

CASLL on "Professional Writing"

In July of 1998 there was a discussion, on the listserv of the Canadian Association for the Study of Language and Learning, aka "Inkshed," about nature and definition of "professional writing." This is an attempt to make that discussion more easily readable, by eliminating headers and other matter, cutting back on "included quotations," reformatting for readability, and putting the messages in actual chronological order rather than according to the "date stamps," which are not always accurate and which ignore time zones. This edited version will, I expect, be available in print form in the *Inkshed Newsletter*.

Participants in the discussion included, in alphabetical order (linked to their email addresses):

[Kathryn Alexander](#), [Marcy Bauman](#), [Rick Coe](#), [Brenton Faber](#), [Roger Graves](#), [Russ Hunt](#), [Rob Irish](#), [Anthony Paré](#), [Christine Skolnik](#), [Tania Smith](#) and [Graham Smart](#)

The discussion as it exists unedited is available on [the CASLL Archive](#). Here, it begins with a sort of summary index; each name is linked to the posting it describes, but you can simply page down through the document and read the discussion in order.

I have already edited in a similar way the discussion, in some ways begun here, on the status of the student "literary essay," which is archived in the July 1998 log of the CASLL list, and was included in the Autumn/Winter '98 issue of the [print Inkshed Newsletter](#).

Date: Wed, 12 Aug 1998

[Graham Smart](#) asks for help in figuring out how people define "professional writing"

Date: Thu, 13 Aug 1998

[Rick Coe](#) proposes a simple definition: done as part of professional practice

[Christine Skolnick](#) raises the question of the relation between professional writing and professional development

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998

[Russ Hunt](#) wonders whether maybe it's just writing you get paid to do?

[Tania Smith](#) suggests that professional writing should be more central to what we do than it is, and that it cuts across disciplines or professions

[Russ](#) suggests the definition should include both writers and professionals

[Brenton Faber](#) expands the definition of "professional"

[Graham](#) says what he's really looking for is more of a semantic map than a definition

[Graham](#) explains some of the immediate context of his question

[Marcy Bauman](#) distinguishes between professionals as writers and writers as professionals

[Tania](#) calls for more respect for professional writers and professional writing

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998

[Russ](#) explains that he was extending the definition, not excluding or denigrating professional writers

Date: Sun, 16 Aug 1998

[Christine](#) describes the status of provisional processes in her professional writing teaching

Date: Mon, 17 Aug 1998

[Brenton](#) discusses the nature and origin of "professional status"

[Graham](#) opts for inclusive definitions

[Kathryn Alexander](#) discusses professional writing as that done where the text is a professional tool

Date: Tue, 18 Aug 1998

[Graham](#) agrees with Kathryn's nuancing of the discussion

[Anthony Paré](#) points out that many professional writers wouldn't characterize what they're doing as "writing"

Date: Wed, 19 Aug 1998

[Russ](#) discusses how "writing" got to be defined as what happens in English class

[Rob Irish](#) discusses assumptions toward writing, and how "professional" is used as an honorific

[Roger Graves](#) queries our use of "professional" as a god-term

Text starts here

Date: Wed, 12 Aug 1998

From: Graham Smart

Subject: defining Professional Writing

Folks,

I'm teaching a graduate seminar in Professional Writing Theory at Purdue this fall. One of the first issues I want to look at in the seminar is the question of how to define "Professional Writing." As grist for the mill, I thought I'd ask a number of people in the field to define what they mean by the term. I wonder whether you'd like to venture taking a stab at describing in a sentence or two (or three or four) what "Professional Writing" means, as you see it? Thanks a lot. I'll be happy to share the results of the exercise with you.

Date: Thu, 13 Aug 1998

From: richard coe

Subject: Re: defining Professional Writing

This may seem dumb, but how about writing done as part of one's professional practice?

Of course, that still leaves the questions, what is writing and what is a profession? Presumably the answers to those questions are not too different in this context than in others.

Or is the question, how is professional writing different from academic writing, literary writing, political writing, etc.? Or, to put it another way, what is the purpose of your question? what do you expect to accomplish in the seminar by posing this question?

