CHAPTER 7

Work Styles and Writing Assignments in the Community

*In academic writing, the audience reads your paper because they have to or
are deeply interested in the topic. This is not necessarily the case with writing for
the community where your aim may be to attract the person's attention or persuade
someone once you do have the precious few minutes of his attention. In non-academic
writing, I personally see a different purpose: Be persuasive. Be succinct.*

—ANH BUI, FOURTH-YEAR STUDENT

When one of your assignments in an academic course with a service-learning component is to write material for the use of a community organization, you find yourself in an entirely different *rhetorical situation* than you do as an academic writer. The adjective *rhetorical* and its root noun *rhetoric* carry with them some perhaps unfortunate connotations. For example, when someone poses a question that she or he does not really want answered, we call it "a rhetorical question." When an argument is merely form, lacking content or sincerity, we call it "empty rhetoric." Although rhetoric has popularly come to connote a devious or otherwise suspect manipulation of language, its literal meaning is simply *the art and the product of spoken or written expression,* whatever the speaker's or writer's motives might be. There is such a thing, of course, as constructive rhetoric, in which speakers and writers craft their language to achieve a positive effect on an audience. A rhetorical situation, therefore, arises from any communication scenario in which a thoughtful speaker or writer must decide how most effectively to style his or her expression so that it accomplishes its *rhetorical purpose.* Rhetorical purpose depends very much on whom the speaker or writer wants to reach.

When you write practical documents in a community context, your primary readers are no longer your instructor and a few of your peers, and your immediate purpose in writing is no longer to receive a good grade. Readers of practical documents comprise new, unfamiliar, and larger audiences than most academic writers are used to. Depending on the kind of document you write and its purpose, your readers may include the public, agency staff, or others associated with carrying out the agency's work. Your purpose—whether to provide these readers with information or explanation, or to persuade them—arises from real necessity.

When you write a brochure that will be mailed by the fire department to every household within the city limits explaining a new local ordinance banning wood-burning fireplaces, your readers are the general public, and your purpose is to inform. When you write educational materials explaining tidepool ecology to visitors to a coastal park, your readers are members of the public of all ages with a demonstrated, if not well-informed, interest in the natural environment. Your purpose is to explain to them the complexity and fragility of the ecosystem they are witnessing and perhaps to persuade them, ultimately, that tidepools are not an appropriate source of souvenirs. If you write a flyer distributed to homeless people publicizing free AIDS testing, you are targeting a very specific, disenfranchised group of people in an attempt to persuade them to come into a local clinic to be tested and perhaps to receive further, much-needed medical care in the process.

Some writing targets agency insiders or professional readers, and its purpose is to promote or sustain the work of the organization itself. When you write an orientation manual for volunteers at a domestic violence hotline, your purpose in informing them is to help train them effectively to field calls from a vulnerable segment of the public. When you collaborate with agency staff in writing a grant proposal for an inner-city after-school program that is looking for a way to pay for computers for its kids to use, your readers may be members of a foundation board reviewing many grant proposals from many community nonprofits. Your purpose is to persuade these readers that your agency and its program are worth funding.

In service-learning, any writing that you do for a community agency should teach you something worthwhile; one hopes that another outcome of your hard work will be a good grade or positive evaluation. However, there are clearly more immediate objectives.

WORK STYLES IN COMMUNITY WRITING

You will find that in many respects writing in the community has much more in common with workplace writing than with most academic writing. This is understandable since private nonprofit organizations and governmental agencies are, after all, workplaces for the people who work in them, and, as businesses do, they serve a clientele. Collaborations in writing and other kinds of work in community agencies and other workplaces are quite common, whereas collaborations are less common in academic work. Working and writing in the community can help prepare you in very tangible ways for the workplace, as well as informing and enlivening your academic work.

The fact is that collaborations require both independence *and* cooperation. In order to be successful, collaborations require each member of a team to pull his or her independent weight. Student service-learners often find themselves in especially complicated collaboration scenarios because they are collaborating with so many

people, in so many ways, and on so many levels. Not only are they collaborating with agency mentors in forming and revising practical writing projects, but they are also collaborating with their instructors and often with other students in completing them. Whereas working with instructors and other students may be familiar to you, collaborating with staff in community organizations may be entirely unfamiliar. It pays to understand something about the collaborative work culture in community agencies, since it differs so dramatically from academic work culture.

