Real World Writing Assignments

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For several years, I have been interviewing people in various professions about their writing experiences in school and on the job. What you are about to read is a transcript of such an interview conducted at an NCTE Conference, “Assigning and Responding to Writing,” held at Colgate University. The panelists, all Colgate graduates, were chosen to represent the worlds of business, law, and medicine. Before they arrived at the Colgate conference, I sent them a list of questions I hoped would prompt them to tell compelling stories about their writing experiences (See Appendix). Before I speculate about their responses, I invite you to read the transcript to see what they remember about their college writing courses and how they describe the writing they must practice in their professions.

Panelists

Joseph F. Trimmer ('63) is Professor of English at Ball State University where he teaches courses in writing and cultural studies. He has written two textbooks on writing, Writing With a Purpose and The Riverside Reader.

Robert Otterbourg ('51) has worked as a newspaper reporter, public relations executive, and the principal of his own public relations firm, Otterbourg and Company. During his recent retirement, he has written two books, It's Never Too Late and Retire and Thrive.

Diane Ciccone ('74) has worked as an appellate for New York State's Attorney General, a litigator for the New York City Transit Authority and Wilson, Elser, Moskowitz, Edelinor and Dicker, and, for the past six years, has operated her own legal practice. She writes a weekly legal column in the Fort Greene News.

Patricia Batchelor Chess ('83) is on staff at the University of Rochester Hospital where she specializes in Neonatology. She is also on the faculty of Department of Pediatrics at the University of Rochester Medical School. She has published her scientific research in journals such as Pediatric Research and European Journal of Immunology.
Joe: What do you remember about how you were taught to write in college?

Bob: That’s easy. A big zero. I was never taught anything about writing at Colgate. Teachers gave me assignments in all my courses, but they presumed I knew how to write. Nobody suggested I change or revise my papers. It was simply trial and error. Same thing when I went to graduate school at Columbia, and, later, when I got into the newspaper business. No editor sat down with me and said, “Gosh, we like this story, but if you want to make it better, here’s what I’d do.”

Once an editor showed me how to use quotes better, how to fix my lead paragraph. But I never had any formal instruction. None of this one-on-one stuff. My generation learned to write by reading writers they enjoyed and copying their style. As a youngster, I happened to find Carl Sandburg. I enjoyed the way he wrote. I also enjoyed the way certain reporters used punchy sentences. That’s how I developed my style. By copying others.

Diane: My story is similar. I came to Colgate and had one English course. They presumed I knew how to write. Teachers would comment on the content of my papers. But as for style, structure and grammar—you either knew it or you didn’t. When I went to law school, they said, “It’s very important to know how to write,” but they didn’t teach me how. They taught me how to conduct research, but there’s a big gap between research and writing. It wasn’t until my second job that I learned how to write. In my first job, as a law clerk, I simply wrote opinions and the judge signed the paperwork. In my second job, I did appellate work. There, my supervising attorney told me, “It’s fine to copy opinions, but that’s not how lawyers write. You have to be persuasive, you have to make arguments, you have to be aggressive, and there are certain ways to do that.” She was the first person who ever talked to me about my writing and I had been out of law school for several years.

Patricia: I had a different experience, actually. I also took only one English course at Colgate and that’s because it was a requirement for medical school. But most of what I learned about writing I learned in my science courses. I would write out my lab experiments, and the professors would pick them apart section by section, pointing out what was wrong, how to correct it, and how to prove my case more effectively. I found that instruction helpful in my future work.

Joe: This conference deals with writing assignments. Do you remember any particular writing assignment you worked on at Colgate?

Bob: No. I can’t quote chapter and verse after 40 years.

Diane: I think the most challenging paper I had was in a chemistry course for nonmajors. I had to analyze information and then present it in a way to make an argument. I wrote about how what we eat affects the chemistry of our bodies. I don’t remember the grade, but I’m still interested in the subject today.

Patricia: I remember struggling through a whole semester of English. The teacher would give us an assignment, but no advice about how to initiate it. No help
about how to improve it. We'd just get a grade. But no real feedback. It was a very frustrating course. I got better writing instruction in Chemistry.

