

Professional Writing Program Assessment Report 2019-2020

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I. Professional Writing Program Mission and Educational Objectives

A. Program Mission

Oregon Tech’s Professional Writing program (PWR) focuses on professional, technical, business, and scientific writing to prepare students for careers in technical, scientific, medical, government, non-profit, and business writing environments. Course instruction links theory to practice via courses in rhetoric and design, writing, digital literacy, style, multimedia composition and management, documentation development, usability testing, web writing, and publishing in print and electronic media. Courses introduce students to the procedures and practices that professional writers and editors use regularly.

The program rigorously trains students in the best practices common to all fields under its umbrella, including—but not limited to—training in structured authoring and layout software (e.g. MadCap Flare, Adobe InDesign), web design tools (e.g. Wordpress and foundational web-languages like HTML, JavaScript, PHP and SQL), business and management techniques (e.g. Lean) and more.

Additionally, students are required to craft their own 33–credit-hour series of emphasis and technical electives, reflecting the specific writing field they intend to join or the practices they will need the most familiarity with.

B. Mission Alignment

The Professional Writing degree is intended to culminate in an externship, offering students a chance to practice their target career with a current professional. Prior to that hands-on experience, Professional Writing courses offer a variety of open-ended projects and opportunities to engage with professional or public communities as objects of study for research (e.g. PWR 330: User Research) or practice (e.g. PWR 355: Project Management for Writers).

As every student’s technical and emphasis elective sequence creates a unique degree program, innovation is a regular feature of the curriculum – students’ programs of study have the potential to vary as much as the students themselves.

AY 2018 saw the first graduate in Professional Writing following the program’s launch in AY 2017. The program is slowly growing, but it did not graduate any students in AY 2019-2020. Due to the program’s recent launch and the limited number of major courses offered, little data has been captured on the program so far.

The Technical Elective requirement and many of our program’s core courses emphasize the university mission’s focus on innovation, hands-on experience, scholarship and applied research.

- **Innovation:** Students actively craft their own professional portfolio of writing and technical objects during their course of study. These projects are often directed entirely by the student using their understanding of the current career landscape in professional writing.
- **Hands-On Experience:** Students in Professional Writing courses regularly apply their academic knowledge to real-life situations and professional tasks, both as a means to complete homework and as a part of their professional lives outside of school. This includes writing fiction, creating websites or web content, or assisting clients in usability research.
- **Scholarship and Applied Research:** Students in Professional Writing engage with rhetorical theories of written communication, both as a means of understanding the discipline and as a product for broader consumption. Students in PWR 355: User Research use current scholarship in UX/UI design to evaluate the usability of client websites, deepening their understanding of that research area and applying it directly to real-world situations.

C. Additional Information

Oregon Tech’s Professional Writing program fills a need in the technical and professional communication world by offering students a chance to not only gain expertise in writing for a variety of audiences and clients, but also in the specific technical languages and tools they will be expected to use. For instance, students intending to take on a career in science or medical writing will find themselves in courses like BIO 200: Medical Terminology and PHIL 305: Medical Ethics,

while their peers looking to become document specialists in large companies may enroll in BUS 313: Health Care Systems and Policy and PSY 347: Organizational Behavior to supplement their Professional Writing courses.

II. Program Description and History

Oregon Tech's Professional Writing program uses the mold of many technical rhetoric and writing programs by requiring students to become familiar with a wide variety of composing and publication formats – from traditionally print media (JOUR 211: Student Newspaper) to fully digital media (PWR 315: Advanced Web Authoring). However, it breaks from the traditional format by requiring students to dedicate 33 credits of their program of study to courses offering technical skills or education in a field other than writing and rhetoric. Professional Writing students learn to apply their *how-to* knowledge from the major to specific audiences, clients and communities represented in their technical electives.

The Professional Writing program resides in the Communication department, and its courses are staffed by faculty who also teach Communication Studies courses and general education communication courses.

The Professional Writing program officially launched in the Winter of 2018, after being publicly announced in Winter 2017. The first full cohort graduated in Spring 2021.

III. Program History: AY 2017 to Present

The Professional Writing program was approved by HECC in Winter 2018. As of this reporting date, most of the proposed new courses have been taught at least once. Many upper division courses are or will be offered on a two-year rotation, due largely to program staffing.

