# Writing Beyond the University

## Preparing Lifelong Learners for Lifewide Writing

*Edited by Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore, and Paula Rosinski*

ELON UNIVERSITY | CENTER FOR Engaged Learning

Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
Elon, North Carolina
www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org



Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten
Copyeditor and designer: Jennie Goforth

**Cataloging-in-Publication Data**
Names: Bleakney, Julia | Moore, Jessie L. | Rosinski, Paula
Title: Writing Beyond the University / Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore, and Paula Rosinski
Description: Elon, North Carolina : Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, [2022] | Series: Center for engaged learning open access book series | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022945867 | ISBN (PDF) 978-1-951414-08-5 | ISBN (PBK) 978-1-951414-09-2 | DOI https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa5
Subjects: LCSH: English language – Rhetoric – Study and teaching | Business writing
Classification: LCC PE1404.W75 2022 | DDC 808.066

CHAPTER 9

# "I'LL TRY TO MAKE MYSELF SOUND SMARTER THAN I AM"

## Learning to Negotiate Power in Workplace Writing

**Brian Fitzpatrick,** *George Mason University, United States*
**Jessica McCaughey,** *George Washington University, United States*

Work is, by definition, getting things done. And in a knowledge economy, writing is the mechanism through which most of that work happens. This chapter examines the ways in which two workplace writers from very different fields have adapted as writers on the job in order to do that work more effectively through a negotiation of language, identity, and power. For one of our interviewees, a marketing director for an educational software company, the work that must be done is primarily sales. For the other, a records management specialist for a network of museums, in this context, the work is confirmation of the completion of delegated tasks. These narratives offer us some insight into the ways in which writers continue to learn, adapt, and "get work done" in writing on the job.

We know that writing transfer is elusive, particularly university-to-workplace transfer (Beaufort 2007, 1999; Dias et al. 1999; Fennick, Peters, and Guyon 1993; Freedman and Adam 2000; Anson and Forsberg 1990; McCaughey and Fitzpatrick 2020), and a "complex phenomenon" (Moore 2017, 6). Student interns and new graduates often report feeling a "disorientation" upon entering the workplace (Anson and Forsberg 1990). They wonder why "they weren't better prepared for the writing tasks that they face in their jobs" (Fennick, Peters, and Guyon 1993, 47), and they even report feeling "so struck by the differences between academic and workplace writing that they feel quite hurt by their institution's failure to provide them with easily transportable knowledge" (Brent 2011, 411).

What transfer research hasn't yet explored substantially is workplace hierarchies, decorum, and expectations about how professionals learn to "get the work done" through writing. In their book *Power and Politeness in the Workplace*, authors Janet Holmes and Maria Stubbe write that "people draw on a variety of discourse strategies to manage problematic workplace encounters" and that "considerations of politeness" are key to understanding such exchanges (2015, 52). Here, we would define "problematic" as both the challenges individuals face in completing job tasks as they depend on others, and the roadblocks they encounter as they try to do so. Holmes and Stubbe, although interested in "talk" rather than text, write that employees put forth "a good deal of effort" (Holmes and Stubbe 2015, 138) into communicating with an eye toward fostering and maintaining strong working relationships with their colleagues. Holmes and Stubbe write that the "interplay between the imperatives of power and politeness is especially foregrounded in cases of miscommunication and problematic discourse" (Holmes and Stubbe 2015, 139). And these two factors—power and politeness—are very likely at the heart of some of the most compelling challenges our writers in the workplace face, particularly as we see the writers below struggle to adapt and negotiate new writing contexts.

We argue here that one piece of the "elusive" writing transfer relates to notions of compromise when it comes to encounters with complex audiences and systems. Claire Lauer and Eva Brumberger write about "responsive" workplaces and the writers within them, claiming that the actions these communicators must take happen "across a vast landscape of contexts and rhetorical practices, affecting our very notions of what writing is and how it gets done" (2019, 636). Here, we witness precisely this: two writers working responsively, struggling to get things done in ways they could not have expected when they were students in the university. Throughout our exploration of these narratives, we focus on the ways in which these writers navigate complex audiences and systems—whether these audiences and systems are bureaucratic, hierarchical, digital, or cross-industry. Both of our interviewees are negotiating between what Koerber calls "competing alternative discourses" (2006, 94)—particularly in email, which we primarily focus on below. Our marketing director must move between the corporate world and higher education, and in doing so, struggles to "sound smarter than I am." Our records management specialist takes the opposite tack, as she's learned to "play sort of dumb" when attempting to get a response from professionals above her in the larger bureaucracy. Leydens considers "rhetorical evolution in individuals over time" (Leydens 2008, 259) to be a crucial element in the development of a writer as they move from "novice" to "insider." We see these writers negotiate expertise and authority, as well as rhetorical skills agency—all in complex and unexpected ways.