Joe: Let's talk a little bit about the way you write now. How has your writing evolved in the workplace?

Bob: I have had two careers. My job as a journalist evolved into a job in public relations. That's really why I'm here today. Because of my work in the business community. I wrote Corporate Annual Reports, corporate brochures, and speeches for corporate officers.

Diane: I think my writing has really evolved. When I left Colgate and law school, I wasn't sure I knew how to write. But once my supervising attorney started to critique my writing, I learned how to make all sorts of adjustments in my style. I realized that I had to persuade someone. I had to state my premise and convince you—if you are the judge—that my premise is correct. I had to be very aggressive, particularly when I suspected I had the losing position. I suppose I had to be a creative writer. If the law said XYZ and I had to convince you of ABC, then I had to be really creative.

Patricia: I had a similar experience coming out of college. I thought of myself as a hard core scientist and so shied away from writing. But then I realized that writing was essential to my career. I had to communicate with patients, other physicians, insurance firms, and even the federal government. So I needed to be good at getting my point across.

I have a dichotomous career because I am a clinician and a scientist, but my writing evolved along similar paths. As a physician in training, you learn to write up extremely meticulous evaluations of each patient. Ten pages was about the norm for a new patient. They were extremely tedious to write and nobody bothered to read them except your preceptor. It was a lesson to make sure you asked all the important diagnostic questions. But then you had to go on to the next step and compress that ten page essay into a half page summary that stated your diagnosis, your reasons for making it and what you were going to do about it.

Likewise, as a scientist, I often begin by writing a forty page manuscript about some experiment. But if I want to publish my findings in a journal, I have to condense all the wonderful information into a concise document. I also have to convince my scientific colleagues that I have completed the experiment in an appropriate manner and that my analysis makes sense.

Joe: Can we talk about "kinds" of writing? What types (or genres) of writing do you encounter every day in your specific fields?

Bob: Let's use one example. Most people have seen an annual report from a corporation. The numbers in that report are compiled by accountants, but I would write the front part where the corporation explains its achievements. I would work like a reporter—gathering background information, interviewing people—and then I would write a clear, concise report.

Next, my text would go through the corporate editing process. The lawyers would look at it and say, "You can't say that." The accountants would
look at it and say, “These figures aren’t quite right.” And then corporate management would look at it and say, “Well, you aren’t positive enough here.” What starts off as a really nice document ends up sounding like gobblegy goop.

The same thing happens with corporate speeches—although sometimes that works out a little better because you are writing for one person. The president of a company has to give a speech somewhere, and so you try to write something he wants to say. But he probably can’t resist showing your text to the lawyers and the accountants. Often, you are not very proud of the end product, but then the CEO gives the speech or signs the annual report, so your name never goes on it. Corporate culture encourages corporate authorship. That’s why most corporate documents read alike.

Diane: As a lawyer, I have to compose several different kinds of texts. I am sure everyone has seen a contract and said, “My God! What is this?” Or wills. These texts contain all the “wherefore clauses” that keep the average reader going around and around in circles. There is a current trend in legal writing called “Plain English” that encourages the kind of writing average readers can understand. But there are some issues that require you to use those “wherefore clauses” if the document is going to protect the client.

When I’m preparing a motion for a judge, I have to do some “case cites” that explain the legal basis for my position and convince the judge that my position is correct. When I’m writing to clients I have to prepare a report to tell them, “this is what I’ve done, this is what it means, this is where I think we are going, these are the strengths and weaknesses in our case, and this is how much I think you are going to be hit for.”

I also write a legal column for a newspaper in which I try to explain simple issues that lawyers often try to complicate. For example, I will tell people, “OK, this is why you need a will! When you die without a will, you can’t control where your things go. You may not have a million dollars, but you may have a favorite ring that you would like to give to somebody.” I really have to be clear about my audience in my column. I can talk or write to another lawyer, and use all sorts of buzz words and jargon to communicate effectively. But I can’t rely on those shortcuts when I write for the public.