As Burke emphasizes, abstract terms are defined only dialectically, i.e., only in contrast with other abstract/dialectical terms. So until we know what contrary you have in mind for "professional writing," we will have multiple and varying responses to this query. But if we agree, for instance, that in this seminar the point is to distinguish professional writing from, say, academic and literary writing, then we can probably reach something approaching consensus.

Date: Thu, 13 Aug 1998
From: Christine Skolnik
Subject: Re: defining Professional Writing

One of the issues that interests me most as a teacher is the relationship between professional writing and professional development. This is an indirect way to go at a definition, but I think the various ways of teaching professional writing say something about the various ways it can be defined: Some courses focus on standard genres/formats for novices, while others teach rhetorical strategies assuming that novices becoming managers need more rhetorical awareness; still others focus on big-picture, ethical issues placing students in the position of corporate leaders and policy makers, or at least consultants/spokespeople. While I don't like the hierarchical bent of this description, I think the question of writing for professional/career development is an important one. I, personally, prefer to subordinate issues of form and genre to rhetorical and ethical issues. Change is the only constant: writers in the professions, I think, need to be able to adapt to volatile technical and economic environments. So for me professional writing is less about particular genres and conventions and more about rhetoric and ethics.

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998
From: Russ Hunt
Subject: professional writing

As usual, Rick raises important questions.

This may seem dumb, but how about writing done as part of one's professional practice?

This would, I'd think, include things like record-keeping notes, exploratory writing, journals and logs, etc. . . . all of which are appropriate to the *study* of professional writing (I think of Pete Medway's work on architecture students' notebooks), but which aren't really so appropriate to the *teaching* of professional writing. So my question is really, is Graham more centrally concerned with the study of how writing is used in professions, or is this primarily a course in which people will learn how to *do* professional writing (it's hard for me to imagine a course in which you learned how to do the wonderful stuff Pete's architecture students do . . .).

This may seem just as dumb: is professional writing writing you get paid to do?

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998
From: "Tania S. Smith"
Subject: Re: defining Professional Writing

Graham,

I was surprised at the responses so far, because I thought the answer would be obviously the same as mine. Professional writing is, like Russ says, "writing you get paid to do". But I think it's more than that. I think a degree or course in "professional writing" should qualify a person to write for pay, for example, as a freelance writer, editor, and proofreader-- a person who can make a profession out of writing! A writing career that you can count on-- usually not of the "creative" writing type, because it's rare one can make a career out of that. Being a professional writer means usually dealing with non-fiction prose such as newspaper/magazine journalism, academic theses, technical manuals, business proposals. I think such a course/program is wider than a journalism program, and develops more non-fiction writing skill than a traditional English Literature program does.

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998
From: Russ Hunt
Subject: Re: defining Professional Writing

Tania says,

Professional writing is, like Russ says, "writing you get paid to do". But I think it's more than that. I think a degree or course in "professional writing" should qualify a person to write for pay, for example, as a freelance writer, editor, and proofreader -- a person who can make a profession out of writing!

Well, it seems to me this is actually *less* than "writing you get paid to do." A lawyer, an insurance agent, a social worker, an architect, do what *I'd* call "professional writing," and get paid specifically to do it -- briefs, reports to clients, recommendations to authorities, proposals . . . etc., etc. They're not "hired guns," in the sense that they're hired *just* to write (as, e.g., a tech writer at a software firm would be) but it seems to me what they do is professional writing. Or at least an argument can be made that it is.

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998
From: Brenton Faber
Subject: defining Professional Writing

On Fri, 14 Aug 1998, Russ Hunt wrote:

Tania says, Professional writing is, like Russ says, "writing you get paid to do". But I think it's more than that. I think a degree or course in "professional writing" should qualify a person to write for pay, for example, as a freelance writer, editor, and proofreader -- a person who can make a profession out of writing! Well, it seems to me this is actually less than "writing you get paid to do." A lawyer, an insurance agent, a social worker, an architect, do what I'd call "professional writing," and get paid specifically to do it -- briefs, reports to clients, recommendations to authorities, proposals . . . etc., etc. They're not "hired guns," in the sense that they're hired just to write (as, e.g., a tech writer at a software firm would be) but it seems to me what they do is professional writing. Or at least an argument can be made that it is.