It's our hope that this chapter will add to the growing body of work surrounding workplace writing broadly, and writing transfer specifically, and that such scholarship is taken up by both faculty and administrators to decrease the number of graduates who feel such disillusionment in the future.

## Participants

Below, we explore two interviews from our larger data pool in an effort to provide specific, illustrative examples of both on-the-job struggles and the on-the-job learning that arises from such struggles. While multiple interviewees speak to the ways in which they adjust their language in this way, these two participants provide what we see as the most robust and complete examples. First, we look to the narrative of our marketing director, who works at a technology company in the higher education space. Next, we turn to an interview with a records management specialist, who primarily performs archival work for a network of museums. These interviews come from a larger IRB-approved study that includes fifty-two workplace writers across industries, collected over the past four years. Overall, we seek to better understand how writing works in these various workplaces and for these particular writers: the kinds of writing they do, the challenges of learning to perform it, and how these writers perceive that their university writing experiences informed, helped, or did not contribute to their ability to write successfully in their work lives.

These semi-structured interviews typically last between twenty-five and fifty minutes. In recruiting, we relied heavily on our personal and professional networks and on social media. We also saw success in the snowball method (Groenewald 2004), in which we used our relationships with participants to inquire about possible interviewees in their networks. Selection criteria were fairly simple; participants must have had at least a bachelor's degree and currently hold a position that requires some writing. We did not interview those who are titled writers or editors, as we feel other research in professional and technical communication has well explored such communicators (Hart-Davidson 2013; Henry 2007; Jones 2016; Karatsolis et al. 2016; Winsor 2003; Slack, Miller, and Doak 2006).

## Negotiation and Compromise in Action

Our two participants here, the marketing director and the program specialist in records management, primarily discussed their workplace writing that takes place via email. Patricia Welsh Droz and Lorie Stagg Jacobs (2019) deem the email form a "chameleon genre," one that "does whatever its users want it to do." By this they mean that an email might be straightforward, delivering logistical information, for example. It might also be "persuasive or narrative or informative; it can be conversational or formal; it can pick up where other communication modes have dropped off" (Droz and Jacobs 2019). We agree, and we go further. To the two writers below, email is in some ways this chameleon genre, yet even more so in email they become chameleon *writers*. These two professionals show us the ways in which they move in and out of specific personas and tones in an effort to perform their jobs well.

Our first interviewee, the marketing director, discusses the challenges in navigating audiences in discourse communities of which he is not a part, particularly over email, stating, "You have to adapt to those audiences and sometimes change your tone and sometimes change the way things are presented." In his current role, his primary audience is university administrators, particularly those who make purchasing and curricular decisions. He states that he struggled especially to connect with this audience because "I'm not a member of the higher education community . . . so I have to immerse myself in that world." Yet even having "immersed" himself in the language of higher education, he recalls:

> I'm talking to somebody in the academic community, so I'll try to make myself sound smarter than I am, and so the writing comes across fake and phony. A president of a university is a person too, and they're going to respond differently to something that sounds fake and phony than something that's a little bit more organic. So, people will tone it down a little bit, and you know, "Back off of that a little bit, or maybe you rephrase this, and you don't have to sound so stuffy about this particular research study, it's not that big of a deal." . . . I think I would tend to overcompensate to try to make it sound a little bit more professional. But I've learned over time, these are people too, and they respond just like any other human responds to something.

The marketing director has learned through trial and error that his initial impulse, to situate his writing within the academic community by "sounding smart," actually impedes his ability to effectively communicate. Only through giving up the perception of in-group authority, the idea that he "belongs" to the same community as his audience, and instead writing more "organically" is he able to be seen as authentic and effective. He notes the difficulties in shifting audience and emphasizes the need for rhetorical awareness and adaptation to be successful in his writing, especially in email.