Joe: I want to get back to your column, Diane, just as I’d like Bob to tell us about the kind of writing he is doing these days. But for now, let’s stay with the subject of the types of writing you encounter in your profession. Patricia?

Patricia: Again, I need to talk about my two professions. As a scientist, I do a lot of grant writing. I have to convince an agency to fund my research. I have to explain what my research is, why it’s important, and why I’m the individual best suited to do it. Once I get the money and perform the experiments, I have to report the results so that my scientific colleagues accept them as valid.

As a clinician, I write a lot of charts for patients. I have to use appropriate medical terms when I admit patients and diagnose their daily progress. I also write a lot of reports for insurance companies. Most physicians will tell you that this is the writing they hate most. We need to explain for every single
patient, for every single day, why that patient needs to be in the hospital. It’s amazing how insurance companies can misread your writing. Let’s say I have a baby on an ventilator who is totally dependent on intravenous feeding for nutrition. If I say that my patient is “stable” because she hasn’t changed from yesterday to today, the company will conclude that the patient is stable and therefore doesn’t need a ventilator.

Joe: Let’s talk about one of the issues Bob raised. To what extent do the types of writing in your profession require collaboration?

Bob: I have never been a collaborative writer. Other people have edited my stuff, but I never sat down in a committee and said, “Well, what are we going to say in this particular piece.” It never happened that way. I was given the assignment to fill the blank piece of paper. Then the editing process began. I had one client who said, “We are going to edit the devil out of your stuff. But we need somebody who can put the stuff on paper.” In the corporate world the hardest thing is to compact fifty thousand words into four thousand words. But someone has to do it. Then everybody sits around and says, “You used the wrong four thousand words.” That’s the easiest part of the game. Picking apart somebody else’s stuff. But it’s not collaboration.

Diane: I have never written collaboratively either. When I write motions or briefs, I may ask someone to write a piece of a document. When I was at the law firm, I had people underneath me research an issue and write me a memo of law. Then I would rework the memo into my brief. Most law firms now have something called a “Motion Bank.” You pull up a motion on the screen and say, “OK, this fits what I need.” Then you just kind of rearrange it to fit your argument. I guess that’s the closest we get to collaboration. I guess you could also call it plagiarism.

Patricia: In medicine, collaboration happens primarily in cases of ethical dispute or in very difficult cases that a single clinician isn’t sure how to solve. Of course, sometimes the family wants another opinion. But that type of collaboration is more a matter of communication than writing. Usually, the attending physician synthesizes all the information communicated at the meeting—or consultation—and then puts that information in the chart.

In science, collaborative writing is more common. In fact, if you are going to stay alive in science today, you really have to collaborate. The cut off line for grants is about nine percent. Nobody’s that good. So, you have to get involved with a group of strong investigators to survive. The mode of scientific collaboration varies, however. Sometimes, I will take other people’s ideas, incorporate them into my work and give them credit. Sometimes I will assist a group of scientists with their work and they will give me credit. Recently, I was involved in a multi-million dollar federal grant that was broken down into six projects. The principal investigator thought that our proposal should sound as if it were written by one person. I wrote my section and handed it over to this other investigator. But because he was not a specialist in my area, his rewrite of my proposal was not appropriate. After
several weeks of going back and forth, I finally said, “In order for this to be a valid piece of scientific work, I have to be allowed to write it myself.” The proposal no longer sounded like it was written by one person, but I think it was stronger as a result.

Any of you who have looked at scientific journals have noticed that some articles can have as many as five authors. What does authorship mean in such work? Usually, each author has to be involved in some aspect of the work, has to be knowledgeable about the work, and capable of presenting that work. But the order in which the authors are listed is the key to understanding who did what. The last position in the list is the place of honor and is reserved for the individual who came up with the idea. The first position is reserved for the “scutt puppy,” the graduate student, who did the hands-on experiment and drafted the paper. The people in between could be the guy in the lab next door who owns some special equipment you used or somebody who devised some technique you were able to incorporate into your research.