I think Russ has a good point here, that a more accurate use of "professional" would need to go beyond "someone who gets paid to do something." In fact, most of the literature I've read on professionalism suggests (ironically) just the opposite, that a professional is someone who does not sell their labour on the market but rather is reimbursed for their access to and distribution of specialized, elite knowledge. So, a professor is not paid by the hour but is reimbursed at a fixed rate because of the knowledge that person controls and shares. (indeed if we were paid by the hour.....!)

A professional is someone who has access to elite (socially important) knowledge and thereby exchanges access to that knowledge for financial security. Thus, a professional does not barter on the market for fees or wages. This is what would separate "professional" from "freelance," "entrepreneur," or "creative writer" since each of those writers must barter and negotiate fees. Professionals (traditionally) command a fixed salary. Professional writing is writing that supports and codifies a certain body of knowledge as both elite (restricted) and necessary to the functioning of society.

This is what makes recent changes to medicine, law, and other "professions" so interesting since they are being required to either work for hourly wages, or compete on the market for fees. At the same time, more technologies are making "specialized knowledge" more and more accessible for people, leaving out the professional as gatekeeper. (please email me separately if you find this interesting)

Finally, as Graham, and other Canadians working here in the US know, a "professional" is really one of the 41 categories that qualify for TN visa status according to the INS and Revenue Canada!

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998
From: Graham Smart
Subject: Re: defining Professional Writing

Rick,

Thanks for responding to my request. (And thanks as well to the other people that have too.) I want to answer your question about the seminar I'll be teaching.

Or is the question, how is professional writing different from academic writing, literary writing, political writing, etc.? Or, to put it another way, what is the purpose of your question? what do you expect to accomplish in the seminar by posing this question?

What I *don't* want to do is elicit or work towards one "right" definition of PW. Indeed, perhaps I shouldn't be using the word "define" at all. What I have in mind is more of a collaborative project (in the spirit of St. Thomas's Aquinas approach) to map out some of the various meanings that people in the field appear to ascribe to the term. Why would I want to do this? In the first instance, it's so that when we use the term PW ourselves in the seminar or come across it in readings, we'll have some sense of the range of possible meanings being invoked by the speaker or writer (and, perhaps, from the context be able to get a little more closely aligned with the speaker/writer's intention). In the longer term, I want the students to be able to handle themselves in job interviews for positions involving PW and, even now at this point in their careers, to know how to place and position their work at conferences or in publications.

By the way, I think it would be interesting to do some similar mapping of frequently used terms such as "rhetoric" (e.g., is it the art of persuasion or, more broadly, the activity of accomplishing something through language and/or other symbol-based representations?), "discourse," and "empirical."

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998
From: Graham Smart
Subject: Re: professional writing

Russ,

To respond to your question:

my question is really, is Graham more centrally concerned with the study of how writing is used in professions, or is this primarily a course in which people will learn how to do professional writing (it's hard for me to imagine a course in which you learned how to do the wonderful stuff Pete's architecture students do . . .).

The seminar will look at how writing is used in the workplace/professions, rather than try to teach how to do professional writing. However, I will be asking the participants to do some on-site research looking at a particular genre in a professional/organizational setting of their choosing; they'll each be examining some socio-cultural aspect of a genre and then writing this up, hopefully as a conference paper or publication.

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998
From: Marcy Bauman
Subject: Re: professional writing

On Fri, 14 Aug 1998, Graham Smart wrote:

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In any case, it might be useful to draw a distinction between the kind of writing Tania identified, and that Russ called "gun-for-hire" writing, and the kind that's normally done by people in the course of their profession, even though they aren't primarily identified as *writers* per se. In the first case, writing often involves a complicated series of relationships with "content specialists" - the people who are expert at what the gun-for-hire is writing about -- and possibly editors, too. In the second, while those relationships may form, they aren't necessarily an integral part of the work.

I'm sure there are other differences as well . . .

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998
From: "Tania S. Smith"
Subject: Re: defining Professional Writing

Oh my goodness . . .