Understanding the Work Culture of Community Organizations

In many well-established *private nonprofit organizations,* there is a board of directors and an executive director. The board of directors generally comprises a combination of staff (including the executive director of the organization) and volunteer board members. Important decisions are generally made on the basis of a vote taken among members of the board. The job of the executive director is technically to carry out the decisions of the board, although most directors of private nonprofits have leeway in making many decisions on their own. Some private nonprofits operate by *consensus,* that is, important decisions affecting the organization are made only when all board members agree.

Not all private nonprofit organizations have boards of directors. If the organization has an executive director, generally this person has the final say on policy and procedure. If the organization operates by consensus, then all staff or project managers, and possibly even key volunteers, have equal say.

Acquiring funding is a major and ever-present concern of all private nonprofit organizations; staff and volunteers spend a huge portion of their time and energy just raising enough money to stay in business. If they don't raise funds, then they can't bring their programs and services to the community. Private nonprofits raise funds in three primary ways: (1) by applying for and receiving monetary grants or material grants (gifts in the form of computers, office supplies, or other materials) from private or corporate foundations or businesses; (2) through membership fees and monetary donations from individuals; and (3) from fundraising events. Staff of nonprofits find it frustrating that often more of their efforts go into fundraising—in the form of grant-writing, membership and donation drives, and sponsoring and hosting fundraising events—than in implementing their actual services and programs in the community.

However a private nonprofit organization is organized, staff and volunteers collaborate on a daily basis in numerous and complex tasks. They work together to conceive, articulate, and publicize their agency's mission. They educate the public through events and written materials. They devise and implement fundraising plans. They network with other groups, individuals, and policy-makers in order to gather and share information and to gain public and political support. They plan and perform outreach in the communities they serve. They conceive and carry out programs and projects that fulfill their agency's mission. Together, they keep the office organized and operational.

Depending on the size and funding of a particular agency, the number of staff and volunteers and the ratio of staff to volunteers vary. A large and long-established organization, especially if it is a national or international one, may have a number of paid staff, even in a regional office. Furthermore, because of name recognition, these organizations may have access to a fairly large number of volunteers who will likely help the agency with special tasks. A small grassroots organization will probably have a minimum of staff, often only one person who is seriously underpaid and seriously overworked. This kind of organization will rely heavily on a limited number of volunteers, dedicated but few, even in the day-to-day running of the office. No one, including staff in relatively large nonprofits, goes into this line of work because of the fat paycheck, and work in the nonprofit sector is notoriously grueling. But clearly, it is also meaningful and rewarding.

Although many, and probably most, students who work with community agencies in service-learning placements will work for private nonprofit organizations, some will work for *public nonprofit organizations,* or *governmental agencies.* Governmental agencies exist on the local (city and county), state, and federal levels. Students working with governmental agencies are most likely to work at the city or county level, with agencies ranging from fire and police departments, to parks and recreation programs, to libraries and social service programs.

Governmental agencies tend to be run differently than most private nonprofit organizations. For one thing, governmental agencies, even on the local level, are often larger operations, employing more people. There also tends to be a more distinct hierarchy in governmental agencies, often with separate departments or divisions operating within one agency. Even more so than within most private nonprofit organizations, everyone answers to someone in a governmental agency; everyone has a boss. For example, both office staff and field officers who work in the Hazardous Materials Division of a large urban fire department answer to the Head of the Hazardous Materials Division, and the Head of the Hazardous Materials Division answers to the Fire Chief. The Fire Chief, in turn, answers to the City Council.