Joe: Patricia has suggested a kind of hierarchy in her field from scutt puppy to major researcher. Let’s talk a little about the risks and rewards of writing. How does writing measure success in your field?

Diane: When I was a law clerk, I had to read motions and briefs to decide who made the most persuasive argument. If I got a motion that went on and on, and buried its main point on page 10, then I would conclude that the writer was ineffective. An effective writer says, “OK, this is my strong point. I am going to be clear and concise and hit you with it up front. Then I’ll address the other issues, the minor issues later on.” If it takes you fifty words to say what you can say in ten, you won’t succeed.

Joe: How did you learn that?

Diane: Trial and error. I learned it from my supervisor, from watching other lawyers work, and from realizing that if I had to argue in court I would have to start off with my strongest suit. I never started off with my weak suit because then my opponent would jump all over it and I would never get to my strong suit. The same thing goes in writing. Why start off with a weak point? Start off with your strongest point and fill in the other stuff somewhere down the line.

Joe: Many writing teachers teach argument a little differently. We tell our students that the most important thing is to establish your persona as a reasonable citizen. We suggest that writers begin by acknowledging the claims of their opponent in a way that seems fair and objective. Then we suggest that they make the transition to their own position by pointing out the weaknesses in their opponent’s case.

Diane: When you look at the volume of paper that comes into a court, when you think about the hundreds of motions law clerks and judges must go through, you don’t want to spend fifty pages being reasonable about your opponent’s case. You want to make your case in ten. Because what’s going to happen is that the law clerk is going to sense where the point should be, and if it isn’t
there he is not going to read any more. If you try to be eloquent, you’ll never get your point across.

Joe: What about the risks and rewards of writing in the corporate world?
Bob: I am always amazed at the executives of corporations. They went to major universities and business schools, worked hard to achieve their position of leadership, and yet remain strangely inarticulate. They are good at speaking, sometimes, but I often wonder can they write, can they edit, can they make it shorter, clearer, more effective? A lot of these people come from sales or other areas where writing isn’t essential. Their attitude toward writing is, “We could do it ourselves, but that’s why we hired you.” It’s a question of time and effort. Writing takes time and effort. Executives would prefer to save time by paying for the efforts of a public relations firm. I suppose executives look at writing the way I look at mowing my lawn. I could mow it, or I could hire someone else to mow it. Of course, executives still have the last word on the text—just like I have the last word on my lawn. If it isn’t done right, it has to be done over.

Patricia: Well, of course, in science, particularly in the academy, it is publish or perish. Your superiors count the number of papers you publish. If you don’t write enough, you don’t survive. Recently, we recruited a full professor who was renowned in his field and eager to help other researchers. But because he spent most of his time collaborating, somewhere in the middle of the author list, he had to leave the university. He was not seen as a unique investigator with new ideas.

Joe: What about your clinical practice?
Patricia: It’s not as important there. You are still allowed to practice medicine if you can’t write. But imprecise writing can cause you ethical or legal problems. And, of course, if your writing is sloppy, you’ll spend a lot of time writing back and forth to the insurance companies.

Joe: Style manuals caution writers against expressing uncertainty in their writing. But some writers think it’s necessary to hedge, to moderate the claims of their argument. How important is such a strategy in your particular field?
Diane: In my profession, I would never want to write with any kind of uncertainty. I’m trying to convince you, whether you are the judge or the jury. I have to use powerful words. I can’t sound uncertain or if-ish or you won’t believe me.

Bob: When I was a journalist, I hedged my bets. If I was covering an important event, I’d never write that it was “the most outstanding event.” Because how would I know? When I got into the corporate world and I’d start to hedge, the CEO would look at my writing and say, “What are you doing here? We are the most outstanding company.” Corporations do not hedge. How are they going to sell you a widget if they say, “Ours is one of the better widgets on the market”?

