Creating Public Texts

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Learning Outcomes

This chapter will teach you

- how to recognize and write in the different genres of public texts such as
    - emails
    - memos
    - social media posts
    - blogs and other online writing
    - infographics
    - opinion editorials

16.1 Learn the Genres

This chapter will focus on public texts--the different genres you might be asked to write in your future career. We will cover everything from how to write inter-office communication to persuasive online writing. Genre is the key. Make sure you understand the constraints of the genre before you put fingers to keyboard.

Photo by rawpixel at Pixabay

16.2 Email

Email is one of the most popular forms of communication in the business and academic worlds. But despite how common email is, it's deceptively hard to write a really good email. You want your messages to be clear, correct, concise, and to-the-point. You want to get the the meat of your message quickly but at the same time keep a light, professional tone. Focus on these Do's and Don'ts:

The Do's of Email

- Be polite and considerate.
- Always be a bit more formal if you are writing to your superior or someone in a position of authority. It's smart to err on the side of being too formal.
- Begin with an appropriate salutation. Find out how your professor/boss/peer would like to be addressed. Or if you don't know, notice how they sign their emails or refer to themselves. If they live in academia-land, stick with Professor or Dr. If they live in the real world, use Mr. for men and Ms. for women. (Mrs. and Miss are out-dated terms that unnecessarily emphasize women's marital status--don't use them unless someone specifically requests it.)
- Use the subject line. It should clearly and concisely state what the email is about. Don't use a vague subject line or start a sentence in the subject line and finish it in the body. In a professional setting, don't make bad puns or jokes.
- Be careful when using the Reply All option. Read the article. 'Nuf said about that. But only say "'Nuf said" if you're writing to your best bud and not your boss.
- Sign your emails with a friendly closing salutation like "Sincerely," or "Best regards." And think twice before using email signatures.

The Don'ts of Email

- Don't email your professor/boss if you can find the answer to your question elsewhere (e.g., it's in the syllabus, the textbook, online, or ask a classmate or coworker).
- Don't ask, "Did I miss anything important when I didn't come to the meeting/class yesterday?"
- Don't use emoticons or emojis and don't overuse exclamation points.
- Don't be overly informal (e.g., avoid slang or spellings like "thx"). Capitalize sentences and the word "I" like normal (this is not a text message) but don't use ALL CAPS (that's the email equivalent of yelling).
- Don't send GIFs in professional settings.
- Avoid being snarky, rude, or curt. It might be funny and sarcastic, but your audience may not read it that way. It's much harder to convey feeling through email, so don't assume your reader will understand if you're joking.
- Don't try to deal with a problem in an email that would be better served by a phone call or an office visit.

With all of these things, Think: what does this question or situation imply about me?

Now, I can hear some of you saying "My boss uses emojis!" That's cool. Your boss can use emojis, and you can, too, as long as you let your boss make the first move to informality. The same thing goes with salutations. Always use the proper format and formal names, but let them drop the salutations before you do. Let your boss/professor sign their first name before you address them as such. Let your boss use slang or emojis before you do.

Remember, you'd rather be slightly overdressed to a party than under dressed. Same thing goes for workplace writing. It's better that your writing be slightly over-formal than sloppy and ill-mannered.

What's Wrong With This Email #1?

Hey, I lost my syllabus because someone stole my notebook so I'm not sure what's do tomorrow. Can you tell me what we need to do for class? Thxs!!! Hildegard <3

Sent at 11:59pm

16.3 Memo

A memo is a weird thing. It lives in the space between an old-school letter and an email. The great thing about a memo is that it forces us to get to the meat of our message quickly. And, being that it is slightly more formal than an email, it immediately tells our audience that this information is important.
So when do we send a memo?

- If it is part of the company protocol.
- When the message is too long to be contained in an email.
- If the document is going to be printed out and placed, say, on a bulletin board.
- When we need to convey detailed and complex information to those outside of our workplace.

