



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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WRITING ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

When teachers and students discuss technology, how it works, where it fits in people's lives, or the role it plays in a student's studies, they don't always consider *writing* about technology. However, every website that displays cool technology—the latest ideas in concept cars, the newest descriptions of computer wizardry for the Harry Potter movies, or new advances in skateboarding—is written by someone. The same is true for articles and advertisements in magazines. Somebody *wrote* that material. I make that point to my students; I want them to learn that writing is *not* punishment! On the contrary, it's a necessary skill that can be tailored to specific interests. Consequently, if that interest is in technology, there's a need for someone to write about it.

As a writing instructor, I know most students do not particularly care to study English. Of the large numbers and diverse groups of students who pass through my classes—students enrolled in automotive, diesel, and heavy equipment; air conditioning and refrigeration; construction technology; visual communications; culinary arts; electronics; and shoe, boot, and saddle programs—many would rather be somewhere else. However, since these students must pass my technical writing course, one of their assignments is to write about the technology in their particular field of study. Rather than reinvent the wheel, I based this writing assignment on an earlier and less-detailed assignment (see *Innovation Abstracts*, Vol. XIX, No. 7). Specifically, the assignment asks students to discuss the types of writing they are required to do at school and on the job, the various types of technology taught and used at our college, the technology they encounter on the job, and the future of developing technologies.

What follows is a step-by-step description of the assignment, by topic headings. The assignment is structured as a formal report and includes a title page. I ask students to write 2-3 pages of single-spaced text, with block paragraphs, appropriate headings, and a list of references (which may include textbooks or relevant websites that pertain to the technologies).

The introduction to the report asks students to

provide the following information:

- Name of the program in which they are enrolled
- Trimester in which they are enrolled
- Internships completed and location (if applicable)
- Date of expected graduation
- Career plans
- Long-term goals

Following the introduction, the report must include four major sections: 1) writing about writing; 2) writing about technology; 3) technology and school performance; and 4) projections for the future.

Writing about Writing

Following the introduction, students must comment on all types of writing they do in school, then briefly summarize the importance of writing assignments that are important parts of their schoolwork. If their program does not require parts of their schoolwork (e.g., shoe, boot, and saddle; or culinary arts), they must discuss the details of their work and how any writing that is required is tied to it.

In the second section of the report, students must look ahead toward graduation. In this section, they are to list the types of writing they may be required to do in order to be effective employees. If they're in an internship program, they discuss the types of writing they are required to do as part of their off-campus daily routine. After they have listed the most important kinds of work-related writing, they discuss those they believe to be the *most* important and why. Part of that section can also be an evaluation of my technical writing course and what they believe future assignments should be, based on their experiences.

Writing about Technology

Because all of our students deal with some technology, this section of the report asks them to discuss, in detail, the kinds of technology used in their current course work. Students may include the equipment used in any of the training labs, as well as any computers, training devices, machinery, or equipment they may have to troubleshoot, repair, dismantle, or reassemble as part of their coursework. If they are "undecided"



students, they are to apply the technology they know will be in the job or on the career path they may eventually choose.

As internship students, many have had experience in the field via college programs, and they must describe and discuss the technology they encountered during their internships with sponsoring companies or dealers. Often, that technology deals with diagnostics and troubleshooting, but may also include computerized engine controls, a variety of sensors, or software. In addition, they are asked to discuss any problems they've had with that technology and, certainly, what they've had to learn in order to solve them. Furthermore, they are asked to comment on technologies which their teachers have characterized as experimental, newly developed, controversial, or new to their field of study. Then, they project the technology's potential contribution to that field or career.

Projections for the Future

I remind students that since no one knows technology as well as the people who are using it, it makes sense they should be able to write about current and developing technologies in their own specialty areas. I explain that every profession needs writers to document and explain the basics, as well as the complexities of technology in that particular field. That need leaves the door wide open for writers. Since most of the students in the automotive and diesel programs work with computer diagnostics, they are aware of new programs, new software, and developing technologies that are being discussed in trade publications and on the job. Consequently, they are asked to comment on how developing technologies will affect their duties in the future and how they expect to receive advanced training in developing technologies once they are on the job.

Technology and School Performance

Finally, students evaluate how their particular programs prepare graduates to use the technology they will be expected to use in the future—e.g., computers in general studies classes or coursework posted on Blackboard.com for writing and math courses. This section may include a description of the technology students are using currently in their technical programs.

However, this section is an evaluation and need not be limited to a specific program. Many students believe that technology is limited to diagnostics and troubleshooting. This report, however, asks them to comment on any other technologies with which they may come into contact as students. They are asked to conclude this section by evaluating how well they are being prepared for the future, based on their opinions and personal

experiences. And, if they prefer, they may also comment on what might be done to improve instruction.

Final Comments

Writing about technology as an assignment need not be limited to the English classroom. Any program that deals with any technology is a target for students who could write for potential users. In a workforce that is highly competitive and constantly training and retraining, writing may be the one facet of students' educations that separates them from other graduates with similar degrees. Therefore, students should learn to stretch their writing abilities by writing about technology. After all, they are studying to be competent technicians with a good grasp of their subject matter. Moreover, they are the experts of the future and could well be the next generation of writers who dominate their field.

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