Patricia: We hedge all the time. In medicine, it’s not important to know what the actual diagnosis is, but it is important to have the diagnosis somewhere on your differential list. There’s an old story about hoof beats, horses, and zebras.
It's probably horses, but you have to consider the possibility of zebras. In scientific writing, if you are really sure of your results, try to be as specific as possible. But be careful. If you present something as absolutely right, someone may prove you wrong five years later. Also, in grant writing, hedge a bit. Frequently, you've done all the experiments you propose to do in what's called preliminary data. What you are really asking for is money to go on to your next project and then use that project as your preliminary data for the next grant.

*Joe:* Let's talk about another stylistic issue. To what extent are you encouraged to use the first person and active voice in your fields?

*Bob:* I have strong feelings about this issue. Politicians are always saying, "We are running for public office." I always want to know who this we is. I don't like people hiding behind we's in political or corporate life. Even when I was in business, I'd always write to corporate officers, "Here's what I feel."

*Joe:* Did that freedom come as a result of your success?

*Bob:* Well, corporate reports are always written in we. The company does things. We are pleased to pay a dividend. Or we are pleased to announce a new product line. But as you get older and more accepted in your particular field, you can break the rules and take more liberties with your writing. Now that I am retired and working as a free lance writer, I always write in first person. In my books I give my advice on subjects I've researched. In *It's Never Too Late* I focus on mid-life career changes, and *Retire and Thrive* I deal with corporate downsizing and early retirement.

*Diane:* I don't have a we problem now that I am working for myself. I use the first person if I am writing to a client. But if I'm writing a brief, it's my client's case that's the issue, so I need to follow court procedures. I can't use first person there.

*Patricia:* In medicine, the chart is always written in third person. If you are writing to other physicians, it's first person. Scientific writing is actually changing. It used to be third person. If you didn't write in third person, your paper was thrown out the window. Now it's commonplace to see first person. What is taboo is switching back and forth. If you start in first, stay in first.

*Joe:* We have been trying to establish some kind of connection between school and career. Your experience suggests that people learn to write in other environments.

*Bob:* Let me respond to that in a personal way. I learned to write when I was at Colgate, but not in the classroom. I didn't have much money, but I did have a girlfriend. I used to write her letters, long letters. My father used to write me long letters when his secretary went out to lunch. And I'd write him back. Then I went in the Air Force and I was in Korea during the '50s. I'd write letters to all sorts of people. I think that's how my writing style began.

*Diane:* I learned to write by writing. And the more I practiced, the more comfortable I got. I have learned a lot about writing from writing my column, because I have to explain important issues to people who are not lawyers. Part
of my audience is a gay population with a high percentage HIV and AIDS. As an attorney I can provide information and comfort to someone going through the problems of disease. I can show them tools to make their life, their partner’s life, and their families’ lives easier in times of legal entanglement. I’ll write a column on something as simple as a—health care proxy. People need to know what to do when the doctor says, “I don’t care if your partner doesn’t want to be on life support, I’m going to put him on it anyway.”

**Joe:** Are you suggesting that we don’t need college writing courses, or that we are teaching the wrong things in writing courses?

**Bob:** I’ve never taught writing, but I know the hardest thing to do is face that blank screen and get something on it. I think your job as writing teachers is to help students take that initial step. Once they have written something, you can help them shape it.

**Diane:** I think you should teach your students that writing is just another form of communication. But it’s a special form of communication. It requires them to make a point and make it clearly. As a member of the Colgate University Board of Trustees, I often get letters from professors. These letters are often five pages long and very eloquent. I’m sure there is a point in those five pages, but it’s often hard to find. My point to you is to teach effective communication. Teach your students to get to the point, to be clear and concise.

**Patricia:** I would add “stress good grammar.” Grammar may be on the bottom of most writing teachers’ list of objectives. It’s boring, mundane. But if you have to read a manuscript full of run on sentences, and split infinitives, the reading will be very painful.

**Joe:** In other sessions at this conference, we have been talking about the types of writing assignments we should give our students. Should we ask them to explore their personal experiences, learn the forms of academic discourse, or practice the types of writing they will do in their careers—corporate reports, legal briefs, grant proposals? I suspect that we do not need to choose, absolutely, among these forms. We can teach all of them in some sort of sequence. But maybe I should ask each of you. What particular kind of writing assignments should we give our students?