Governmental agencies are notorious for their complicated bureaucracies, and even in efficiently run offices students' practical writing projects can evolve more slowly than in most private nonprofit agencies because there are more people involved in the collaboration. For example, one student working within the Hazardous Materials Division of a city fire department found that after his agency mentor, the Head of the Hazardous Materials Division, had approved the content of a Web page that he was writing to inform the public about household pesticides, he and his agency mentor had to submit the plan to the Fire Chief for approval. The same chain of approval had to be followed before the finished Web page could be posted to the fire department's Web site. This process took time and was occasionally frustrating for the student, but he and everyone else involved were very happy with the finished product. If you work with a governmental agency, be ready to work within a bureaucracy.

Governmental agencies are funded differently than private nonprofit organizations, but they, too, must scramble for funding. Since these agencies are funded by the government rather than by private grants and donations, they

must submit budget proposals at the federal, state, county, or city level. Just because a governmental agency submits a proposal for a certain amount of money to fund operations and programs doesn't mean that it will be given this money. Many governmental agencies, therefore, are financially strapped, just as most private nonprofit agencies are. It would be relevant for you to know how the community agency you are working with is organized and funded, so ask.

Working with Agency Mentors and Staff

When you agree to work with a community agency, you may see yourself primarily as a student and as a service-learner, but staff and volunteers at your agency will see you as one of the team. They will expect you to do your job as part of that team. The emphasis on collaboration in the nonprofit sector, however, does not mean that you will not work independently. You will. Even if you are with a group of students at your agency, you will probably do quite a lot of independent work in researching and writing your project. Collaboration with agency staff will likely come into the picture most in hands-on work, and in planning and revising a practical writing project.

Once the project is reasonably well-defined and you and your mentor have agreed on its audience and purpose, you may find that you are pretty much on your own, and that your agency mentor will send you on your way, expecting you to work independently until the draft of the project is ready for review. After providing editorial feedback on the draft of a practical writing project, your agency mentor will probably send you off again with a smile and a "just do it" attitude. For students who are used to more structured and more familiar assignments, this degree of independence can be both liberating and disconcerting.

An agency mentor agrees to work with a service-learning student for one primary reason: the student will contribute something tangible to the agency's work. Since most community agencies are understaffed, having one more person to help with the work, especially with writing projects, is tremendously useful. Many of the documents that students produce have been on agency wish lists for some time, but these projects keep getting put off because staff must focus on more immediate concerns. Agency mentors are thrilled, in this respect, to work with students. One hopes, too, that agency mentors will enjoy working with students; most mentors do. They appreciate not only the work that students contribute to their agencies, but also the students' energy, their fresh ideas and perspectives.

The fact that we refer to them as *mentors*—as opposed to, say, *supervisors*—implies that mentors in community agencies do have an instructional role. Still, it is important for you to understand that an agency mentor's job differs from a teacher's job. Your teacher's exclusive job is to teach you and other students. Serving as your mentor is one of many professional tasks on your agency mentor's plate.

> I think an ideal mentor is someone who is very easy to reach, gives the writer a reasonable workload, is explicit about what they are looking for in the project, and checks up on the student frequently. But there must be a balance between checking progress and giving the writer a legitimate amount of creative freedom.
> —*A first-year student*

This student seems to be confusing the role of the mentor with the role of the teacher. Teachers *should* be easy for their students to reach. They *can* be expected to assign a reasonable workload, because they know what constitutes a reasonable workload in an academic context. Instructors *can* be expected to be explicit in their assignments, because they are teachers; likewise, instructors often *do* take the initiative in checking up on their students' progress because that is part of their job. Providing students with "creative freedom" may indeed *be* an important fundamental goal of an academic class.

Expectations that you might quite reasonably attach to your teacher cannot, however, be reasonably transferred to your agency mentor. Agency mentors can't be expected to be at students' service in the same way that teachers can, since mentors have other and different kinds of work to do. Agency mentors might not know what a reasonable workload is in a service-learning context; it is up to you to be clear and direct with your mentor if you feel that the work he or she expects from you is too much. Neither can a mentor be expected to be explicit in an assignment if he or she is expecting you to collaborate in clarifying it. It is not the mentor's responsibility to check up on student progress; rather, it is your responsibility to check in with your mentor when necessary. Ensuring that students have "creative freedom" is not the point in service-learning placements; making sure that agencies get what they need—whatever that may be—is. If your creativity can contribute to the success of a project, that's wonderful, but showcasing students' creativity is not a prerequisite for worthwhile practical writing projects.