Conventions of the Genre

Memos look a lot like email--if the email were written out in a Word document. Follow this format to create a memo (you can also use a template from Word or Google to begin with):
"Memorandum" or "Memo" as the title (flush left)
To: (readers' names and job titles) From: (your name and job title) Date: (complete and current date) Subject: (what the memo is about, highlighted in some way)

- Block format (flush left, with no indentation for new paragraphs)
- No salutation
- No signature

Make sure that you get to the main point of your memo quickly. That means that the first sentence is your purpose statement. The content should be short and to-the-point and provide the context or background information briefly. The last sentence should be a clear action request.

Memo Examples

Google "Memo Examples" and peruse the examples that come up to get an idea of what memos look like and the kind of language and style they typically use. Now think of 3 possible instances when you might be asked to write a memo in your future career.

16.4 Multimodal Writing

Now we're going to talk about different types of writing that use more than words. We call this multi-modal. You will discover how image, video, color, and other design choices can forward the argument you are making with your words. In fact, the various modes should be an argument by themselves. When you create a multi-modal argument, you will bring all modes together into one cohesive, unified, effective ensemble.
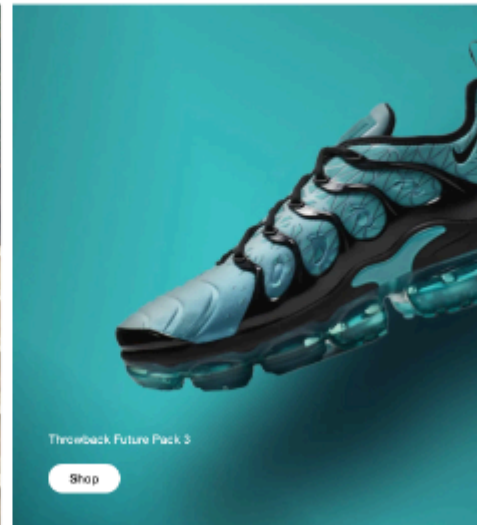
16.5 Social Media

You're probably very familiar with how to navigate and use social media to promote your own image and purposes, but how can you do this on behalf of a company or group? Just because you were born during a certain time frame (Hello iGen'ers!) you *might* be asked to write the social media content for the company you work for. Let's do what we've been taught to do when we are tasked with something new and analyze the genre.

GENRE ANALYSIS

Let's use a single company to analyze the social media genres you might be writing. Let's "just do it" and use Nike. Spend a bit of time scrolling through Nike's website, Instagram, and Twitter feed.

[Website](#)

Trending Footwear

New Air Max 720 Colors

Shop

Throwback Future Pack 3

Shop

Instagram
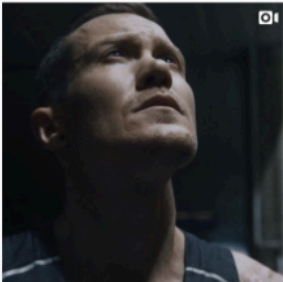
Twitter
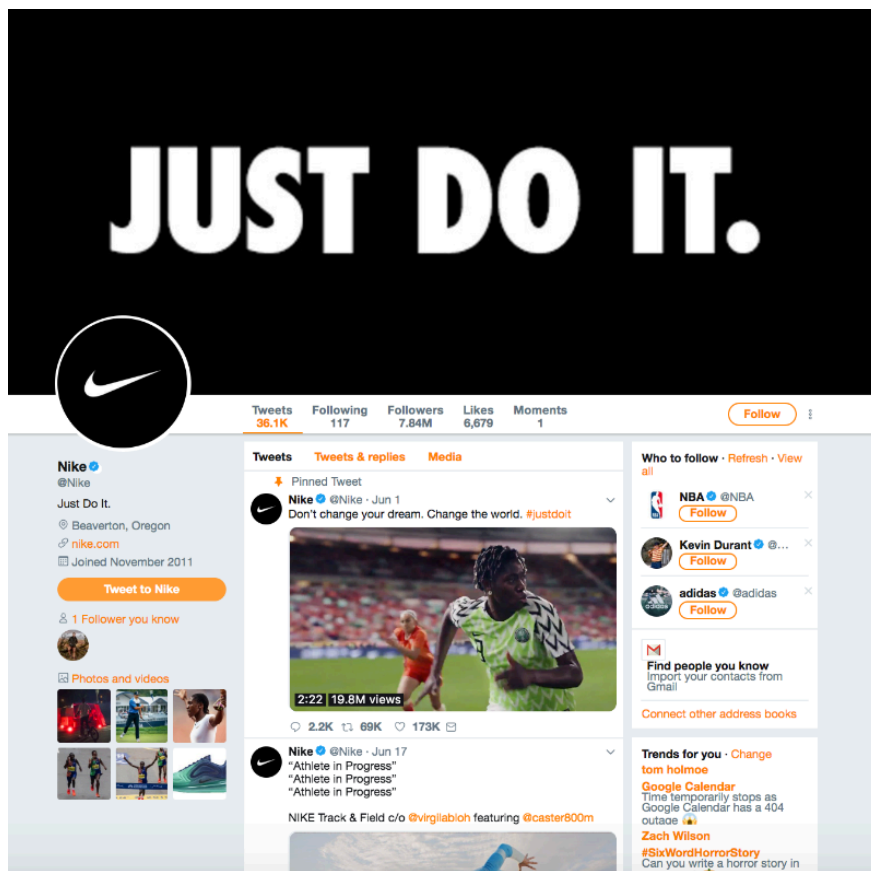
Images