**Bob:** Well, there are writing assignments, and then there are writing assignments. Are you asking what kind of assignments you should give to potential writers, or what kind of assignments you should give to professionals who have to write in some sort of applied environment?

**Joe:** Both, I suppose.

**Diane:** Well, for the law the most important assignments are those that require students to write aggressively and persuasively. It’s one thing to look at something and comment on it. It’s another thing to look at something, analyze it, and then persuade someone that your particular position is the most compelling.

**Patricia:** This may sound silly, but I wish someone had taught me how to communicate better in a formal letter. What’s the appropriate heading? How
do you finish it up? Where do you break your paragraphs? In medicine, we write letters every single day—to patients, other clinicians, insurance companies. Students should be taught how to write letters so that they know how to report information accurately and clearly.

Bob: After a lifetime of writing, I can’t suggest one kind of assignment that will transform people into effective writers. I guess I need to go back to the blank piece of paper or the blank screen. You have got to convince your students that they are not as inarticulate as they think. The most difficult writing assignment I ever had was as a young second lieutenant in an air squadron. We lost one of our pilots. My commanding officer knew I liked to write so he asked me to write the condolence letter to the family. How do you write a letter to a mother and father who have just lost their twenty-four year old son in a jet crash? That blank piece of paper sat on my desk for many hours. But eventually I had to say something. I had to commit my thoughts to a piece of paper. Any assignment that forces students to do that is productive. That’s the whole secret of writing.

I am always surprised when I read transcripts of my interviews with professionals. As my long list of questions suggests (See Appendix), I expect to uncover detailed information about every aspect of their experiences with writing. But I have conducted enough interviews to realize that working systematically through a set of questions is counterproductive. I loom as the relentless inquisitor and they lapse into reluctant witnesses. So, surprisingly, I have better luck when I simplify the assignment—when I ask my panelists brief, open-ended questions that invite them to tell their favorite stories.

One of their favorite stories describes how little they learned in their college writing class. They may remember having difficulty with some aspect of grammar (Diane) or some particular instructor (Patricia), but, for the most part, they readily acknowledge that their college writing instruction was vague, incomplete—or as Bob says, “A big zero.”

One way to read these stories is to see them as part of an institutional history. Colgate University likes to imagine itself as teaching the top two percent of America’s college applicants. Such students, so the story goes, already know how to write. And so, for most of its history, Colgate University offered no composition courses—although writing was regularly assigned and rigorously graded in most courses. Bob, Diane, and I are products of that institutional policy. In the 1980s, Colgate decided that its students could profit from intensive writing instruction, and so developed its innovative Interdisciplinary Writing Program—a cluster of courses taught outside the English Department by an interdisciplinary writing faculty. Patricia is a product of that program.

Another way to read these stories is to see them as part of a disciplinary history. In the first half of this century, teaching writing was teaching rules. Students were encouraged to memorize manuals, such as Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* and as Diane points out, “you either knew it or you didn’t.” But
in the second half of the century, composition began to redefine itself as a discipline. Employing the techniques of literary analysis, teaching writing became teaching models. Students were asked to analyze professional essays, such as E.B. White’s “Once More to the Lake,” and then imitate its distinctive features. As Bob explains, “my generation learned to write by reading writers they enjoyed and copying their style.”

In the 1970s teaching writing became teaching a process—a complex, recursive process that evolved through the stages of planning, drafting and revising. Students were taught to measure the progress of their texts and the texts of others by using a variety of rhetorical strategies. In one popular assignment, students were asked to compare six drafts of E.B. White’s essay on the “Moon Landing” to determine how he revised his subject, audience and purpose. Patricia seems familiar with the process approach when she criticizes her English teacher for failing to offer her advice about how to plan her essays and praises her science teacher for helping her revise the drafts of her lab reports.

