

TEACHING BRIEF

**Building Portfolios, Connections and
Confidence: How Professors
Can Leverage Student Writing Collections to
Support Students' Employment Opportunities**

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Rationale

At Drake University, Public Relations Writing is the second course required of all PR majors in a six-course sequence, and it provides an opportunity for students to develop the writing and editing skills necessary to succeed in a public relations career. Students learn to think critically about current events and how they relate to PR practice. Some coursework is completed on behalf of a community partner while much more is created on behalf of a dream employer of their choice. This allows students to customize their writing portfolios, while often feeling increased commitment to creating quality content. The best part? Each student's final work is shared by their professor with their dream employer, providing an important professional connection that often leads to job shadows, internships and even future employment.

Student Learning Goals

Aligning with the college's core values, this assignment is designed to help students "understand how to develop content across multiple channels in this age of media convergence, with sensitivity to multicultural audiences and an appreciation for global perspectives," and "apply reasoning, critical thinking, persuasion and creativity through the writing and editing processes." At the beginning of the semester, students take a pre-assessment to measure their self-identified comfort level with key facets of public relations. Throughout the semester, they peer edit one another's work prior to each submission, and the instructor provides detailed feedback on every assignment during the grading process. Students are encouraged to incorporate edits into each piece as the semester unfolds, so they can learn from the feedback while also refining their work. In the final week of the class, students select their top pieces from the class to feature in their portfolios. Students also take a post-assessment to identify areas of growth since the beginning of the semester.

Connections to Public Relations Practice and/or Theory

Students create a variety of materials in the class, including issues briefs, annual report content, fact sheets, infographics, fundraising appeal letters, digital and social strategy, proposals for corporate expansion, PSAs, brochures, blogs or podcasts and traditional press releases. Each student must also create an original piece to add to the collection, in addition to a cover letter and resume prepared for their dream employer. This final portfolio – five professional pieces and their cover letter and resume – qualifies as their final exam in the course. Immediately after finals, the professor sends the portfolios to the dream employers. As part of their portfolio development, students are responsible for identifying a contact name, email, and physical address of their dream employer. Typically, the contact is the public relations principal at the organization, or someone within the department that is responsible for the work the student wants to do. The professor uses this information to send the portfolio file with the explanatory email.

Evidence of Student Learning Outcomes/Assessment

In addition to evaluating the quality of student work, the external review of student portfolios often results in valuable feedback and ideas for future class assignments. Students' self-reported confidence grows according to the class pre- and post-test assessments. Portfolio deliveries have sparked job shadow opportunities with companies as varied as the Los Angeles Angels, American Airlines, National Geographic and Nationwide Insurance. Students' customized work has earned them internship positions in companies, government agencies and nonprofit organizations which have led to several full-time placements after graduation. A sample dream employer response is below, highlighting another important outcome—elevating the visibility of our small program.

Jenna –

Elise Eberwein shared your communications portfolio with me, and I am so glad she did. Terrific job putting together a wide variety of communications platforms, each with their own tone of voice. That's something we try to do at American Airlines every day. We have millions of customers and more than 100,000 employees who all have a different perspective on how our business works, and each one of them expects us to speak with them in familiar terms and with a friendly voice.

We're only a few months into our integration with US Airways, and it's very clear that the world is watching everything we say and do. Communication is critical. Much like your portfolio, we have to use a variety of channels to hit each audience and make sure that the message is consistent across all of them. You've done a nice job pointing to the restoration of our fleet and our commitment to being the greatest airline in the world with top-notch customer service.

Please keep us up to date on your projects and where your degree might take you next, and let us know if we can help in any way.

Casey Norton
Director, Corporate Communications
American Airlines
Office: 817-931-3051

APPENDIX A

The Assignment:

Final Individual “Dream Employer” Portfolio

Instructions

In lieu of a final exam, you will compile an individual “dream employer” portfolio. Please read the instructions and be sure to include all portfolio components.

- The “dream employer” portfolio must include at least five individually prepared tactics, four of which may be revisions of work you submitted on behalf of your dream employer throughout the semester. That means at least one tactic will be original for your portfolio.
- The original tactic can be anything we have discussed this semester that you haven’t prepared for your dream employer (e.g. fact sheet, social media content calendar and posts, blog/podcast concept, PSA, VNR, etc.) or other tactic of your choosing. However, the tactic should be appropriate for your dream employer and its public(s).
- Additionally, your individual portfolio must include a cover letter and current resume. The cover letter for your dream employer should be addressed to an appropriate public relations contact within the organization. The letter should express your interest in working for the organization, and pitch the work contained within your portfolio. You must include the full name, title and mailing address of the PR contact on the letter, as I will mail these packets to those contacts.