> Ideally, the mentor is someone who is patient and kind, someone who is already well established in their organization so that they can tell students exactly whom to talk to about what.
> —*Katie Braden, fourth-year student*
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> The ideal agency mentor is responsive, helpful, direct, energetic. My agency mentor was a busy man, as could be expected. However, he was good about responding via email, and he left phone messages when necessary. This helped me out a lot.
> —*Steve Schreiner, fourth-year student*

What *can* you reasonably expect from your agency mentor? Some expectations are more realistic than others. Your agency mentor should be accessible and responsive when you have important questions related to your project. But in the real world, your mentor may not be as readily available or respond to your questions as quickly as you would like. Most mentors are open to new ideas, but they also frequently have set projects in mind and a way of doing agency work that may limit your input. Because there is often a high rate of turnover among staff in community agencies, your mentor may be relatively new to the organization; although most students would prefer working with seasoned mentors, some mentors will be learning as they go, just as students are. Some will be more experienced or skilled in working with students or will enjoy it more than others: that's just a fact of life. Although of course you hope that your mentor will be kind and organized (as no doubt your mentor hopes that you will be), personality traits like these cannot be categorically expected.

Mentoring styles vary widely. One mentor may relate to you matter-of-factly, with a down-to-business attitude; another mentor may invite you over for dinner and take a more active role in providing you with guidance related to your project and beyond. There's really no telling in advance what kind of mentor yours will be. But in collaborating with your mentor, you will form an important relationship, and you will certainly have a role in shaping it.

Working with Instructors

Instructors who assign community-based practical writing projects as part of the work in their service-learning classes have a variety of individual approaches in managing these projects. Your instructor may take a hands-off approach, preferring that you collaborate primarily or exclusively with your agency mentor and, if yours is a group project, with the other students in your group. If your instructor's approach is hands-on, she or he may want to check on your progress at various stages of your project's development, as you define, research, plan, draft, and revise the project. Whether her or his approach is relatively hands-off or relatively hands-on, your instructor will be the one evaluating the finished project, since it is part of your course work. This can be confusing, especially if your instructor is providing advice and feedback on your project along the way: you may wonder, *who's the authority here, the instructor or the agency mentor?*

When you write for a community agency, the answer is *the agency mentor.* If your instructor gives you ongoing feedback as your project develops, or even just at the draft stage, he or she is trying to be helpful. Your instructor's role in helping to guide your practical writing project in the community is as an advisor; the agency mentor will have the final word on what works or does not work in a document you write for the agency's use. Your agency mentor is essentially the project boss; he or she knows much better than the instructor does what the agency wants and needs from the project.

The fact that your instructor is the one who will in the end evaluate your project involves a kind of act of faith on your part. It is your instructor's job, in collaborating with you and your agency mentor, to understand the audience and purpose of any writing that you produce for the agency; your instructor's evaluation of your project will be based on this understanding. Many instructors ask agency mentors for their assessments of students' projects before evaluating them. You need to trust that your instructor knows the specific audience and purpose of your community writing project well enough to evaluate its success on those terms rather than as a piece of academic writing.

Working with Other Students

In group projects that involve writing for a community agency, or when drafts of community writing projects undergo peer review, your collaboration process is further complicated: you are considering not only your agency mentor's and your instructor's feedback, but also feedback from other students. Of course, students with whom you are collaborating in writing a single project will have both a special understanding of and a vested interest in your work. Active collaborations with other students in a working group are most likely to occur in the formative stages of the project and in the revising and formatting stages.

After students working collaboratively have clearly defined a project with their agency mentor, they must figure how to fairly divide the work, including research. Although the research each student does may be accomplished independently, a student group needs to come back together to plan an organizational strategy for the document and to divide the work of drafting it. Although drafting the whole is very often accomplished most efficiently by each student individually drafting a part, it is essential that students collaborate in piecing these parts together. Revising and formatting the finished document should be a collaborative effort. (See "Collaborations among Peers" in Chapter 3. Also see Chapter 11, Formatting; and Chapter 13, Revising and Editing.)