In the 1990s teaching writing became teaching intertextuality—disclosing the way writing was socially constructed and economically situated in the flow of cultural production. An engaging assignment asks students to take E.B. White’s essay, “Democracy,” out of a college anthology and place it back in its original context in the “Talk of the Town” section of the July 3, 1943 issue of The New Yorker. Then students are encouraged to see how the texts that precede and follow the essay—an ad illustrating a rich woman in a fur coat and an article featuring a white woman’s conversation with her black maid—raise troublesome questions about class, gender, and race seemingly overlooked by White’s essay. Although none of the panelists have been taught this version of college composition, they seem familiar with its language as they discuss how their texts are created and positioned in their professional cultures.

Rehearsing this disciplinary history reveals that although teachers have aspired to teach the same subject (writing)—or even the same writer (E.B. White)—their practice has produced a muddle of rules, models, strategies and theories. Occasionally students can clear up this muddle by asking each new writing teacher, “What do you want?” More often, they remain confused by the clutter of conflicting assumptions and expectations embedded in each college composition assignment. No wonder graduates, when asked what they learned about writing in college, seem unable to make it all cohere. They smile and say, simply, “A big zero.”

The other story professionals like to tell is how much they have learned about writing as they have struggled to survive on the job. Often these stories begin with a sense of betrayal. As they encounter their first major writing assignment, professionals, like Diane, suddenly realize that their education has not prepared them to write in the real world. The kinds of writing (corporate reports, legal briefs, clinical charts) are shaped by all sorts of silent conventions. Unless a mentor (Bob’s editor, Diane’s supervisor, Patricia’s preceptor) reveals the tricks of the trade, these professionals will never succeed.
But that is how these stories end. These professionals do succeed because, as their stories love to point out, they have been resourceful. They have learned to write by writing—by learning from their mistakes, by observing the success of others, by attending to the advise of their supervisors, and by studying the cultural network that connects their work to the work of others in their profession. Their stories are filled with inside information about how to assess rhetorical situations (Bob), compose compelling arguments (Diane), and earn the respect of peers (Patricia).

These success stories prompt writing teachers to ask professionals the inevitable questions at the end of the interview: What advice do you have for us? What should we teach our students about writing to prepare them for your profession? Their responses are intriguing: Patricia suggests we teach rules (grammar) or models (letter); Bob encourages us to teach a process (filling the blank page); and Diane wants us to teach a form of intertextuality (how to produce and position arguments in a culture of arguments).

In the aftermath of this interview, as writing teachers and panelists swapped stories about writing, there was room for another surprise. Writing teachers, always adept at finding hidden meaning, saw a connection between the stories about what professionals did not learn in college and what they have been forced to learn in their careers. They have learned how to learn. Their college composition course might not have taught them the specific rules, models, strategies and theories they needed to succeed in their career, but those courses did teach them that writing situations were shaped by rules, models, strategies and theories. Their job was to learn how to find this information and adapt it to a specific writing assignment.

Given this revelation, one teacher suggested that a version of an opening line from an old story might still hold as a conclusion to these stories about writing in school and writing on the job: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that students in search of a good career must be in want of a college composition course.”

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Notes


Appendix
REAL WORLD WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
SCHOOL (college student)

1. What do you remember about how you were taught writing in college? Did your professors teach, or merely assign writing? Did your professors help you revise, or did they merely correct your essays? Was there any difference between the way you were taught writing by English (or writing) teachers and the way you were taught writing by the teachers in your major field?

2. What specific writing assignments do you remember? Why do you remember them? Which ones gave you the most difficulty, the most satisfaction? What factors prompted your response?

3. What skills or strategies were buried in particular writing assignments? What did your teachers assume you knew, or expect you to accomplish? Did they “spell out” these assumptions and expectations, or were you expected to figure them out on your own? How did you learn how to do it?

4. Did you ever help other students with their writing assignments? What seemed to be the most persistent difficulty they had working their way through particular writing assignments?

REAL WORLD (APPRENTICE)

1. What are the major genres of writing in your field? How do these genres compare to the genres you were taught in college? Who taught you the rules of each genre? To what extent must you adhere to these rules? When are you allowed to break them?