Similarly, the program specialist must also often give up the perception of authority in order to achieve her writing goals. She states that emails are a "learn on the job type thing." She works in the office of her organization's highest ranking official, and often has to communicate with the heads of various museums and cultural institutions across the country, most of whom she notes that she's never met in person. She states that when an email request goes unanswered, she has to choose how to proceed. In some cases, she will "loop her boss into it," although this is rare and "uncomfortable." She works to get a "read" of the person she's communicating with, and very often learns "from back-and-forth email interactions with them [they] don't respond well to that, and they see that as some . . . challenge to their title or something." The program specialist then takes the opposite approach:

> And so, then I have to kind of play sort of dumb and pretend like, [pleading voice] "I know this is a real bother, but can you please, please do this and it's like a hassle, but like we just need it done and like once it's done, I'll close it out and it will be over with and you won't have to deal with it anymore." And that's sort of a strange way to interact with people. But that's kind of how the job works.

This professional must negotiate a complex system of authority capital—writing on behalf of an authority (the head office) to those who are protective of their titles and the capital that comes with them. She finds herself trying to avoid the discomfort of "tattling" on her unresponsive audience by looping in the head of her organization in follow-up emails, by sacrificing her own authority even further and "dumbing-down" her voice, playing to the ego of the audience. Despite her own expertise and the authority-by-proxy from which she writes, she chooses to supplicate herself and her position to achieve her purpose efficiently, because "that's kind of how the job works." While it might be more expedient to immediately go to the head of the organization, she is aware of the importance of maintaining relationships through positive interactions with her audiences, despite the seemingly incongruent goals she has (to get a response) and those of her audience (to avoid response unless pressed).

Interestingly, we see the marketing director and program specialist negotiating challenging audiences in opposite ways—one by reverting to his authentic voice, which is less "scholarly" or academic, and the other by abandoning her authentic voice to appease colleagues—yet they ultimately achieve similar ends. Elizabeth Wardle notes, "Some new written practices may be opposed to newcomers' values and ethics; [and] may ask them to give up some measure of authority to which they believe they are entitled" (2004). The marketing director attempts to elevate his language as a means of establishing his authority. However, as he is not a part of the discourse community of his audience (broadly, academia), he comes off as "phony" and inauthentic, thus damaging his authority with that group. The way in which he ultimately finds success in his writing is by writing more organically/naturally and finding authority through authenticity.

On the other hand, the program specialist is writing to an audience that bristles if and when she asserts her authority, and she finds that they typically "don't respond well" when she urges action. In converse of the marketing director, who first elevates and then reconciles his language within his authentic identity, the program specialist intentionally becomes inauthentic; she voluntarily relinquishes her authority by diminishing her language, performatively pleading in order to mollify her audience and bolster their sense of authority in the transaction. It's important to note that although we do not know the genders of the audiences about whom the program specialist speaks, we must consider how much gender dynamics and expectations come into play as well, as we see this female employee relinquishing her authority to placate her audience. This is a potentially rich area of future study across industries.

While these two workplace writers apply opposing means, both achieve the same goal. They each must "read" their audience and flex accordingly. The marketing director recognizes that the academics will see through his attempts at miming their writing style, while the program specialist can tell when her audience will be resistant to prodding. Both must adapt their approaches (one by becoming more authentic, the other less) to get what they need from their audiences. We can see that both interviewees are writing in difficult situations—confined within complex systems and limitations on their writing and composing to audiences that each want something that is difficult or impossible to provide. In order to be successful in their communications, each must negotiate a balance between the ideal and the realistic, for the sake of efficacy.

Elizabeth Wardle, in her article "Identity, Authority, and Learning to Write in New Workplaces," examines the case of Alan, a computer specialist assigned to work with a group of academics in a humanities department (Wardle 2004). Alan struggled to adapt his writing persona when faced with a new expert audience and ultimately failed to become a member of the community. Alan fails because of an incongruity between his perceived and his actual authority. He sees himself as an ultimate authority and either refuses or is unable to bend in his asserting of that authority to his audience. When contrasted with Alan, we can see how these workplace writers, the marketing director and the program specialist, succeed where he failed. Workplace writers have to negotiate their own values, at times, in order to successfully participate in new communities, sometimes taking on roles or personas that are not congruent to their identities (Russell 1997; Lave and Wenger 1991; Wardle 2004). In Alan's case, authority is held by his audience (an academic department), but he believes it is his. However, our marketing director is fully aware that his audience, academic decision makers, hold the power, and so he, after initially faltering, is able to adjust his approach and adapt to them, approaching them more authentically and succeeding in his interactions.