Formatting

- The individual portfolio should include your cover letter and resume followed by your tactics as a single Word .docx or pdf.

- All tactics should be thoughtfully created, well organized, properly formatted and of professional quality, reflecting your best work. Use proper grammar, spelling, punctuation and AP Style. Attribute outside sources, as appropriate.

Evaluation

- Your individual “dream employer” portfolio will be worth 200 points. Standard evaluation criteria will apply.
- Failing to submit your portfolio by deadline will result in a zero for the final exam grade.
- While we encourage this outreach to future employers as a unique opportunity to showcase your abilities, you may request that your portfolio not be submitted to your dream employer. Please share any concerns with me. Note: Your project will still be due by the final exam deadline and evaluated as your final exam grade in the course.

APPENDIX B

TABLE 1: RUBRIC

PR Writing – Dream Employer Portfolio/Final Exam Rubric

In addition to the items noted in the rubric, accuracy will be evaluated throughout the portfolio. The writing should be based on facts that can be verified by a third party. Grammar, spelling, punctuation and AP Style should be used correctly. No spelling errors! In fact, one error will bring a deduction of 7 points to your final grade. Two errors will bring a deduction of 14 points, and more than three errors will result in 20 points automatically lost.

	Weak	Average	Strong
Reasoning	20 points The purpose of the writing – what the intended public is supposed to think or do – is not clear or supported by sufficient evidence.	26.66667 points Some objectives of the assignment are met but not completely or to complete expectations.	33.33333 points The purpose of the writing – what the reader is supposed to think or do – is clear and supported by sufficient evidence.
Critical Thinking	20 points The writing is basic and shows little to no understanding of targeted public(s) or consideration for possible counter arguments.	26.66667 points Some objectives of the assignment are met but not completely or to complete expectations.	33.33333 points The writing demonstrates thorough understanding of targeted public(s) and anticipates and addresses possible counter arguments.
Persuasion	16 points The writing does not motivate readers to think, feel or do.	21.33333 points Some objectives of the assignment are met but not completely or to complete expectations.	26.66667 points The writing motivates readers to think, feel or do.
Creativity	16 points The writing is bland, without persuasive or style components.	21.33333 points Some objectives of the assignment are met but not completely or to complete expectations.	26.66667 points The writing employs an unexpected approach without compromising any of the other principles.

Strong Ethics	16 points The writing engages in ambiguity, exaggeration or misleading language.	21.33333 points Some objectives of the assignment are met but not completely or to complete expectations.	26.66667 points The writing stays within ethical parameters; there is no ambiguity, exaggeration, or misleading language.
Solid Voice	16 points The writer uses passive voice, with inappropriate style and tone.	21.33333 points Some objectives of the assignment are met but not completely or to complete expectations.	26.66667 points The writer uses active voice. The style and tone are appropriate for the target public and the medium.
Aesthetics	16 points Overall design, layout, style and appearance are not appropriate for the organization, target public(s) and medium.	21.33333 points Some objectives of the assignment are met but not completely or to complete expectations.	26.66667 points Overall design, layout, style and appearance are appropriate for the organization, target public(s) and medium.

APPENDIX C

Sample Cover Letter From Professor to Dream Employer:

[Director of Communication (or similar title)]

[Organization Name]

[Organization address]

[Organization CSZ]

[Date]

[Salutation]:

Greetings from <UNIVERSITY NAME> in <CITY, STATE>! I'm proud to share the attached portfolio of student work with you, with this letter serving as explanation and context.

As part of <UNIVERSITY NAME'S> globally distinguished Public Relations program, students take a variety of courses that all include a "real-world" component to help prepare them for professional practice. As early as their sophomore years, students are producing work for real organizations.

For our required Public Relations Writing course, students are able to choose a "dream employer" for which to create a variety of work. Throughout the semester, they create an issues brief, a news release, social media posts, and more, all for their self-identified dream employer. That's where you come in.

One of my students has chosen your organization as their dream employer,

and has created the enclosed materials with your goals in mind. While these materials are, of course, never distributed on your behalf, I thought you would appreciate seeing how passionate this student is about the important work you do.

We send these to you as a way to know the impact your organization has on students here in <CITY, STATE>, and as a way to show off our quality student work. If you're interested in learning more about <UNIVERSITY'S> PR program, please feel free to reach out to me. If you're interested in contacting the student about internship opportunities or for more information, you'll find their contact information in the attached materials.

As you know, in today's rapidly changing media environment, it's more important than ever that students have a solid foundation of applied practice before entering the workforce. That's our goal with this course, and with all of <UNIVERSITY'S> Public Relations coursework. Thank you for providing inspiration to our students!