Take care in a collaborative project that one student does not become the project leader. The collaborative process fails when one person or group within the larger group does more, or less, work than others. If you have had a poor experience with group work in the past, consider the possible reasons.

- *Have you shouldered the lion's share of the responsibilities in group work?*

If so, was it because your peers were lazy and you cared more about the work than they did? Or (be honest!) are you the type of person who tends to take over?

- *Have you not taken on your fair share of the responsibilities in group work?*

If so, was it because you were lazy and just didn't care? Or was it because you have a hard time speaking up?

Although simple laziness of some group members can be a factor, it is likely that the causes of most unfair collaborations run deeper than this. In your collaborations with other students, be self-aware, and pay attention to group dynamics. Early on in the collaboration, articulate an agreement among all group members that, regardless of personalities, *everyone* will contribute and *no one* will dominate.

In student collaborations, decisions that affect the whole project should be arrived at through mutual agreement so that the project is unified, coherent, and of one voice. Except in unavoidable circumstances, all students in the group should together attend meetings with the agency mentor or any other meetings or events that pertain to the whole project. Similarly, when meetings with the instructor focus on the entire project, as opposed to a student's individual part of it, all students should attend.

If your practical writing project is a collaborative one with other students, plan to serve as peer reviewers of one another's work, contributing ideas, suggestions, and editorial advice to each other. Clearly, students within collaborative groups make excellent peer reviewers since they have an in-depth understanding of the assignment, including the subject of the writing as well as its audience and purpose. However, because other students in your group are "inside" readers, they might sometimes find it difficult to read from your intended reader's perspective. A student from outside your collaborative group can also function as an excellent peer reviewer. In fact, an outside reviewer who understands the audience and purpose of your project well might be better able to read from your audience's perspective, spotting gaps in information or explanations, perhaps, or language that is unclear or not well suited for your intended reader.

Peer review is also, of course, extremely helpful if you are working on an individual project. With the suggestions and comments that you receive from your agency mentor and perhaps from your instructor as your project unfolds, you will not lack feedback. But feedback from a peer reviewer can provide you with a fresh perspective.

Collaboration in practical writing projects in the community can be both exhilarating and challenging. Working with a variety of people who are interested in and excited about your work and invested in your success can energize you and make you feel that you are contributing to something important through your writing. And you are! But intense collaboration with so many people can be confusing as well, especially if you sometimes receive contradictory feedback. Just remember two things:

- *Make sure that you have a good grasp of the assignment, its audience and its purpose.* If you do, then you will know what you are trying to accomplish in your writing and will be better able to situate the feedback that you receive within the context of your goals in writing.

- *Remember that your agency mentor has the final word about what works and what doesn't in your practical writing project.*

DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

> In my community-service writing project, I had to look at my writing as my audience would read it, and fit my writing to my audience's needs. At first, I discounted how difficult this task could be, and wrote my draft with an ambiguous and vague audience in mind.
>
> —Karen Lai, first-year student

A *discourse community* is a group of people, whether readers or writers, who not only have interests in common but also a special way of communicating within the group. These communities vary widely from coast to coast, region to region, neighborhood to neighborhood, even family to family; they vary radically with age, culture, religion, education, ethnicity, native language, and many, many other factors. Adolescents, for example, may form a vast discourse community, with a language and communication style that sets them apart from other age groups. Within this enormous community are countless subgroups—jocks, stoners, skaters, gamers, and the list goes on and on—smaller, more specifically identified discourse communities.

Discourse communities exist everywhere, and understanding them equates to understanding your audience when you are writing in the community. Members of discourse communities have common interests, both in the sense of being interested in the same things and having the same needs and concerns. They also quite often practice particular language and communication styles in expressing or sharing these interests.

Several basic characteristics can help you begin to identify discourse communities in order to understand your audience:

- *Age.* How old are your readers? If they are children, what is their age group? Elementary school age? Younger adolescents, in middle school? Older adolescents or high school students? Young adults? Older adults? Elderly people? Each of these age categories can be seen as comprising a broad discourse community.
- *Education or literacy.* Level of education is often related to age, and literacy is often related to level of education—but not always, and not exclusively. At what level of complexity is your audience able to read? Don't assume that all adult readers are sophisticated readers; many aren't, for a variety of reasons. On the other hand, an adult reader whose first language is not English may be a sophisticated reader in Cantonese, but not in English.