2. How varied are the writing assignments in your field? Do you see these assignments in some kind of sequence? How would you arrange them according to difficulty, complexity, significance, or status?

3. What do you remember about the FIRST writing assignment you were given (or gave yourself) in the real world?

4. In what ways did you feel as though you were applying writing skills and strategies you had been taught in college?

5. What new skills and strategies did you have to learn to complete the assignment? Who taught you these skills and strategies?

6. To what extent were these skills and strategies merely more advanced writing procedures—procedures required in any advanced writing assignment—and to what extent were these procedures unique to the culture of your work environment?

7. Who graded your first real world writing assignment? What criteria did they use? What was at stake? Were you allowed to fail or “do it over”?

8. How would you compare your learning/writing process as an apprentice student (1st year liberal arts student, 1st year student in your major, 1st year in law school, med school, business school, J-school etc.), and your learning/writing process as an apprentice worker in law, medicine, or business? Were you adequately prepared for the transition from school to work place? What were the biggest writing surprises?
REAL WORLD (practitioner)

1. What specific writing assignment do you remember as marking your transition from apprentice to practitioner in your field?
2. What kinds of writing assignments did you discover defined the successful practitioner?
3. Who gave you these assignments—or did you make them up on your own? Who measured the success of your writing? What kind of criteria did they use? What was the price of success and failure?
4. Where did you do most of your writing once you became a successful practitioner? What new writing tools, support and assistance came with “making it”?
5. How much collaborative (team) writing was involved in your assignments? What did you learn about yourself as a person, practitioner, and writer when you worked collaboratively?
6. Where did you go for advice about the planning, drafting, and revising of your writing assignments—secretary, research assistant, colleague, editor, boss? What sort of advice did these people contribute? In what ways was this advice similar to the advice you received from your college teachers?
7. What kind of skills and strategies did you use to complete writing assignments for clients or other outside audiences? How did you alter these skills and strategies for inside audiences? How did you adjust your writing when you addressed employees (below), colleagues (equal level), and superiors (above)?
8. As you moved from apprentice to practitioner to expert, how did your writing assignments change? To what extent did you still author your own texts? To what extent did you become a reader of other writers’ texts?

REAL WORLD (expert)

1. How much writing do you do as an acknowledged expert in your field? How much writing is part of the daily routine of all experts in your field? What kinds of writing are you expected to do? Who generates, defines, reads, evaluates these writing assignments?
2. How does freedom factor into the way you design and execute writing assignments when you are an expert? What kind of risks are you allowed to take? What writing risks have you taken? Which ones failed, which ones succeeded? Why?
3. What changes have you seen in the way writing is assigned, drafted, revised, and evaluated in your field? How has the electronic media prompted these changes? What has your profession gained and lost by implementing these changes?
4. How is the concept of originality defined in your profession? As an expert, is it still important to “do your own work”? What kind of writing wins you the most points—creative, original work at the margins, or conventional, solid work at the center? Who gets to say what’s original and what’s conventional?
5. If you were to assemble a “writing portfolio” of your best work, what sort of writing assignments would you feature?
6. What advice would you give writing teachers about how to design writing assignments to prepare students for success in your field?

7. What skills and strategies should be embedded in school writing assignments to prepare students for real world writing assignments?

8. How should writing teachers prepare their students to respond to the evaluation of their writing? How have you overcome failure? How have you dealt with success? How have you learned to adapt to a constantly changing work and writing environment?

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**Winterowd Award Winners Announced**

The annual W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published in 1997 was awarded to Mutnick, Deborah for *Writing in an Alien World: Basic Writing and the Struggle for Equality in Higher Education*.

The 1996 W. Ross Winterowd Award was awarded to James A. Berlin for *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*, and Honorable Mention was awarded to John Schilb for *Between the Lines: Relating Composition Theory and Literary Theory*.

This annual award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd. Professor Winterowd presented the 1997 awards during the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition meeting at the CCCC Convention in Chicago.

Send nominations for the 1998 W. Ross Winterowd Award to Gary A. Olson; Department of English; University of South Florida; Tampa, Florida; 33620.