



Teaching Public Relations

Published by the Public Relations Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Edited by Dr. Gay Wakefield, Director of the M. J. Neeley Center for Productive Communication, Texas Christian University

[Editor's Note: Dr. Todd Hunt, Rutgers University was editor of *Teaching Public Relations* at the time this issue was originally published.]

No. 17, May 1990

Writing Students Benefit from Feedback with Computer

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Teaching any writing course effectively requires that the instructor evaluate and grade student papers. In public relations courses, the task is even more time consuming because the instructor must evaluate each paper on a word-by-word basis, requiring numerous handwritten notes to explain the grading.

After a few hours of handwriting notes--much of it the same information for different students--the instructor's handwriting becomes nearly indecipherable and the suggestions are all but useless to the student.

"If only I could type my notes" is a frequent lament by such harried writing instructors as they edit and slash and suggest with their red pens across page after page of double-spaced hard copy.

But now, writing instructors can type their notes directly on students' papers. All it requires is that the department provide both faculty and students access to word processors and require their use.¹

Texas A&M University's Department of Journalism provides two reporting Maclabs, each with 16 Macintosh SE word processors and both WordPerfect and Microsoft Word software. The instructors who teach the writing courses have in their offices individual Macs with 20-meg hard discs.² Beginning and intermediate news reporting/writing students and public relations writing students are required to work their assignments on the Macs.

Of course, some students turn in hard copy, by choice or because they cannot get to the Macs. In such cases, the instructor returns to the traditional handwritten notes and suggestions.

How It Works

Using WordPerfect software, Howard Eilers, associate professor of Journalism at Texas A&M University, designed the evaluation and grading system as follows.

Each writing class is assigned an electronic master file folder--for example, "357" for the PR writing course--and the instructor is assigned an electronic "357 drop box" within that master file folder.

Each student in the class is assigned, by name, an individual file folder accessible only to the named student and the instructor. In addition, each student must provide two floppy discs, one programmed for accessing the software system and one to serve as a personal copy storage disc.

A student wishing to write a piece of copy inserts both discs into a Mac and calls up the WordPerfect software. After the proper screen is displayed, the student writes the story. For grading purposes, the story need not be written in double space. The student copy edits, corrects, rewrites, and saves the story to the storage disc under a file name or slug line.

To avoid story duplication in the drop box, the file name for each story must begin with the student's last name. For example, a story on a proposal to increase tuition would be filed by various students: Andrews tuition, Baker tuition, Carter tuition, and so on.

After the story is saved to the storage disc, the student drags it over to be copied into the drop box, thereby giving it to the instructor for evaluation and grading. Students cannot remove any work from the drop box; only the instructor has that privilege. But the students have their own copies on their own floppy storage discs.

Easy on the Instructor

One major benefit of the Texas A&M system is that instructors may use their office Macintoshes and call up the stories from the drop box for evaluation and grading. They need not do their evaluation and grading in the reporting Maclabs.

After evaluating and grading the story, the instructor removes the story from the drop box and saves it to the appropriate student's personal file within the master file. The student then may retrieve the story at leisure and study and learn from the evaluation and legibly written suggestions.

The most valuable part of the process occurs while the story is on the instructor's screen. That is when the instructor uses the keyboard to provide each student individual instruction and suggestions. Equally important, the instructor may be as lengthy and as detailed as desired, because all of the information is presented clearly and legibly.

No longer does the instructor have to struggle with hastily scrawled handwritten notes; no longer does the student struggle to decipher what the instructor meant; and no longer is the student upset by all that red ink. The instructor notes are typed; they are clean, complete, legible, and black.

Moreover, for both the instructor and the student, the system enables the instructor to write lengthy notes, not only between paragraphs, but even between words, providing a kind of instruction not possible with the red pen on traditional double-spaced hard copy.

Evaluation Suggestions

Naturally, instructors will have their own individual styles of evaluation and marking of student work. But one suggestion is as follows, and it is done electronically.