Sprout Social found that 58% of consumers prefer "visual-first content, with graphics, images and produced video taking the lead." Or, as my students say, the **images hook** and then the **words inform**. Look at the images found on the various platforms. Notice that the images are cohesive and visually appealing. It might seem superficial, but many of our readers will make snap judgement just by looking. Our goal is to present a professional product and we need to do that through both the visual and compositional element. If you need a refresher on visual rhetoric, see Chapter 6 Design.

Hashtags

Be strategic with your use of hashtags. (They act almost like the keywords found in your literature review.) You want to attract potential customers or users by using appropriate hashtags that describe your product or company or enhance the narrative you are trying to tell. Avoid cultural appropriation. And avoid hashtag overkill.

Takeaways

- Look at other successful companies that are similar to yours. What does their social media content look like? What lessons can you learn from their feed?
- Review your company's mission statement, values, narrative, and purpose.
- Ask yourself who, specifically, is your audience? The wrong answer is "the entire world."
- Consider your audience's expectations. What are they expecting to see or to learn from your posts or tweets?
- Adhere to genre conventions:
  - Blog—concise paragraphs with carefully cultivated images.
  - Tweet—280 characters to get your message across. Choose wisely.
  - Instagram and Facebook post—short and sweet messages with cohesive visual elements.
- Brainstorm ways in which you can quickly and efficiently highlight the purpose of the post or tweet

16.6 Online Writing

Writnig online can be harder than it looks. Photo by Scott Graham on Unsplash

It is highly likely that you will be asked to write a blog post or online article for the future company you work for. Even if you go into academia, most departments expect their professors to have an online presence. Often, these online writing is persuasive and informative. They ask the reader to reconsider previously held ideas or to take action. Like all of the other genres we've discussed in this textbook, an understanding of audience is extremely important.

One of the worst things you can do when writing online is to write in a manner inconsistent with your target medium. Just as you adopt a different tone in letters asking Mom for money than you would in a letter to your bank asking for a loan, you also must know the conventions of the place where your writing will be read.Your tone must be balanced and consistent and your voice unique—humorous or cynical, angry or sorrowful, objective or contemplative--but definitely the voice of the writer. If you're writing for your job, remember that you are not writing as a private individual, but as an employee. You are an extension of the company and must write as such.

As you'e writing, follow these steps. First, state the issue at hand. Good pieces evolve from current issues concerning and intriguing the intended readers. Next, state a position on the question or issue. The best and most effective pieces then go on to state the opposite position's best argument, which is then knocked down by the writer's better argument. Back your position with evidence, data and stories. Last, provide a call to action or restate the issue you want your audience to reconsider. Remember the tips for writing for General Audiences in Chapter 14.