A. Program Locations

All Professional Writing courses are currently located on the Klamath Falls campus. Faculty are actively developing plans to hybridize or offer these courses fully online in order to recruit students from the Portland-Metro area or other fully online populations. In AY 2019, Dr. Amber Lancaster piloted hybrid versions of core Professional Writing and general education courses (e.g. WRI 410: Proposal and Grant Writing). The results were positive for both students and faculty, but we face some institutional barriers¹ to implementing this model more fully.

¹ These barriers are both human and technological. Human limitations are easy to expect: the training necessary to effectively teach a hybrid, writing-intensive, groupwork-intensive course is increasingly common in the fields that Professional Writing faculty come from, but it is not ubiquitous. Dr. Lancaster is uniquely qualified at the moment to teach these types of courses and set the model for the rest of us. Technological limitations are more difficult to surmount. It is unclear how the courses should be categorized in the online catalog, whether the courses are “owned” by Online Learning or not, and whether teaching these courses would fall under a faculty member’s regular contract or the more traditional online-overload model.

The Professional Writing program was approved by HECC as a 49% online program. As competitor programs across the state have moved more of their curriculum online following COVID, the Professional Writing program at OIT is more earnestly pursuing greater hybrid and online modality options to better address student and staffing needs.

B. Enrollment and Retention Trends

Professional Writing has continued to grow. It recruits students from the Digital Media Design program at Klamath Community College, and it retains OIT students who do not persist in their majors chosen at enrollment. The technical focus aspect of the program allows students to apply many credits from their former major (or their previous degree program at another school) toward graduation, and the program’s emphasis on connections between written communication and technical fields creates significant in-class and program-wide value from these backgrounds.

	2018	2019	2020
<i>Professional Writing</i>	4	5	11
<i>Full-Time</i>	3	4	10
<i>Part-Time</i>	1	1	1

C. Program Graduates

In AY 2020, four students graduated from the Professional Writing program. Graduates have gone on to work for newspapers (in marketing departments), hospitals (in social media management positions) and universities (in admissions and outreach offices).

D. Industry Relationships

The Professional Writing program’s advisory board consists of members with professional backgrounds in technical writing, web content writing and journalism.

E. Program Changes

In AY 2020, the Professional Writing Advisory Committee revised its original list of 18 PSLOs down to 6. This revision followed extensive conversations about the PSLOs that were being reinforced in various classes and the changing landscape of writing-based professions. The new PSLOs are discussed below.

IV. Program Education Objectives and Program Student Learning Outcomes (PSLOs)

A. Program Education Objectives

Upon completion of the Professional Writing program, students should be able to:

1. Design and create documents appropriate for professional and consumer audiences using a variety of industry-standard tools.
2. Use accepted rhetorical, linguistic and design theories to craft user- and reader-centered documents.
3. Demonstrate professionally-appropriate practice in working with clients/stakeholders and teammates.

4. Demonstrate professionally-appropriate ethical reasoning, including awareness intellectual property in the creation and management of documents.
5. Analyze their position within the fields of publishing, technical communication, professional writing, and allied disciplines.
6. Manage the production of complex, large-scale projects and their related documentation.

B. Origin and External Validation

The PSLOs above were discussed with our Industry Advisory Board in Winter 2021. Advisory Board members agreed that these outcomes were valuable across all of their fields.

V. Curriculum Map

Beginning in AY 2018, program faculty have been polled occasionally regarding the PSLOs *necessary* to successfully complete a course within the program. For instance, COM PSLO 7: Communicate Ethically is considered necessary in many courses, but that looks different in each context. In COM 326: Communication Research, ethical communication practices often look like an informed consent form for survey-based research and accurate citation practices in the formal report produced from that research. In COM 255: Communication Ethics, ethical communication practices are more likely to involve justification of communicative practices using established ethical theories.

New PSLOs were officially adopted late in the academic year, and the curriculum map has not yet been completed. The empty table below is intended to be filled in for the AY 2022 assessment report.

