INTRODUCTION TO PROFESSIONAL WRITING

Brandeis University
The Heller School for Social Policy and Management
Master of Arts in Sustainable International Development

Instructor: Professor Joan Dassin
Office: Schneider 105 Phone: 781-736-2207
Email: jdassin@brandeis.edu
Office hours: By Appointment

COURSE INFORMATION

Course description:
The course uses on hands-on exercises to improve students’ professional writing while also building skills in reading comprehension and critical analysis of important texts in international development, health and peace building. Students are introduced to a variety of formats, including critical essays, policy briefs, professional emails and memos. Recommended resources are provided for executive summaries and abstracts, cover letters and grant proposals, consultant reports, and research papers.

Online exercises and writing assignments will allow students to practice basic writing skills such as structuring sentences and paragraphs, creating effective transitions, developing logical arguments, and using clear and concise language. The course aims to provide students with tools to continuously improve their professional writing skills.

Week 1 (Week of June 25): Introduction to Professional Writing
Students will review the basic principles of clear, effective professional writing. We will analyze the most common writing pitfalls and consider the best writing style to present information about research, policy and practice in international development, global health and peacebuilding.

Required Reading:


Reading Questions:

1) What are Pinker’s main criticisms of academic writing?
2) What is the most frequent kind of poor writing that you read in your professional work?
3) What are the biggest challenges in your own professional writing?

Discussion Forum:
Please write short answers to questions found in Exercises 1 and 2 [see link]. Post your answers in the Discussion Forum and respond to at least 2 posts from other students.

*Practical Topic #1: “Preventing, Contextualizing and Avoiding Plagiarism.”* Read material on plagiarism, summarizing, paraphrasing and quoting. Complete exercises for each topic that you would like to practice. See: [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/930/01/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/930/01/)

*Proceed to online Quiz [see link].*

*Writing Assignment Format and Checklist [link]*

*Writing Assignment #1: Select two short passages from a book or journal, magazine or newspaper article in your primary field of interest. One passage should be an example of poor, unnecessarily complex or obscure writing. The other should be an example of good ‘classic’ style. In a maximum of two pages, explain why you have selected the two passages and what is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ about the writing. Include the passages you have selected in your text. Present your explanation clearly and give examples.*

*Your paper is due Friday, June 29. Post your paper on the Latte link under Unit 1.*

*Additional Resources:*
Review APA Style: APA Style Guide: [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/)

Learn to read the Turnitin Report: [http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/ASCtii/ASCtiioriginality](http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/ASCtii/ASCtiioriginality)

Grammar Review:
Purdue Online Writing Lab Exercises: [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/exercises/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/exercises/)
Topics:
  - Grammar
  - Punctuation
  - Spelling
  - Sentence Structure
  - Sentence Style
  - Writing Numbers
  - ESL Exercises

Editorial help online: [www.grammarly.com](http://www.grammarly.com)
NOTE: DO NOT PAY FOR THIS!

**Unit 2 (Week of July 2): Essay Writing**
- This unit will focus on the common types of essay writing: expository; descriptive; narrative; and argumentative. See:
  - Essay Writing: [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/1/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/685/1/)
  - Parts of an Essay: Outlining [https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/2/55/](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/2/55/)

*Reading:*

**Reading Questions:**

1) What are the key elements of Vasanti’s life ‘story’?
2) What does Nussbaum learn from talking to Vasanti and observing her?
3) Based on Vasanti’s story, what does Nussbaum conclude about development?
4) How is the ‘capabilities’ approach different from conventional approaches that focus on economic growth and GDP per capita?

**Discussion Forum:**

Would you categorize Nussbaum's article as a type of argumentative essay? Do you agree with her main argument that the ‘capabilities’ approach is a more complete measure of development than economic growth and GDP per capita? Why or why not?

Post a short answer and respond to at least 2 other posts.

**Practical Topic #2: Structure and Organization in Writing**

Self-paced review:
- Relevance of Ideas https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/30/
- Order of Ideas https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/31/
- Transitions https://owl.english.purdue.edu/engagement/2/1/32/
- Argument papers: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/724/01/

**Writing Assignment #2**

In her essay “What Makes Life Good,” Martha Nussbaum argues that conventional approaches to development that focus solely on economic growth and GDP are insufficient. She builds her case using the example of Vasanti, a poor woman in India. Do you agree or disagree with Nussbaum’s argument? Write a 5-paragraph argumentative essay to explain your position.