Open strong

Start with an attention-grabbing opening line that cuts to the heart of your key message and encourages people to read further. Online articles are meant to be read quickly. If an article is not interesting, readers generally will not bother finishing it. Therefore, it is crucial that you begin with a good lead, an opening sentence or story that "hooks" readers immediately and makes them want to read on. A good lead tantalizes, informs, and sets the tone for the piece. It can even be creative.

For instance, an editorial on gambling in the Wall Street Journal began with a paraphrase of Dr. Seuss: "I do like gambling, Sam-I-Am, I really like it, and I can. For I can do it in a plane, on a boat, at the track, and in the rain. I can do it in a casino, with the lottery, or with Keno." This type of beginning immediately evokes an emotion reminiscent of books from childhood but with a grown-up theme. This leads to curiosity and reading on. Readers make decisions on whether or not to read an article by how they respond to the headline and the first sentence. In other words, the first line is the display-window for all the goodies you have inside; waste no time in getting to your point.

Use active and conversational voice

Emphasize active verbs. Don't overuse adjectives and adverbs, which only weaken writing. Write to the level of your audience.

Keep paragraphs short but variable

In general, paragraphs should be no more than 3-5 sentences. Keep sentences short. If a sentence is overly long, your audience will get lost (and bored).

If you want to deliver a really punchy point, remember—single sentence paragraphs rock!

The reason is "gray space," the way a long block of text tends to turn gray upon glancing. The most important consideration about shorter paragraphs is that they're easier for readers to read. Long unbroken blocks of text are daunting to most readers. Frequent paragraphs promise a sort of "rest stop" to readers. One advantage to this is that you don't need to keep your paragraphs wholly unified and long as in academic writing.

Find the story

We all love dazzling our friends with great data and facts, but to really make an impact with your piece wrap your data in a story. Refer to real world events or personal experiences that you and your audience have likely encountered. Don't try just to teach your readers, touch them emotionally.

Include Images

Images are often the first things that hook the reader. Make sure that your images promote your message and are there for a purpose. Make sure that the images you use create a cohesive aesthetic for the article, post, or overall blog. Just like your words tell a story about the content and the writer, so do your images. A word of caution—provide proper

attribution for each image you include. If you don't know if an image is copyrighted, don't use it. Instead go to Creative Commons or my personal favorite: Unsplash where you can find thousands of beautiful, copyright-free images.

You can also do an Advanced Search in google imge search to find copyright-free images. Under "Settings," click "Advanced Search" and then at the bottom look for "Usage Rights." Click on the drop-down menu and choose "Free to Use or Share." Now all the images that come up in your search will be free to use.

Give Credit

Beware that even if an image is free to use or share, you still need to say where you got it. Look through this textbook and notice that all the images are copyright-free or have a Creative Commons copyright. Note also that we always say where the images some from--that's called Attribution and is often required, so just get used to doing it. Be a responsible online writer! Give credit!

16.7 Infographics

An information graphic is a document that uniquely displays information and data in a compelling way. The use of graphics, images, and symbols allows readers to download information much more quickly than text alone. You have probably seen them used for advertising or public service ads. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the sponsoring institution of BYU) even has a collection of infographics in their Newsroom which communicate complex or controversial topics in an easy to read format.