<i>Course</i>	PWR 1 Design and create documents appropriate for professional and consumer audiences using a variety of industry-standard tools.	PWR 2 Use accepted rhetorical, linguistic and design theories to craft user- and reader-centered documents.	PWR 3 Demonstrate professionally-appropriate practice in working with clients/stakeholders and teammates.	PWR 4 Demonstrate professionally-appropriate ethical reasoning, including awareness intellectual property in the creation and management of documents	PWR 5 Analyze their position within the fields of publishing, technical communication, professional writing, and allied disciplines.	PWR 6 Manage the production of complex, large-scale projects and their related documentation
PWR 101: Introduction to Professional Writing						
PWR 102: Introduction to Web Authoring						
PWR 206: Social Media	Not yet offered					
PWR 215: Writing in the Public Interest						
PWR 220: Writing for Interactive Media	Not yet offered					
PWR 306: Writing for the Health Professions						

PWR 310: Professional Writing for International Audiences					
PWR 315: Advanced Web Authoring					
PWR 320: Structured Authoring					
PWR 330: User Research					
PWR 355: Project Management for Writers					
PWR 490: Portfolio Development					
PWR 499: Internship in Professional Writing					
COM 109: Intro to Communication Tech					
COM 115: Intro to Mass Communication					
COM 225: Interpers Communication					
COM 237: Intro to Visual Communication					
COM 248: Digital Media Production					
COM 255: Communication Ethics					
COM 301: Rhetorical Theory & Applicatn					
COM 326: Communication Research					
COM 345: Organization Comm I					
COM 358: Communication and the Law					
COM 424: Capstone					
JOUR 211: Pub/Student Newspaper					
SPE 314: Argumentation					

Table 1: PSLO Map by Course

VI. Assessment Cycle of Student Learning Outcomes

Following the PSLO revision, a three-year assessment cycle was developed to adequately capture student performance in each PSLO.

	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
PWR 1: Design and create documents appropriate for professional and consumer audiences using a variety of industry-standard tools			✓
PWR 2: Use accepted rhetorical, linguistic and design theories to craft user- and reader-centered documents			✓
PWR 3: Demonstrate professionally-appropriate practice in working with clients/stakeholders and teammates		✓	
PWR 4: Demonstrate professionally-appropriate ethical reasoning, including awareness intellectual property in the creation and management of documents		✓	
PWR 5: Analyze their position within the fields of publishing, technical communication, professional writing, and allied disciplines	✓		
PWR 6: Manage the production of complex, large-scale projects and their related documentation	✓		

Table 2: PSLO Assessment Cycle

VII. Summary of 2019-2020 Assessment Activities

Due to staffing and time constraints, formal assessment is limited to direct assessment of student performance in PWR 101: Introduction to Professional Writing and PWR 255: Project Management for Writers

A. PSLOs

1) *Direct Assessment in PWR 101: Creating Documents and Discovering the Field*

PWR 101's Annotated Job Ad assignment was assessed to measure performance on PWR 2 and PWR 5. The course faculty member noted that "every student got an A, and looking back on them all they were all quite successful memos both as technical documents AND as people situating themselves in their professional fields." In previous years, this assignment had become a sort of "washout" moment, where students first see what a career in professional writing really looks like, sometimes choosing not to persist in the degree as a result. Students this year all submitted the assignment and found a professional goal they could strive towards. The faculty member of the course noted that she may blend this assignment with the Portfolio Development course's assignment sequence on finding alternative areas in writing-focused fields that students may be interested in.

2) *Direct Assessment in PWR 355: Difficult Team Environments*

PWR 355's term-long project focused on crafting a playable game and all of its associated materials (game pieces, boards, documentation, illustrations, etc.). PWR 3, PWR 5 and PWR 6 were applicable. Students were separated into two groups, and both groups completed the projects satisfactorily. However, the size and complexity of the projects, along with the difficulties of

working with teammates, was a significant challenge during the course. One group finished successfully and maintained positive working relationships throughout and after the course. The other group suffered a great deal of friction and struggled to collaborate effectively.

3) *Indirect Assessment*

Two graduates completed the exit survey. Much of the exit survey data will not be discussed as the sample numbers are too small to draw conclusions from. However, all of the program's graduates were and continue to be very vocal about how the program was (and was not) serving their needs as students.

A majority of the feedback given during students' academic careers and in the text response areas of the exit survey emphasized the importance of faculty, both as effective advisors and as potential barriers to graduation. In the former case, a particularly effective advisor was praised for helping a student strategically enroll in courses to graduate on time. In the latter case, the program's inability to offer courses regularly (sometimes no more than once every two years) or the inability to offer courses that do not conflict with student schedules, both due to a lack of staffing, harmed the students' academic experiences.