It must be my youth and naiveté, but I was hardly expecting to get this kind of response *from CASLL people* toward the idea of freelancing as opposed to professionalism. . . . I, who aspire to become a professional writer besides becoming a professOR, feel surprised at being pushed beyond the pale of an acceptable (lofty? elite?) "professionalism" because of my suggestion that one could make a profession out of linguistic and rhetorical skill and the ability to adjust to a variety of discourses and content areas. Why must such laudable, useful, and, yes, "elite" skill and knowledge NOT be a profession? The word "profession" conjures up in me the idea of specialization and advanced skill and knowledge, and when it is applied to a field of work, it grants status and respect to its members. Denying such a field of work that requires such lengthy training and broad knowledge the title "professional" seems to deny it status and respect. Why must freelancing in the field of writing frequently conjure up an image of the mercenary (hired gun)? I now recall an acquaintance of mine calling it "literary prostitution" as well. There's a terrible immoral connotation in such metaphors that I'd rather not have anything to do with. I think such judgments are not based on the type of work itself, but on its relation to the context of university disciplines and established professions, and the manner in which someone gets paid.

Date: Fri, 14 Aug 1998
From: Russ Hunt
Subject: Re: defining Professional Writing

I'm sorry you read those responses that way, Tania; I didn't think they were so intended. I'm sure mine wasn't.

For my part, I was just trying to *extend* the concept beyond the narrower concept of someone paid to write (whether on a piecework or salary basis), to include the kind of writing professionals do.

I didn't read any of the other postings as denigrating either freelancers (since I am one myself, in a kind of minor but ongoing way) or paid professionals (I didn't think the phrase "hired gun" was derogatory (I meant it to include myself), but I guess I can see that it can be read that way.)

Why must freelancing in the field of writing frequently conjure up an image of the mercenary (hired gun)? I now recall an acquaintance of mine calling it "literary prostitution" as well. There's a terrible immoral connotation in such metaphors that I'd rather not have anything to do with. I think such judgments are not based on the type of work itself, but on its relation to the context of university disciplines and established professions, and the manner in which someone gets paid.

My view of the hired gun always included Shane, supporting the poor downtrodden dirt farmers . . .

There's a long tradition, of course, going back to Plato, of denigrating rhetoricians because the tools they use can be used in the service of any cause. One of the few areas in which I think there's anything much to be said for Plato.

Date: Sun, 16 Aug 1998
From: Christine Skolnik
Subject: Re: professional writing

At 11:13 AM 8/14/98 AST4ADT, you wrote:

As usual, Rick raises important questions. ("This may seem dumb, but how about writing done as part of one's professional practice?") This would, I'd think, include things like record-keeping notes, exploratory writing, journals and logs, etc. . . . all of which are appropriate to the study of professional writing (I think of Pete Medway's work on architecture students' notebooks), but which aren't really so appropriate to the teaching of professional writing.

Actually, when I assign collaborative projects I have my students keep and submit a paper trail of notes, e-mails, telephone messages, schedules, drafts, sketches etc. The object is threefold: 1) to impress on them from the start what it takes to be active and responsible group members -- and that they will have to produce evidence of their collaborative contribution, 2) to highlight these minor genres of professional writing, that can actually have major legal ramifications 3) to assist me in fair evaluation of collaborative projects.

Again I'm backing into the issue, but I guess collaboration would be a huge part of the definition of professional writing, as would ethics and legal responsibility.

Date: Mon, 17 Aug 1998
From: Brenton D Faber
Subject: Re: defining Professional Writing

On Fri, 14 Aug 1998, Tania S. Smith wrote:

I now recall an acquaintance of mine calling it "literary prostitution" as well. There's a terrible immoral connotation in such metaphors that I'd rather not have anything to do with. I think such judgments are not based on the type of work itself, but on its relation to the context of university disciplines and established professions, and the manner in which someone gets paid.

Tania,

I also want to say that I apologize if my comments leaned this way. I think you are right and as Russ has noted, there is some (considerable) history here. In fact, historically speaking, it has only been recently (last 70 years or so?) that doctors have effectively jettisoned the same "moralistic" condemnations that you cite. Though, debates between traditional and alternative health care often starting heading off in this direction. Lawyers . . . well that is anyone's guess as readers of Bleak House will know (what do you call 100 Lawyers at the bottom of Lake Ontario? -- a start :))

While this may be off Graham's original topic, a worthwhile question could be why a freelance writer needs to be concerned about "professional status" if you really aren't interested in moralistic arguments. Burton Bledstein argues that "professional status" rose at precisely the same time as the middle class, middle class morality, and middle class schooling. Thus, as a term it combines morality, economics, and labour. This could be why professionals can also act as "notary publics" for things like passports and why the notions of social status and self regulation are more important for professional groups than entrepreneurs for example.