Check out this infographic of infographics to get a look at the genre.
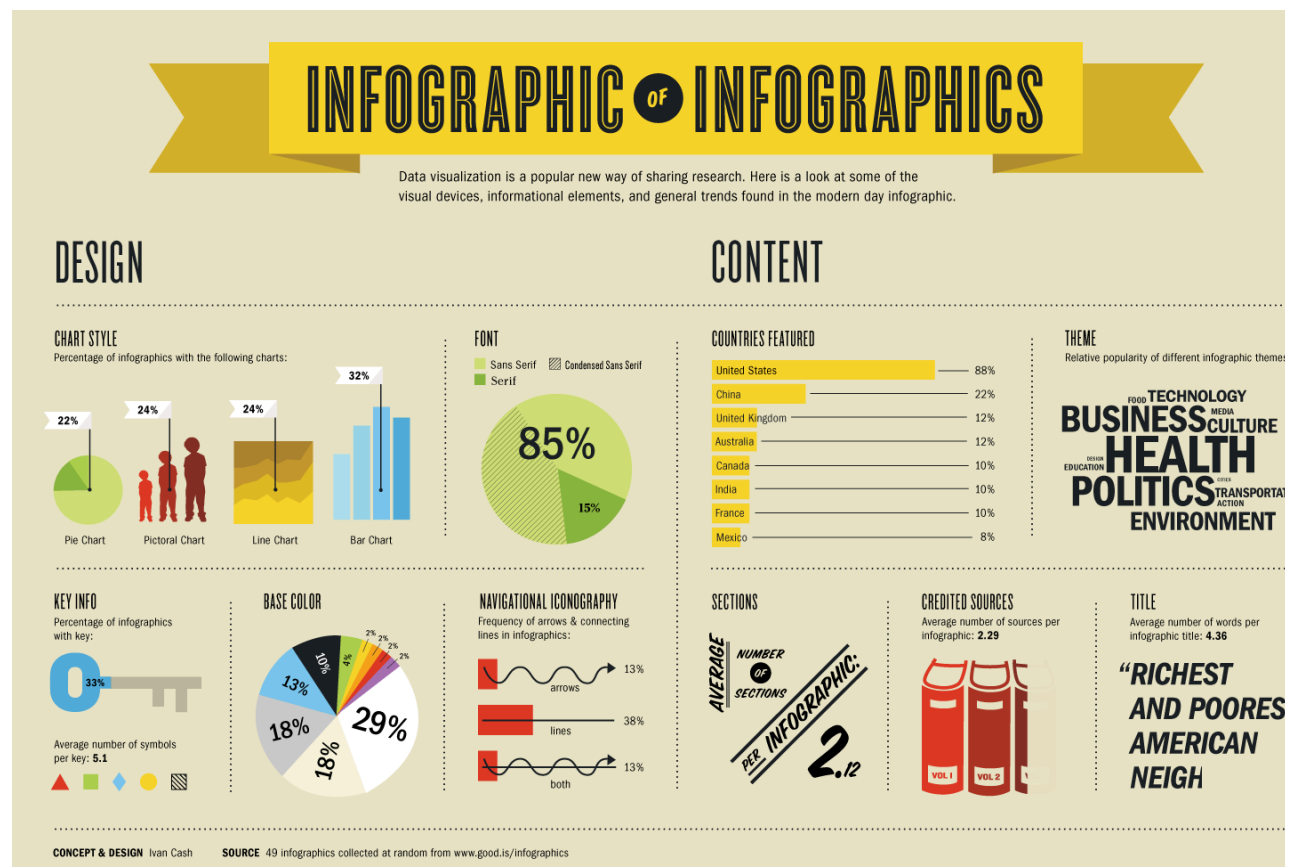
Creating infographics

As rhetorical masters you are ready to go beyond writing documents; now you can design them. Now you get to use the rhetorical principles we have discussed throughout this textbook in an even more engaging way. There are many different modes of rhetoric—remember, everything is rhetoric—but each mode has its own rhetorical strengths and weaknesses.

Your audience will be anyone who is interested in the information you are presenting in your infographic. You need to create a document that will engage and inform them quickly, and inspire them to seek out further knowledge. Because of its easy access and shareability, your infographic will pull in a much larger secondary audience. So, be sure to create a document that less-informed audience members will understand and appreciate.

In addition to Photoshop, InDesign, and Powerpoint, there are many online infographic generators to choose from. Check out the following generators and find one the suits your needs:

- Canva
- piktochart
- Venngage
- Visme

Formatting an infographic

Formatting is entirely up to you. A good rule of thumb is to use around 250 words of text in your document and a combination of images and charts/graphs. Simplified images are usually better than actual photos. Just remember: your visual rhetoric should make your argument as effectively as your written rhetoric does.