The program specialist has the choice of either asserting her authority (by prodding or by bringing in the head of the organization to handle things) or by ceding authority (either genuinely or for show). While she could be "successful," in the sense that the tasks she needs done would get done, by looping her boss into every communication, she recognizes that this strong-arm tactic could damage relationships she needs to maintain. Additionally, this tactic might also backfire in that by asserting "authority" by proxy (via her boss), she might actually appear less competent and authoritative in the eyes of her employer—that she is unable to "get the job done" on her own. She chooses to downplay her authority to her audience and is successful in getting responses from them by appearing capable to her employer.

We aren't arguing, of course, that individuals should have to capitulate in this way, or that the kind of pleading our program specialist, for instance, performs is right or even the most effective method to getting work done. But as we can see in both of these interviews, some workplace writers strongly feel the need to take on dramatically different tones or identities in order to get work done.

## Implications for Teachers

The concept of the "chameleon writer," discussed above, as well as email as a "chameleon genre" that Droz and Jacobs (2019) propose, are valuable ones as we consider workplace writing preparation in the classroom. Droz and Jacobs further argue that writing instructors aren't teaching email writing—or perhaps any writing—in this way (2019). We see it as crucial that writing instructors and instructors in various disciplines who teach and require writing look beyond the classroom and devote deliberate attention to framing such complex rhetorical "shifting" not as a move that *may* occur in future work spaces, but one that students will no doubt encounter and be forced to confront. Even more so, we encourage those writing instructors who are lucky enough to oversee and mentor students through workplace internships to take advantage of the authentic and no-doubt complex rhetorical contexts these writers find themselves in, however temporarily, and discuss negotiating authority via email to achieve goals.

Finally, we are happy to point teachers and administrators to the Archive of Workplace Writing Experiences (www.workplace-writing.org). It is in this archive that our workplace writer interviews are available in audio and written transcript form for classroom use, so they can play interviews in class and have discussions with students about negotiating power. Further, in the "Resources" section of the archive, faculty and administrators will find transfer-focused, authentic, and adaptable lesson plans, assignments, and activities rooted in these interviews which meet these needs.

## Implications for Administrators

This research, at its core, offers a glimpse into the gap between the writing, disciplinary and otherwise, that we teach in the university and the writing that these workplace professionals are being asked to do on the job. Every workplace—and every worker—must be responsive. Lauer and Brumberger write that "the workplace is, more than ever, an environment that requires the kind of rhetorical and critical communication skills that our students learn in our writing classrooms" (Lauer and Brumberger 2019, 660). It's clear that critical thinking and rhetorical flexibility are central to both environments, and many scholars and teachers, of course, argue for "critical thinking" models in the classroom (Bloch and Spataro 2014; Page and Mukherjee 2007; Paulson 2011). But we would ask program administrators to consider more deeply the nuance of negotiation between audiences, arguments, priorities, and goals that these writers—and many of the other writers in our study—must perform multiple times each day.

Bergmann and Zepernick write, "Longitudinal studies . . . make a strong case that the orderly progression implied by a FYC-to-writing-in-the-disciplines model is little more than an optimistic fiction" (Bergmann and Zepernick 2007, 125–26). While we likely wouldn't go that far, we do think that as we continue to learn more about the transfer-related struggles of our graduates in the workplace, we need to continue to reconceive of such programs to better meet students' needs. We place this task on administrators as a foundational responsibility: View preparation for university-to-workplace writing as a mandate, and do so, first, by working to better understand, as a field, the incredibly complex nature of even seemingly mundane and "easy" workplace tasks, such as email correspondence. We call on writing program administrators to consider the ways in which such learning and development might be more explicitly built into curricula.

## References

Anson, Chris M., and L. Lee Forsberg. 1990. "Moving Beyond the Academic Community: Transitional Stages in Professional Writing." *Written Communication* 7 (2): 200–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088390007002002.

Beaufort, Anne. 2007. *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Beaufort, Anne. 1999. *Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work*. Language and Literacy Series. New York: Teachers College Press.

Bergmann, Linda S, and Janet Zepernick. 2007. "Disciplinarity and Transfer: Students' Perceptions of Learning to Write." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 31 (1–2): 124–49.

Bloch, Janel, and Sandra E. Spataro. 2014. "Cultivating Critical-Thinking Dispositions Throughout the Business Curriculum." *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* 77 (3): 249–65. https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490614538094.

Brent, Doug. 2011. "Transfer, Transformation, and Rhetorical Knowledge Journal of Business and Technical Communication." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 25 (4): 396–420.