Readers with various levels of education and literacy can be seen as distinct discourse communities.

- *Recipients or providers of services.* Does your reader *receive* services from the organization? Or does your reader *provide* services to people in need of them? This is a fundamental distinction. Recipients of services comprise a discourse community quite different from that of those who provide services.

Of course, much more specifically identified communities exist within each of these very broad categories. A crucial part of your job in developing your particular assignment in writing for a community agency will be to identify the particular discourse community to which your reader belongs and to learn as much as possible about it.

In order to write for a particular set of readers, student writers need to become part of their discourse community. In some assignments this is easier to accomplish than in others. The more closely you identify with your reader's discourse community, the better you will understand your reader, his or her needs, and his or her language and communication style. If, for example, you are an eighteen-year-old college student writing a brochure about safe sex to be read by high school students, you are close enough in age and experience to have an intuitive understanding of your readers' experiences, needs, and attitudes as well as a good sense of how to—and how *not* to—communicate with them. In fact, as someone who has recently endured adolescence yourself, you are probably much *better* qualified and prepared to write for this particular discourse community than are the older people at the community organization you are working with.

If, on the other hand, you are an eighteen-year-old writing for an audience comprising elderly people, you have a more challenging task, since this discourse community has experience, needs, attitudes, and language and communication styles that are relatively unfamiliar to you. Let's imagine that your particular assignment is to write a simple and accessible how-to guide for elders who are interested in learning enough computer skills to access email and the Internet. You are considering a computer science major, so the subject is inherently interesting to you, and you certainly know the skills well enough to instruct others in them. What you need now in order to accomplish your task is the ability to put yourself in your reader's position and to understand what the world looks like from his or her point of view.

In order to write your elder's how-to guide to email and Internet access, you will have to understand your reader as specifically and completely as possible. You will need to take care not to project assumptions based on your own experience onto a reader whose experience is quite different from yours. The best way to learn about your reader and his or her discourse community is firsthand. Visit a retirement home.

- **Observe.** What is the daily routine? What resources exist? What are people's limitations?

- **Ask questions.** Talk to residents and staff. What do residents need? Seek advice and suggestions.
- **Listen** to people's stories; pay attention to their attitudes and their complaints.

In speaking to elderly people in a retirement community, what in retrospect may seem obvious begins to occur to you. Even among those residents who are interested in learning about new technology (and for them, computers *are* new technology), there is hesitancy, even fear. Computers are complicated and intimidating, many residents tell you. "What if I break something?" more than one person asks. For many people in this community, personal computers—whose use was common well before you were born—are utterly foreign. Most have no inherent understanding, as you do (because the cultural and educational climate you grew up in more or less demanded it), of how these machines work or what the Internet is. Whereas using a mouse was a fine motor skill you learned at the age of three, most of your potential readers don't know what a "mouse" is, much less how to use one. This discourse community has no technical language related to computers.

You realize that in order to write your how-to guide for this discourse community, you will have to explain in very clear and basic terms how computers and the Internet work before you can explain how to use them. You will have to avoid computer jargon, keeping technical language to an absolute minimum. When you do have to use terms like "window" or "desktop" or "mouse," you will need to explain clearly and simply what these terms mean. Moreover, it is crucial that you accomplish all this respectfully, without condescension; if your tone is patronizing, your reader will probably be rightfully offended and will simply stop reading, which of course will defeat your purpose. You also realize that you will have to print your guide in a larger than usual font, since poor eyesight is a fact of life for many of your readers.