--Misspelled words, incorrect punctuation, and style errors are underlined.

--Incorrect information and incorrect use of words are highlighted by changing the font to "outline." [1999 Editor's Note: Since the program used to format this Website does not allow "outline" text, the color red has been substituted where "outline" appeared on the original publication. -- GW]

--Notes to the student, both within the copy and at the beginning and end of the copy, are **boldfaced**.

Some instructors not only permit but require students to rewrite their copy, both for the learning experience and as a means of trying to improve their grades. If so, it is a good idea to require that the students turn in the original evaluated and graded version along with the rewritten version.

Rewrites are handled as follows: The student calls up the original version and writes the new version just below it in the same file. Thus, the rewrite of "Andrews tuition" contains the original version and, strung below it, one, two, three, or more rewrites, depending upon the instructor's requirements.

The instructor needs the previous versions to ensure that the student did, in fact, rewrite the piece rather than merely retyping it and incorporating the instructor's corrections. Reading the earlier versions first enables the instructor to recognize the changes the student made in the later versions.

Recording Grades

To make the whole course program electronic, the instructor should prepare a computer spreadsheet for the class listing each student in the rows and providing a space for each assignment--including rewrites--in the columns. The last column on the right provides the formula for calculating the mean, which is the grade for the course. As the instructor enters the grade for each assignment, a mean is tabulated in the last column, providing a current grade for each student. And, if the formulas and the individual grades are entered correctly, errors in grade tabulation are reduced to nearly zero.

At the end of the semester, the instructor no longer faces hours of calculating with the constant concern over error. As the last grade is entered onto the spreadsheet, all calculations are complete and accurate and the grades may be transferred immediately to the grade report form.

Conclusion

Using computers in public relations writing courses provides several benefits:

- a. It helps prepare the students for the real world, where the computer is common.
- b. It gives the students practice in the professional manner of composing directly on the keyboard.
- c. It helps the instruction process by providing suggestions as detailed as the instructor wishes and exactly where the instructor wishes.
- d. It helps reduce errors on the part of the student because of misreading handwritten notes.
- e. It speeds up the entire process of evaluating and grading student work.

Notes

1 See, for example, Hampden H. Smith III, "Teaching reporting, editing on computers becomes obligation, not option," Journalism Educator, 45, No. 4 (Winter 1989), pp. 44-45. Macintoshes are used at Texas A&M, but the system described in this paper could be adapted to IBM PCs or equivalents.

2 Howard Eilers, "Microcomputers remove paper from many university labs to keep step with industry," Journalism Educator 45, No. 4 (Winter 1989), pp. 38-43,49.

Sample showing instructor's suggestions and comments both within and following the

student's text. Note use of varied typefaces for different categories of evaluation.

Texas A & M University is hosting a two-day honors invitational for high-achieving students during the months of June, July and August.

Ellen Wilmeth, coordinator of the invitational **says** the goal is to provide **up-to-date** information about Texas A&M University facilities, honors courses, and scholarships **as well as** **[does not mean 'and,' it means that what follows already is known by the reader]** an introduction to the university and **it's** **[for shame]** professors.

This program, which seeks highly sought after students, offers five *mini-courses*. Among these are humanities, science and mathematics, engineering and business. **[if you offer only 5, and you list all 5, you may not use 'among them' because there are no others after you have listed them all]**

Nine colleges conduct individual sessions to give the students an opportunity to meet with the deans and to learn more about **the college** **[which of the nine colleges are you referring to?]** itself.

Write in the PAST tense. [1999 Editor's Note: Some things change, and this advice is one of those things. Current practice encourages avoidance of past tense and inactive voice. -- GW]

Sure, the info will be up-to-date. Who would provide out-of-date info?

Unforget, you are writing ABOUT people FOR people. All this 'opportunity to meet' is stilted. Say what the students will do and learn; say why these top-of-the-line students are coming to A&M and why A&M wants them to visit.

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Posted July 2, 1999