Dias, Patrick, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Paré. 1999. *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Droz, Patricia Welsh, and Lorie Stagg Jacobs. 2019. "Genre Chameleon: Email, Professional Writing Curriculum, and Workplace Writing Expectations." *TechComm* (blog). February 4, 2019. https://www.stc.org/techcomm/2019/02/04/genre-chameleon-email-professional-writing-curriculum-and-workplace-writing-expectations/.

Fennick, Ruth, Mary Peters, and Lois Guyon. 1993. "Solving Problems in Twenty-First Century Academic and Workplace Writing." *The English Journal* 82 (3): 46. https://doi.org/10.2307/820229.

Freedman, Aviva, and Christine Adam. 2000. "Write Where You Are: Situating Learning to Write in University and Workplace Settings." In *Transitions: Writing in Academic and Workplace Settings*, edited by Patrick Dias and Anthony Paré, 31–60. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Groenewald, Thomas. 2004. "A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 3 (1): 42–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690400300104.

Hart-Davidson, William. 2013. "What Are the Work Patterns of Technical Communication?" In *Solving Problems in Technical Communication*, edited by Johndan Johnson-Eilola and Stuart A. Selber, 51–74. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Henry, Jim. 2007. "Writing Workplace Cultures—Technically Speaking." In *Critical Power Tools: Technical Communication and Cultural Studies*, edited by J. Blake Scott, Katherine V. Wills, and Bernadette Longo. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Holmes, Janet, and Maria Stubbe. 2015. *Power and Politeness in the Workplace: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Talk at Work*, 2nd ed. Routledge Linguistics Classics. London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Jones, Natasha N. 2016. "The Technical Communicator as Advocate: Integrating a Social Justice Approach in Technical Communication." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 46 (3): 342–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047281616639472.

Karatsolis, Andreas, Suguru Ishizaki, Marsha Lovett, Stacie Rohrbach, and Mollie Kaufer. 2016. "Supporting Technical Professionals' Metacognitive Development in Technical Communication through Contrasting Rhetorical Problem Solving." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 25 (4): 244–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572252.2016.1221141.

Koerber, Amy. 2006. "Rhetorical Agency, Resistance, and the Disciplinary Rhetorics of Breastfeeding." *Technical Communication Quarterly* 15 (1): 87–101. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427625tcq1501_7.

Lauer, Claire, and Eva Brumberger. 2019. "Redefining Writing for the Responsive Workplace." *College Composition and Communication* 70 (4): 634–62.

Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Learning in Doing. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Leydens, J.A. 2008. "Novice and Insider Perspectives on Academic and Workplace Writing: Toward a Continuum of Rhetorical Awareness." *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication* 51 (3): 242–63. https://doi.org/10.1109/TPC.2008.2001249.

McCaughey, Jessica, and Brian Fitzpatrick. 2020. "16. Hidden Arguments: Rhetoric and Persuasion in Diverse Forms of Technical Communication." In *Effective Teaching of Technical Communication: Theory, Practice, and Application*, edited by Michael J. Klein, 303–18. Ft. Collins/Boulder, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse/University Press of Colorado. https://doi.org/10.37514/TPC-B.2020.1121.2.16.

Moore, Jessie L. 2017. "Five Essential Principles about Writing Transfer." In *Understanding Writing Transfer: Implications for Transformative Student Learning in Higher Education*, edited by Jessie L. Moore and Randall Bass. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Page, Diana, and Arup Mukherjee. 2007. "Promoting Critical-Thinking Skills by Using Negotiation Exercises." *Journal of Education for Business* 82 (5): 251–57. https://doi.org/10.3200/JOEB.82.5.251-257.

Paulson, Edward. 2011. "Group Communication and Critical Thinking Competence Development Using a Reality-Based Project." *Business Communication Quarterly* 74 (4): 399–411. https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569911424484.

Russell, David. 1997. "Rethinking Genre in School and Society: An Activity Theory Analysis." *Written Communication* 14 (4): 504–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088397014004004.

Slack, Jennifer Daryl, David James Miller, and Jeffrey Doak. 2006. "The Technical Communicator as Author." In *Critical Power Tools: Technical Communication and Cultural Studies*, edited by J. Blake Scott, Bernadette Longo, and Katherine V. Wills. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Wardle, Elizabeth. 2004. "Identity, Authority, and Learning to Write in New Workplaces." *Enculturation* 5 (2). http://enculturation.net/5_2/wardle.html.

Winsor, Dorothy A. 2003. *Writing Power: Communication in an Engineering Center*. SUNY Series, Studies in Scientific and Technical Communication. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.