When I argue that, currently, freelance writers have not organized themselves into professional status. I am not saying that they are immoral or anything of the sort. In fact, in some sectors (technical writers in the computer industry for example) specific writers are emerging as professional groups with self regulation through STC, university degree requirements, regularized salaries, benefits, and varying degrees of social status.

In addition, the NAFTA handbook used for US/Canada trade does certify "Technical Writer" as a profession if the worker has a B.A. in an associated discipline, can demonstrate membership in an association, has several years work experience, and has been offered a salaried position within a company. Oddly enough, we can thank B. Mulroney for this boost in Tech Writing's occupational currency!

Someone whose employment is dependent on bidding within the market for hourly or project based compensation is not considered a professional in an admittedly academic (social science) definition. But the only sense of morality here is the intentional residue of the term's construction (i.e.. it was historically designed to create more power for middle class, educated people who didn't own land) or, Canada's long-held cultural suspicion of entrepreneurs (who are little too close to American capitalists!).

Mon, 17 Aug 1998
From: Graham Smart
Subject: Re: professional writing

Marcy,

On Fri, 14 Aug 1998, Graham Smart wrote: The seminar will look at how writing is used in the workplace/professions, rather than try to teach how to do professional writing. However, I will be asking the participants to do some on-site research looking at a particular genre in a professional/organizational setting of their choosing; they'll each be examining some socio-cultural aspect of a genre and then writing this up, hopefully as a conference paper or publication. In any case, it might be useful to draw a distinction between the kind of writing Tania identified, and that Russ called "gun-for-hire" writing, and the kind that's normally done by people in the course of their profession, even though they aren't primarily identified as writers per se. In the first case, writing often involves a complicated series of relationships with "content specialists" -- the people who are expert at what the gun-for-hire is writing about -- and possibly editors, too. In the second, while those relationships may form, they aren't necessarily an integral part of the work.

For sure! I myself do see Professional Writing as encompassing both "career writers" (e.g., technical writers, documentation specialists, speech writers, etc.) and people such as engineers, lawyers, medical researchers, etc. who write in the course of their work -- not to say that I think there's any one correct or most viable definition for PW.

Date: Mon, 17 Aug 1998
From: Kathryn Alexander
Subject: When is workplace writing not Professional Writing

Forgive me for blurting and stumbling in here - this has been a really thought provoking discussion - and I hope this is not an interruption or a spoke in the wheel of sorts.

I have been following this thread of discussion this week, and wondering at the workplace writing that is done by mainly service sector workers which would not be considered "professional" but nevertheless has powerful economic, social, medical and political implications for the writers and the "objects" or subjects of the writing, and yet is not considered elite, high status or qualifies for US VISA status -- this writing is highly literate, is situated in complex social and human contexts, I am thinking of the writing that is done by child-care workers, youth

workers, lay mental health workers, street workers, transitional house workers etc. - many of these occupations require a considerable amount of reading/reporting documenting/summarizing in a deeply situated manner as well as interacting/ negotiating/ advocacy with hierarchical "regulating bodies" which supply the "official" genres and technical and literate authority about official textual accounts of things. It seems to me that most of the workers in these occupations are mid-aged women, or younger men and they may typically hold a BA or some other semi-professional certificate.

I wrote my MA thesis on the workplace writing that was done by mental health workers in a community mental health boarding home, (I think I fell into the job because my artist friend Polly said it would give me "flex hours so I could do my "real" writing as a "poet", this thesis was based on my own experience as a mental health worker and in it I tracked eleven years of daily documentation in a massive archive we called the daily log. most of us "nonprofessional" mental health workers were reasonably to highly educated folks, with backgrounds in the arts, community based education , theatre, and social activism, advocacy, etc. - and in our workplace we wrote daily progress notes in the day to day care of adults in transition from total institutions of the psychiatric warehouses of the late 70's early 80's to "independent living"/ abandonment in the community.

