethnic identity and language preference, to understand how to appropriately tailor the document.

The requirement to include a visual element, like a map, photograph, or figure, gives rise to important conversations about a range of topics. For instance, students need to understand what Internet images are appropriate to use for their fact sheet from a copyright standpoint. Photographs raise important questions about privacy and issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Other issues include the need to make visual elements colorblind friendly.

Titles and headlines will vary according to the document type, message, and target audience. Fact sheets require a simple headline that conveys the main message of the document; for example, the argument that breastfeeding has protective effects for both the breastfeeding parent and child.

Finally, because the product will be presented to and used by an external partner, the stakes are higher than a traditional academic writing assignment and students tend to take these assignments very seriously.

The Real-World Writing Project affords the opportunity for students to improve their product through multiple revisions. The project is broken down into multiple assignments (see, for example, table 12.1) that include an initial draft, a structured peer review wherein they receive feedback from two classmates, a second draft on which they receive instructor feedback, a penultimate draft on which they receive feedback from their external partner, and the final product. This process allows students to develop their product

iteratively, helps them learn to receive and incorporate feedback from a variety of readers, and keeps the project on track throughout the semester. Clear instructions are provided for each assignment as well as a rubric (examples available from the authors upon request).

Sample assignment goals that instructors can provide to students to support writing	
First draft	Initiate a draft based on the above summary of the writing product
Engage in peer review	Give and receive feedback from peers
Submit second draft	Revise the first draft in response to peer feedback
	Describe the revisions through a reflective cover letter
	Receive feedback from instructor on the second draft
Submit third draft	Revise the second draft in response to instructor feedback
	Receive feedback from practice site partner on the third draft
Submit final draft	Revise the third draft in response to the practice site partner feedback

Table 12.1.
The authors will provide complete assignments upon request.

The Real-World Writing Project has been implemented in both undergraduate and graduate level public health courses (Anderson and August 2020a; August, Ansorge, and Anderson, forthcoming). To evaluate the Real-World Writing Project, surveys were distributed to participating students as well as their community partners. Public health students reported applying various skills such

as interpreting scientific data, using design software, and reviewing literature to create relevant public health written products like social media content, blogs, or fact sheets. Community partners reported that public health students conduct themselves professionally and that the Real-World Writing Project has resulted in quality written products for their organizations.

Document Formats Help Intended Readers Navigate Public Health Problems

Writing instruction emphasized that document formats play a role in how people navigate a common public health problem or scenario that they may be experiencing. The "real-world" public health problem addressed in the example patient brochure (see figure 12.2) is the high prevalence of human papillomavirus (HPV) among women and the patients' need for information after a diagnosis is made. Instructors made connections between the situation and the purpose, the document format, the audience, and other elements.

Purpose and Audience

The purpose of the writing example is clear—to educate women about HPV, including the consequences of having the virus, as well as to advocate for behavior changes such as practicing safe sex and getting the HPV vaccine. The document format helps achieve the purpose of the writing. Brochures are portable and patients can take them home after talking with their doctor as they continue to process their diagnosis and consider behavior changes that they might make in response to their health condition.

In class, we discussed the importance of identifying the intended audience and emphasized that the product will be more effective with a specific audience because it can be tailored to meet their values, cultural preferences, language, and informational needs. Instructors helped students navigate conversations with practice site partners who may have initially indicated that the document was for a "mass audience." Students were encouraged to open up a discussion with their practice site partners in an effort to narrow the

What is HPV?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. It's the **most common** sexually transmitted infection (STI)—almost every sexually active person without the vaccine has had it in their lifetime. HPV is **usually harmless** and goes away by itself, but some types can lead to cancer or genital warts.

HPV can be carried without symptoms and is usually cleared from the body without any health problems.

HPV is easily spread from sexual **skin-to-skin contact** with someone who has it. HPV is spread when your vulva, vagina, cervix, penis, or anus touches someone else's genitals, mouth, or throat—usually during sex.

Low-risk types of HPV cause most cases of genital warts. They are considered to be low-risk since they don't lead to cancer or other serious health problems.

High-risk types of HPV can sometimes lead to cancer. The most common type of cancer linked to HPV is cervical cancer.

Additional Resources

For more information or to reference the material in this pamphlet, visit these sources:

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)
Human Papillomavirus (HPV): Resource Overview
https://www.acog.org/Womens-Health/Human-Papillomavirus-HPV

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Human Papillomavirus (HPV)
https://www.cdc.gov/hpv/index.html

Planned Parenthood
Human Papillomavirus (HPV)
https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/stds-hiv-safer-sex/hpv

MICHIGAN
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28555 Orchard Lake Rd #120
Farmington Hills, MI 48334
(248) 489-1070
http://michiganwomensobgyn.com

HPV

UNDERSTANDING YOUR DIAGNOSIS

Options after your diagnosis

9 out of **10** HPV infections go away by themselves within 2 years

Can HPV be treated?

Unfortunately, there is **no treatment for HPV** itself. High-risk types HPV can still clear from the body naturally. About 10% of high risk types of HPV lead to HPV infections or abnormal cell changes, which can result in cancer. Here are some **treatments/tests** to discuss with your provider if you have abnormal Pap results:

- **Colposcopy**: a procedure to look more closely at the cervix to see if there are precancerous cells
- **Laser conization**: a treatment using laser to remove/excise precancerous cells from the area
- **LEEP** or Loop Electrosurgical Excision Procedure: a treatment to remove precancerous cells from the cervix with an electrical current

Regularly get screened for cervical cancer if you are **21-65 years old**. Ask your provider how often you should get screened.