*Your essay is due on Friday, July 6. Post your text on the Latte link under Unit 2.*

**Optional Writing Exercises:** [see link]

**Unit 3 (Week of July 9): Writing Effective Policy Briefs**

This unit will focus on the key elements of effective policy briefs and on the broader question of communicating research results to generate policy impact and public awareness of important issues.


**Required Reading:** Research to Action. “Is the age of the Policy Brief over”? 3
Reading Questions:

1) What is the main purpose of a policy brief?
2) What makes a policy brief effective?
3) In your view, what is the best way to influence policy makers? In the age of instant access to information, are policy briefs still necessary? What other communications strategies can be used to communicate research for policy influence?

Discussion Forum:
Identify an example of an effective policy brief in your field. In the Discussion Forum, post a link to the policy brief you have selected and state why you think it is effective.

Recommended website for policy briefs: Center for Global Development, see policy briefs at: https://www.cgdev.org/section/publications?f%5B0%5D=field_document_type%3A2048&f%5B0%5D=field_document_type%3A2081&f%5B0%5D=field_document_type%3A2048

Practical Topic #3: Increasing Reading Comprehension

See: https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/ASCsuccess/ASCreading retention
Apply one or more of these techniques to your reading of policy briefs. Which technique works best for you?

Writing Assignment #3
Before writing your paper, review the different toolkits for communicating research results to policymakers and the general public. See: http://www.researchtoaction.org/2015/04/research-communication-for-policy-influence-key-toolkits/

Select an urgent issue in your field (e.g. violence against women; HIV/AIDS) that requires further research, policy action and/or public advocacy.

In a maximum of two pages, explain: 1) what the issue is; 2) why it is important; and 3) what communications strategy (e.g. policy brief; media outreach) you would use to bridge the gap between research and action on the issue.

You do not have to write in a strict essay format but remember to follow the principles of effective writing, structure and organization so that your paper makes a clear, coherent and strong argument.

Your paper is due Friday, July 13.

Recommended Resources:


Unit 4 (Week of July 16): The ‘SDGs,’ Email and Memo Formats and Review/Practice Assessment
Students will read Agenda 2030, the official document that establishes the 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Students will learn about formats for memos and professional emails, and review best practices in scholarly writing, especially for structure and organization (the most common challenges).

To conclude the course, students will complete a practice writing assessment.

Required Reading:

Reading Questions:
1. What is your prior knowledge of the SDGs?
2. Do you think the goals address all the major challenges faced by the international community? Are there significant omissions?
3. How can global goals be implemented across a range of different societies and contexts?

Discussion Forum:
In your view, which of the 17 SDGs is most critical for your country? Why? What do you expect to learn at the Heller School that will help you to address that question? Post a short statement in answer to the question. Respond to at least 2 posts from other students.

Practical Topic #4: Elements of Professional and Scholarly Writing
Memos: Review this format on your own. Do you write memos often in your professional work? See: How to Write the Perfect Memo. http://polaris.umuc.edu/ewc/web/memo.html

Emails: Review the proper format for a professional email. Make a list of the key elements for future use. See: How to Write a Professional Email. https://www.aje.com/en/arc/editing-tip-professional-email-writing/

Elements of Scholarly Writing: Browse through the section entitled “Building and Organizing Academic Arguments.” Make a list of three practical tips that will help you in your writing when
you come to Heller. Keep this for your personal reference. See: 
https://academicguides.waldenu.edu/writingcenter/webinars/scholarlywriting

Review and Practice Assessment

Students review material from the course at their own pace and ask questions as needed.

Practice Writing assessment: This is a practice version of the assessment that all SID, COEX, Global Health and dual degree students take during orientation. The actual assessment will be based on a similar text and use the same type of questions. Spend no more than 2 hours on the practice assessment, since this is the time you will have when you take it at Heller.

Complete and submit practice assessment by Friday, July 20. Post on link under Unit 4. TEXT for the Practice Assessment:

Text will be distributed on Friday, July 20.