I think one of the most remarkable findings for me was to realise the degree of literate practice that went on in the day to day maintenance of our community, but which remained almost entirely taken for granted - invisible, as a form of consciously acknowledged "writing" - "its not real writing" it's just log notes!!!" I remember someone declaring, but others of us wondered at this writing that was so vital to our daily care of others, so powerful and evocative of the lives lived within the walls of our community - that we kept writing in a particular "fieldnotes/anecdotal" manner because we felt it was a better way to provide care for our residents -- despite having institutionally and finally forensically mandated edicts to write in a medical model progress notes style.

when the workers in the house unanimously decided to maintain two sets of texts, one to satisfy the licensing board and the forensic authorities, and the other in order to remain connected as a community and workplace, because it seemed a more accurate, "safer" and ethical form of writing, I knew we were onto to something quite profound.

Perhaps at the university and elsewhere - we lose sight of the immense privilege that our particular writing/reading practices hold, (for example now I sometimes laugh a wee bit ironically perhaps, when I talk about my "work" when it means I must devote the weekend to some reading and writing), meanwhile as I settle in at my desk to do this work - somewhere over the other side of town - someone else is sitting down to read twenty pages of hand written progress notes about what happened in the community boarding home that week, and after she reads this text she will be faced with "understanding" the subjects of this writing, providing care, food, crisis management, medical supplements, dinner and social interaction to fifteen psychiatrically marginalized adults for the next 8 - 12 hours - after which she will sit down and write an account of "what happened" in order to communicate sometimes life-critical details to her fellow workers coming onto the next shift later that day/week -- her work is highly literate,

textually sophisticated and yet she is paid slightly about minimum wage and is not considered "technical, academic, or professional"

So to answer in a kind of rambling way - professional writing is the kind of writing that certain people do where the focus of their labour becomes a recognised textual product that has cultural capital in some form, because the text can be seen as a active agent of some kind -- also there seems to be a conscious apprenticeships where this genre of writing is refined

whereas other people's workplace writing is not defined as professional - and the writing is done as a part of the work that is done - it is perceived as instrumental - a means to an end, and I suspect that learning the writing of the workplace is part of learning how to become a "mental health worker" - much as Lave and Wenger speak of in "Situated Learning" -- therefore this form of writing does not have status or capital value mainly because the labour falls into that mediated space where the focus in upon the services of the body (even when that service in for the care and welfare and comfort of many other people) and the textualization of that labour is rendered invisible in the services of the bodies. I imagine that pay equity legislation will begin to draw attention to the textual and literate practices of this invisible but essential sector of under-valued workers.

For anyone interested -- I think Dorothy Smith has made a huge contribution to this "curious eclipse" about the differences between "professional" texts and what she calls documentary text in her writing about "the active text" and the "textual relations of ruling" in her two books - The Conceptual Practices of Ruling -- and Texts, Facts and Femininity: Exploring the Relations of Ruling.

Date: Tue, 18 Aug 1998
From: Graham Smart Subject:
Re: When is workplace writing not Professional Writing

Kathryn,

Thanks so much for your thoughtful contribution to the discussion of Professional Writing. In my sense of the term, PW involves writing in the professions/writing in the workplace (as well as the writing of "career writers") -- and I agree with you completely that this realm includes the writing of clerical / support / "paraprofessional" / blue collar workers.

Again, thanks for nuancing the discussion so carefully.

Date: Tue, 18 Aug 1998
From: Anthony Paré
Subject: When is workplace writing not Professional Writing -Reply

Kathryn: Your post reminded me of how, when I first started to study workplace writing in social work, I would ask workers about their "writing" and get painful disclaimers: "I'm a terrible writer," "I can't spell, and my grammar is awful," and a real discomfort with the idea that I wanted to look at their "writing." Then I noticed that the workers themselves referred to this activity as "recording," and so I asked about recording and got rich, thoughtful, confident replies. Clearly, this was something quite different from what we might call "professional writing." In fact, I suspect that most social workers (and others in service fields, as you point out) would deny that they did anything called "professional writing." Someone (I can't remember for certain who, but I think it might have been my colleague Jane Ledwell-Brown) reports that even people who spend a considerable amount of their working week "writing" do not list that activity as "writing" on their job descriptions.