Protecting yourself and others against future HPV

Practice **safe sex** by using a condom/dental dam every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex. While condoms and dental dams are not as effective against HPV as they are other STIs, they can still **lower your chances** of getting HPV.

Get the HPV vaccine. No longer just for adolescents, the FDA has approved Gardasil 9 for adults **27-45 years old**. You are unlikely to be positive for all strains of HPV, the vaccine can still protect you from other strains. If your partner gets vaccinated, they will also be protected from the most common strains of HPV.

The HPV vaccine can **reduce the risk** of HPV-related cancers by up to

99%

when **fully protected** with recommended doses.

Talking to your partner about your HPV diagnosis

HPV can occur at any point in **committed, long term relationships** and is not indicative of infidelity. HPV can be introduced in previous relationships and carried without symptoms for years by either partner.

Your partner **likely already has HPV** if you have been together for a while. HPV usually clears from the body without symptoms, so it is unlikely they will have health problems.

Your partner can check for unusual growths, lumps, or sores, and should continue to have **regular check-ups**, including STI testing.

Long term partners are unlikely to be exposed to new strains of HPV. Short term, unvaccinated partners may benefit from **receiving the HPV vaccine**, as it is unlikely they are positive for all strains.

Figure 12.2. Example of a student project. Public health practice site: Michigan Women's Health. Public health problem being addressed: How to respond to a human papillomavirus (HPV) diagnosis. Target audience: Women who have been diagnosed with HPV. Writing format: Patient brochure

intended audience. The audience for the example patient brochure is very specific: women who have just been diagnosed with HPV.

Supporting the Writing Process and Clear Expectations

Student writing was supported through assignments that required them to gather information about their product; develop an initial draft; receive and reflect on feedback from their peers, the instructor, and their practice; and synthesize feedback into revisions. The assignments for each class that offered the Real-World Writing Project were slightly different, but those for the example HPV brochure are listed in table 12.1. The first assignment required students to meet with their practice site partners and gather information about the purpose of the writing, the document format and length, the intended audience, as well as any other relevant information. After this meeting, but before they started writing, students completed a reflective writing assignment describing these elements. They also turned in a model of writing similar to their project (from their practice site partner or something they found on their own).

Additional writing process assignments included giving and receiving peer feedback. At the beginning of the review session, students introduced their product (purpose, intended audience, etc.) and flagged specific things they wanted the reviewer to focus on. They also shared the writing model with their peer reviewer. Each student completed a structured peer review form that required them to comment on different aspects of the product and to specify two specific things that worked well, and two concrete suggestions for improving the product. Students were asked to avoid focusing on things like typos and spelling errors to maintain focus on the bigger picture.

The student who created the example brochure—as well as the rest of the students—were asked to revise based on their peer review and submit the revision with a reflective cover letter. This cover letter highlighted changes made in the new draft and elaborated on their experience with the peer review process. Using a similar process of peer review, a revision with reflective cover letter was

completed after instructor review and after review from their practice site partner (in this case, Dr. Eisenberg at Michigan Women's Health). Assignment expectations were provided for each assignment including a rubric with points attached to each item.

Visual Elements

Students learned about developing effective visual elements in class, including making persuasive arguments, making the visual compelling and relatable to the audience, adjusting the technical level of information to the audience, as well as tailoring it to the medium (e.g., electronic versus paper documents). There are multiple visual elements incorporated into the HPV brochure. For example, the visual on the front of the brochure shows a female silhouette, and the females using the brochure may identify with this visual. The tone of the visual is solemn and reflective. The brochure is designed to be inviting and easy to read, and detailed charts or graphs are not included. Finally, because the brochure will be printed on paper, no hot links were included. The color scheme was chosen to enable printing in color or black and white (either would look good).

Titles and Headlines

Finally, the instructor led a discussion about effective titles in class, and the example brochure's title clearly specifies the purpose of the document and identifies the intended audience.

Collectively, these assignments help students prepare for writing beyond the university. Students made connections between public health problems and activities and specific document formats that connect to them. Students learned to gather information and clarify expectations with their practice partners initially, and then seek feedback on the penultimate version of the document. Public health is a collaborative field, and the process that students engaged in to develop their final product helped them incorporate multiple viewpoints and feedback.

Conclusions

Assigned writing in public health and other health disciplines offers students an opportunity for meaningful learning experiences to help them thrive beyond graduation. The eight recommendations provide instructors with a framework to help guide them in developing engaging and effective writing assignments. Such assignments incorporated into a public health program will result in student competence to deliver public health messaging through various modes of written communication to diverse audiences. As instructors become more skilled in developing effective writing assignments, this is reassuring to administrators who may have to monitor and evaluate student competencies to maintain accreditation and prove their program is successful in developing a strong public health workforce.

Further, if public health graduates are equipped with written communication skills to support public health, these outcomes will reflect positively on their program and can foster sustained support and relationships across the degree-granting institution, alumni, and community organizations. The potential to effectively support students' ability to write can have measurable impacts for multiple stakeholders.

Acknowledgements

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