Beware of including information that comes from only one source, since this can unfairly drive the facts towards a particular conclusion. In the social sciences, this is called single-source bias. Look at your infographic the same way that you would a research paper or a university essay. The more sources you have, and the more building blocks you have to tell an interesting story, and the more credible that story is.
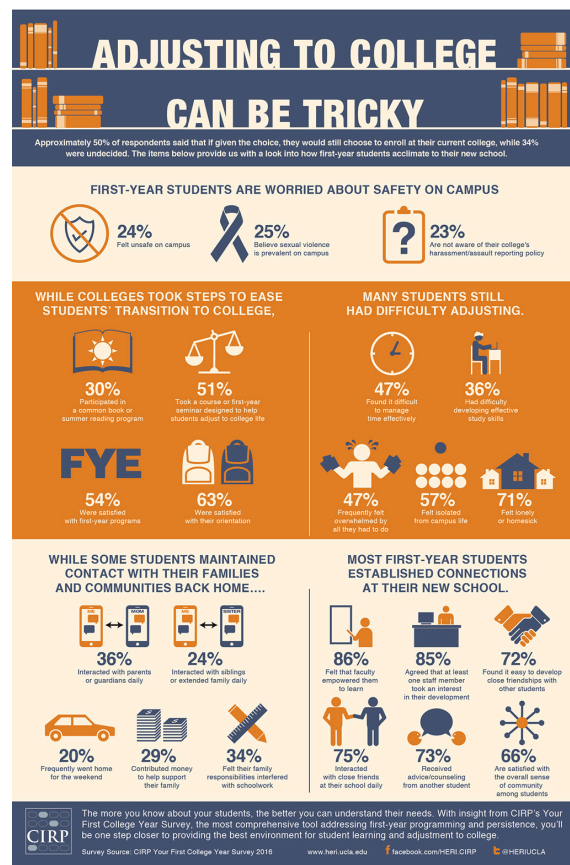
16.8 Opinion Editorials

Don't be like this. Use a convincing argument instead! Photo by Steve Johnson on Unsplash

A good opinion editorial (aka op ed) offers a perspective on a current item of interest to the readers of a specific publication. Hence, an understanding of **audience** is extremely important. Moreover, opinion pieces are the product of an individual, not a committee. That means that the author must insure his or her **voice** shines through and that the **tone** is appropriate for the topic of the piece.

Also, while it may seem obvious, it bears repeating: the best opinion pieces are lively, informative, and good pieces of writing.

Opinion editorials and other newspaper and magazine articles have **very short paragraphs**. In general, no more than two or three sentences make up a typical paragraph. Like other online writing, don't feel you need to keep your paragraphs unified and long. In opinion writing it is perfectly legitimate to begin new paragraphs often, even if it means continuing a thought begun in an earlier paragraph.

Another consideration about op ed writing is that you must **grab the reader's attention quickly**. Articles are meant to be read quickly, and rarely are they ever read again. And if an article is not interesting, readers generally will not bother finishing it.

A final consideration for op-ed pieces is that it must be **short and concise**. Although lengths of op-ed pieces in real newspapers vary—those in the New York Times may be longer than those in smaller papers, for example—you should waste no time in getting to your point.

What aspect of your research topic would make a good opinion piece?

Choose something you discovered from your research and that you have a strong opinion about. What could be a good argument you could make about that topic?

16.9 A Few Final Words

By now, you should know the importance of getting to know your **genre**. If you know what the genre constraints are before you begin writing *and* you are keeping your **audience** expectations in mind, you will save yourself a huge headache and avoid heavy usage of the delete button. Also, make sure that you are considering your own **character**-- whether you are writing as yourself or as a spokesperson for your company--and how your voice and tone could be perceived by your audience. Using **images** are powerful, but make sure they are consistent with the message and **narrative** you are attempting to deliver.

You've been doing all of these steps for a long time. Since you began asking mom or dad for a few bucks for the weekend or your boss for some time off. Since convincing a certain someone to date you. Since you started creating your perfect Instagram or TikTok persona. See . . . you are a natural. Now, go out and change the world!

References

The 2018 Sprout Social Index: realign and redefine. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://sproutsocial.com/index/

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