Understanding Purpose

Why do you write? Why should anyone write? The obvious answer to that question—to communicate with others—is also, in a way, not an answer. Why should you want to communicate with anybody? What’s the point?

Isn’t communication the basis of human motivation and activity? It’s what we do, like breathing, eating, and watching TV.

**Principle 1: Communication is the basis of human relations, and good human relations are the aim and purpose of all human communication activity.**

Ideally, we communicate in order to make our lives good/better, for me, you, all of us. Thus, communication and ethics are integrally related topics—and that explains why ethical considerations are an important aspect of everything we will talk about in this class.

But that’s communication generally—and “good human relations” are an ultimate, not an immediate, goal. People usually have no trouble seeing the value and importance of personal human communication, but they less frequently assign similar value or purpose to *written* communication. Writing is seen as more of a chore—a necessary task perhaps, but one to be avoided when at all possible. We need to ask the same basic question about purpose when we pull up a chair to do professional writing. What is the purpose of business writing, technical writing, promotional writing? What is my purpose in writing this memo? in producing this progress report? in uploading this web page?

**Principle 2: The ultimate goals of professional writing are to effect positive action and to promote better relations between people in the workplace and outside it.**

Whatever the specific document, your writing task is to improve relations between yourself and your co-workers, between your department and other departments in your company, between your company and its clients and customers, between your company and society. You can define “better” in lots of ways—but “better” certainly includes the ideas of “happier and more positive.” The job of every professional writer is to produce writing that serves the needs of readers both within and outside an organization.

Another point about writing: It’s not “just words”; it’s also action. Professional writing does not refer only to the words on a page or to the document that gets stuffed in the file cabinet. Professional writing is also action, action directed at some readers in an effort to effect some positive change. Professional writing does something—and that “something” should be a positive good for some people (including yourself). People who think of writing only as words tend to think that writing and communication are of limited value—“mere words” and “talk is cheap.” But if you view writing as an action that attempts to produce positive change in people, then you realize that writing can be an extremely important means for achieving better human relations.
Rhetoric of Professional Writing

Principle 3: Every document you produce will have multiple purposes.

You have your own purposes for writing: you write to secure your job or to get an A in your report writing class; you write to justify your work to your supervisor; you write to explain a new policy to employees; you write to promote a product or service of your company. You write so that you will be rewarded and promoted, so that your company will thrive, so that your co-workers will be happier and more productive, so that your clients and customers will be satisfied, so that the public will benefit. All these purposes and multiple audiences become entwined in any workplace writing situation—and you have to be aware of how they interact and sometimes even conflict. Ethical issues can arise between competing “goods”: between what is “good” for your company and what is good for the public; between an immediate here-and-now good and a long-term good; between what is good for you versus what might be good for your company.

The Purposes of Professional Writing

We have talked about the ultimate goals of communication, but let’s consider some of your more specific and immediate aims when you set out to write. Communication theory typically distinguishes various aims or purposes or documents such as the ones discussed below.

One traditional distinction between business writing and technical writing has been that business writing is more persuasive than informative, while technical writing is more informative than persuasive. The prejudice goes something like this: Business people use style—the smile, the handshake, the sharp suit or dress—to get things done; technical writers use facts. But this distinction has to do more with style and tone than with the aim relative to readers or with what actually happens in documents. In fact, all professional writing aims to effect change, through both persuasive and informative strategies. All professional writing has the following aims, to a greater or lesser degree.

To Earn or Maintain Good Will

Do you write thank-you notes to your employees and co-workers? praise them for their good work? ask them how they’re doing? Good professional writing develops and maintains positive relations with others. Even if your sales letter doesn’t make an immediate sale, that doesn’t mean it’s not effective—if it helps establish rapport with a potential client or customer, if it creates “good will,” if it opens a line of communication and trust with another. International business communicators have long recognized the importance of “just getting to know” someone else. That is an important and worthy aim of communication: developing good relations and establishing a line of communication, trust, and good will. In situations involving difficult negotiations or a complex problem or a contentious issue, just figuring out how to sit down and talk with one another is a crucial first step.
Rhetoric of Professional Writing

To Persuade

Ultimately, all professional writing has as its aim changing some audience. You want your readers to act in some specified way: to approve funding for your project, to purchase a new product or service, to hire new employees, to reward your work. Persuasion refers to the intention of effecting a change in an audience; moving readers to action is the crux of the persuasive aim.

Persuasion is not confined to advertising, sales letters, web sites. When you write a recommendation report you are also persuading, or arguing, that a certain course of action would be in the best interests of the company to pursue. In a lab report, you are trying to convince your engineering professor that the lab was appropriately and successfully completed and that you did a competent job with the report: the action you are hoping for is success (an A). Even though the report write-up may use a strictly analytical or descriptive style, there is still a persuasive aim in the document. Professional writing seldom only informs. There is probably no such thing as pure, unadulterated information. (Even the phone book, a neutral listing of names and addresses, is an effort by the phone company to get you to use phone services.)

When persuading an audience, you have to be especially alert to the potential for manipulation. Are you providing your readers with all the information they need to make an informed decision—or are you withholding vital information? (In your lab report, did you report findings that did not fit the expected answer? Did you report your mistakes?) Is what you are persuading an audience toward in their best interests—and how do you know that?

To Inform

Professional writing always informs: it provides new information to readers who want and would benefit from having that information. In a resume, you hope to persuade an employer to hire you—but you do that by providing basic information about where you’ve worked, where you earned your college degree, what you majored in. In a sales letter intending to convince a potential client to order parts from your company, you achieve that aim in part by providing information—such as product specifications—which allows the audience to make an informed decision. A report recommending that your company enter the world of e-commerce—that is, sell its services to customers via the Internet—provides information about how e-commerce has worked for other companies, about the benefits and disadvantages of such a move, about issues of security for online credit card transactions. A table of data arranges information in a form that readers can readily access and understand.
To Amuse, Entertain, Please, Appeal

Entertainment is—probably rightfully—not usually thought of as a primary aim of professional writing. But can’t a report exhibit a sense of humor? Maybe more reports would be read if they did. Letters and e-mail can certainly convey personality, irony, humor. Web pages and reports can use color to jazz up an otherwise black-and-white document.

Professional writing can certainly use literary and aesthetic devices in circumstances where that is appropriate. The design of documents pertains not only to readability and accessibility of information, but also to aesthetic appeal. Font choices can make a report seem professional or amateurish, interesting to read or dull. You can use metaphors, analogies, and other figurative devices to make a point. A carefully crafted sentence which makes its point both gracefully and forcefully can be appreciated for its aesthetic value. Sometimes the best way to be informative or persuasive is simply to tell a story rather than write in some formal or official analytic style. Sometimes doing the unexpected or the unconventional is a good idea.

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