B. *ESLOs*

Quantitative Literacy and Inquiry and Analysis were assessed university-wide in AY 2020. Not enough artifacts were submitted to the Inquiry and Analysis committee to allow for generalizable or useable assessment data.

Quantitative Literacy's assessment was largely completed via faculty reflection and response about their satisfaction with their students' quantitative reasoning ability at various points through their academic career: lower-division coursework, upper-division coursework and graduation.

Professional Writing faculty who teach courses requiring some quantitative literacy largely noted two patterns in our students. Their ability to perform calculations to a course's expectations tends to *decrease* over time, while their ability to ask questions about quantitative problems tends to *increase*. Their ability to communicate the importance of quantitative information tends to remain satisfactory throughout their academic career.

Upon further discussion, faculty felt that these trends were due to the abstract role of quantitative reasoning in our discipline. For example, students focused on document or media design (e.g. COM 248) are expected to understand algebraic and geometric mathematics to an intermediate level in order to use the design software central to those courses.

While Professional Writing courses frequently discuss quantitative data and its use in argument or messaging strategies, it is rare for students to have to calculate or collect that data themselves, resulting in much greater challenge in upper-level courses where that expectation exists. However, faculty discussing quantitative literacy among program students also noted that specific faculty in our program are associated with those quantitative issues, and our students are especially adept at

determining what questions they need to ask to address a computational or quantitative data concern, even after graduation.

VIII. Action Plan

During Professional Writing Advisory Committee (PWAC) meetings in AY 2020, the following action plan was developed for AY 2020 and following years.

A. Revision of Technical Emphasis Sequence

Budget Effect: None

Staffing Effect: None

It was suggested by Dean Peterson that the Professional Writing program should consider reducing its technical emphasis sequences listed in the catalog. These sequences were intended to be suggestions rather than requirements, similar to a Communication Studies focused sequence, but are treated as required checkboxes in DegreeWorks. This may dissuade students from enrolling in Professional Writing, as the major looks more restrictive than it actually is.

B. Curriculum Map

Budget Effect: None

Staffing Effect: None

In AY 2021, the curriculum map will be completed to indicate which PSLOs are emphasized in each course that has already been taught. Courses that have not yet been offered will not have this information completed.

C. Portfolio Development and Active Reflection

Faculty conversations about assessment data and our experiences in class have led to a desire to expand our existing expectations for metacognition as part of the portfolio development process. All Professional Writing students graduate with a professional portfolio (a necessity to apply for any writing professions), which is developed from both professional work outside school and projects completed in coursework. All Professional Writing faculty currently encourage some metacognition from students, encouraging them to connect what they are learning in one course to what they've learned in another, at times even encouraging them to explicitly identify PSLOs in the process.

Program faculty have begun discussing techniques for making this expectation more consistent across all courses, encouraging students to see the connections between skills they develop in all of their academic experiences.

D. Hire More Faculty

Budget Effect: Significant

Staffing Effect: Increased staffing

The program has submitted requests for more faculty over the past few years, resulting in few actual new hires. At times, this is a result of timing: new hire request paperwork is due from the department at the same time that our field's academic job postings are going public, so we tend to post our advertisements months after the ideal hiring time. At the same time, many of our writing-focused hires have been on one-year contracts, forcing us to repeat hiring requests and searches each year without actually expanding our staffing.

However, as student feedback and our own history of course offerings reveals, we need more faculty for this program to grow and be more effective. Program faculty are stretched thin between general education courses, Professional Writing courses and Communication Studies courses, often leaving students to wait an extra year to take required courses.

Ultimately, this is not a programmatic or departmental decision. The program requires support from the university to grow.

IX. Closing the Loop

A. Beginning the Loop

The recent launch of the Professional Writing program has not allowed for the formation of an inquiry loop, let alone the closing of one. Professional Writing faculty are conscious of the need for systematic review of the program's performance in meeting the needs of its students. Faculty in the program will continue meeting regularly to discuss the development of the program in response to student needs *as students*, as well as the changing professional landscape that they will encounter upon graduation.

As we have recently graduated our first full cohort and collected enough observations to see the program's performance as a whole, future conversations will focus on developing student reflection assignments to create a more coherent connection between all Professional Writing courses.