Date: Wed, 19 Aug 1998
From: Russ Hunt
Subject: unprofessional writing

Kathryn's and Anthony's posts have pushed to me to think again about how much I learned back when I first heard Lee Odell talking about "non-academic" writing at the Cs in New York -- it was complete news to me that the sort of thing that insurance executives and bankers did was as principled, skilled, reflective and complex as what I'd been educated to think of as "Writing" (that is, academic, scholarly and literary writing). It took me years to learn that in fact "non-academic" is a weird phrase because it suggests that what's the marked or singled out case is the writing that really has audience and intrinsic purpose and function, unlike the student essay or dissertation . . . It's "academic" writing that's the bizarre case.

It's a surprise to me, but not a big one, that people are still learning that "Writing" is what you do and read in English class, and all the other stuff is, well "recording" or just "work."

That's really the issue I wanted to address when I wondered under what circumstances "professional writing" would include note taking, reporting, recording, etc. -- because, as Anthony points out, it's not only not seen as professional, it's not seen as writing either.

Date: Wed, 19 Aug 1998
From: "Dr. Robert K. Irish"
Subject: Re: unprofessional writing

I have followed this discussion with little interest until Brenton and Kathryn's responses triggered me. I asked my wife Lisa about professional writing. She works in a health-related field in which she does a fair bit of writing. Initially she held that professional writing was writing that got published somewhere. She would include in-house manuals (she has produced several), but not advertising or promotional material. I asked her then if she would include a proposal for a training program that she was in the process of writing. She dithered because the proposal is for a

program that will have a published manual. Was the proposal itself "professional"? She thought not. What then, I asked, of proposals such as those written in response to RFP's by government for say refitting a building? Yes, she would include those because the work that was to follow from it was work. Ah, I said, and the training program that you are designing won't be work? O.K., said Lisa, maybe I have to rethink my definition.

Then, I mentioned Brenton's response. It reminded us of a social work course that we had both taken during university. There the prof. spent about 40% of the course explaining (defensively) why Social Work was a profession. Certainly, many, not just writers, are concerned with professional status. And why not? It typically means more power, more money, and more of those kind of parties. I hate those parties, but I'll take the money and the power if offered.:

Honestly, I think the issue becomes envy not professionalism. My brother's a doctor. I'm not. He has a sailboat, a windsurfer, expensive ski equipment (and the vacations to use them). I don't. He's in Ireland right now (not the exploding part). I'm not. Would I like to be? Would I like to have his toys? Sure, but my professional status -- even as a PhD -- doesn't equal his. So, I can't go so far. Universities are very concerned these days about their declining status in the eye of the public (witness the fiasco at ACCUTE this May where they debated --supposedly-- "The Future of English Studies and The Public Good", but actually whinged and whined about wanting an academic discourse as impenetrable as Neuroscience). I think much of this concern derives from a sense of being outstripped (read: outearned) by other professionals like lawyers and doctors. If universities were not being "underfunded" would we have such concern about things like public accountability, and the public good and the status of universities? I think not. At least, not from within the walls.

Graham, I hope that when you teach this course, you allow for a critique of both words "professional" and "writing".

Date: Wed, 19 Aug 1998
From: Roger Graves
Subject: Re: unprofessional writing

One of the issues not raised here so far is the use of the term "professional writing" as a new kind of god-term to include or subsume technical and business writing as well as writing done in workplace settings. In an academic context, this new term is used to create a sort of locus of power for those who have been marginalized in their own departments, be those English or Business or Engineering. And I really think that is where the term came from more than the other really fascinating explanations and discussions that I've had the pleasure to read on this topic.

If you start with the idea that "professional writing" is that kind of term and meant for that kind of purpose, then it is easier to live with the discontinuities that everybody has been pointing out - who considers what they write to be "professional writing"? what kinds of writing do we (academics) not count as professional" and so on. The term "professional writing" doesn't make

much sense except as a move to establish power in the academic community; outside the academic community they don't really care what you call it.