Best,

<PROFESSOR NAME>

<PROFESSOR TITLE>

<UNIVERSITY>

<PROFESSOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION>

APPENDIX D

TABLE 2: PRE-ASSESSMENT

PR Writing Pre-Assessment: Students complete this questionnaire during the first class meeting.

**JMC 123: PR Writing
Pre-assessment**

1. For each item listed below, indicate how familiar you are with that particular facet of public relations practice:

Facet of PR Practice	Very familiar	Somewhat familiar	Neutral	Somewhat unfamiliar	Very unfamiliar
Research/planning					
Internal communications					
News media relations					
Social media relations					
Community relations					
Government relations					
Investor relations					
Consumer relations					
Internal communications					
Advocacy					
Crisis Communication					
Integrated marketing communications					

2. For each item listed below, indicate how confident you would feel TODAY if you had to write content for that particular type of public relations tactic:

Type of PR Practice	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Neutral	Somewhat lacking in confidence	Not confident at all
Issues brief					
Message platform					
Newsletter					
Intranet					
Fact sheet					
Backgrounder					
Advisory					
Pitch					
News release					
Video news release					
Social media news release					
Blog					
Micro-blog (e.g., Twitter)					
Live tweeting					
Podcast					
Presentation					

Type of PR Practice	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Neutral	Somewhat lacking in confidence	Not confident at all
Grant proposal					
Policy brief					
Annual report					
Earning statement					
Brochure					
Magazine					
Website					
Mobile application					
Market assessment					
Public service announcement					
Crisis plan					
Webinar					
Writing portfolio					

3. For each item listed below, indicate how you would rate your current skill level for that particular aspect of public relations writing:

Aspect of PR writing	Very strong	Somewhat strong	Average	Somewhat weak	Very weak
Reasoning (i.e. creating and defending a central argument)					
Critical thinking (i.e. anticipating and proactively addressing counter-arguments)					
Persuasion					
Creativity					
Spelling					
Grammar					
AP Style					

4. What, if anything, about starting this course causes you the MOST anxiety?

Thank you for your time and input. The feedback will help guide our work this semester.

APPENDIX E
TABLE 3: POST-ASSESSMENT

PR Writing Sample Post-Assessment: A student’s responses captured in the last class period of a recent term. (Shared with student’s permission)

JMC 123: PR Writing
Pre-assessment

5. For each item listed below, indicate how familiar you are with that particular facet of public relations practice:

Facet of PR Practice	Very familiar	Somewhat familiar	Neutral	Somewhat unfamiliar	Very unfamiliar
Research/planning		X			
Internal communications		X			
News media relations	X				
Social media relations	X				
Community relations		X			
Government relations		X			
Investor relations		X			
Consumer relations	X				
Internal communications	X				
Advocacy		X			
Crisis Communication	X				
Integrated marketing communications		X			

6. For each item listed below, indicate how confident you would feel TODAY if you had to write content for that particular type of public relations tactic:

Type of PR Practice	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Neutral	Somewhat lacking in confidence	Not confident at all
Issues brief		X			
Message platform		X			
Newsletter	X				
Intranet		X			
Fact sheet	X				
Backgrounder	X				
Advisory		X			
Pitch	X				
News release	X				
Video news release	X				
Social media news release	X				
Blog	X				
Micro-blog (e.g., Twitter)	X				
Live tweeting	X				
Podcast		X			
Presentation	X				

Type of PR Practice	Very confident	Somewhat confident	Neutral	Somewhat lacking in confidence	Not confident at all
Grant proposal	X				
Policy brief		X			
Annual report		X			
Earning statement		X			
Brochure	X				
Magazine	X				
Website	X				
Mobile application	X				
Market assessment	X				
Public service announcement	X				
Crisis plan	X				
Webinar		X			
Writing portfolio	X				

7. For each item listed below, indicate how you would rate your current skill level for that particular aspect of public relations writing:

Aspect of PR writing	Very strong	Somewhat strong	Average	Somewhat weak	Very weak
Reasoning (i.e. creating and defending a central argument)	X				
Critical thinking (i.e. anticipating and proactively addressing counter-arguments)	X				
Persuasion	X				
Creativity	X				
Spelling			X		
Grammar			X		
AP Style		X			

8. What, if anything, about this course caused you the MOST anxiety?

As I move on from this class, I hope to remember the great majority of what I learned. I hope that my grammar and spelling can continue to improve as well as my content and creativity. I want this class to be a solid foundation for what is to come in my future and career when it comes to writing. I hope to be an effective communicator orally and more importantly through writing.

Thank you for your time and input. The feedback will help to shape our PR curriculum.