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em•pa•thy *n.* Intellectual or imaginative apprehension of another's condition or state of mind.
Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary

ster•e•o•type *n.* A biased, generalized image of the characteristics of an ethnic or social group.
Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary

Empathizing with your reader does not mean stereotyping him or her. A *stereotype* is derived from an automatic, overgeneralized, unexamined, and often erroneous assumption about what characterizes a large group of people. *Empathy* requires a deep and particular understanding of your reader's position in the world, what his or her life is like, what special needs he or she might have, what his or her attitudes and assumptions might be, and what language and communication style he or she might most readily understand and respond to. Writing for a relatively unfamiliar discourse community requires both research and *heart*. It requires that you become an honorary member of your reader's discourse community.

WRITING PURPOSES, GENRES, AND ASSIGNMENTS IN THE COMMUNITY

Exigence is a piece of writing's reason for being; it is the occasion of and the necessity for a piece of writing; it is the most essential connection that exists between the reader and what she or he is reading. Writers generally have to work harder in academic writing than they do in writing for the community to establish the exigence of a piece of writing, to convince the reader that what she or he is reading is important and relevant. The fact that your instructor is obligated to read what you have written does not mean that he or she will necessarily find it interesting or important. Because writing for the community is more inherently or more obviously purposeful than academic writing and targets a more specific reader who often has an inherent interest in what you are writing about, exigence is often easier to establish. For example, if you write an article about this year's upcoming programs for your agency newsletter, and that newsletter is mailed to the membership of the organization, you can assume that most of your readers will have an inherent interest in what you have to tell them; their interest is demonstrated through their membership.

However, just because your reader in the community has an inherent interest in the content of your writing does not mean that he or she will find that the writing is interesting. Your instructor *has* to read everything that you write, no matter how well or poorly it may be written, because it is his or her job to do so and to help you improve your ability to express yourself. Your reader in the community, on the other hand, has no obligation whatsoever to read what you have written; he or she will simply stop reading something that is poorly written or does not sustain his or her interest. Clearly, this would defeat your purpose in writing. In a practical writing project, your project boss might be your agency mentor, but very often your reader is someone else entirely, and whatever the specific kind or purpose of the document you write, it must *work* for that reader.

If you have had a job that has called upon you to write, you know something about the importance and functions of practical writing in the workplace. If you are like most students, however, you have not done much structured writing other than in school, and although you may not always feel entirely comfortable as an academic writer, you are likely to be more familiar with writing in academic genres than in practical ones.

As readers, though, we encounter practical writing genres constantly. When we read the newspaper, we read articles and advertisements, both practical genres. When we read flyers handed out on the street or posted on telephone poles and bulletin boards, we are reading practical genres. When we attempt to decipher the instructions to program our DVD, we are reading a practical genre. As readers of practical writing genres, we know what works and what doesn't in capturing our attention and giving us the kind of information we need. If a flyer handed to you on the street isn't personally relevant, you chuck it into the first available trash or recycling bin. Even with your inherent interest in learning to program your DVD,

if the instructions are too technical, too complicated, or unclearly written, you will probably give up in frustration and get somebody else to do it or try to figure it out on your own. Understanding your assignment in terms of your reader's needs, and understanding how this translates into *rhetorical purpose,* is even more important in writing in the community—where writers and readers often do not belong to the same discourse community—than it is in academic writing.

It is likely that the writing that you do for your community agency will have a primary—or predominant, or ultimate—rhetorical purpose, just as it has a primary reader. Ask yourself:

- Is the primary purpose of the document *to inform?* Is it *to explain?* Is it *to persuade?*
- To what extent do these rhetorical purposes overlap? To what extent will they build on one another in the document?

Practical Genres That Inform

Because of its practical nature, most writing in community contexts serves *to inform* readers, providing them with specific information that they want or need. This information often pertains to the agency itself, to its activities and programs, or to subjects that are related to the agency's work. Some of the common practical genres that inform in community writing are press releases, reports, instructional manuals, brochures and pamphlets, flyers, fact sheets, newsletter articles, and Web pages.

If the exclusive purpose of the writing you do for your agency is to inform, then you must take special care in two respects:

1. Your information must be relevant, accurate, and complete, according to your reader's needs.

2. You must be careful not to editorialize.

There are many instances in practical writing scenarios in which injecting your opinion, or even the position that your agency might take in another rhetorical situation, is not appropriate. For example, the volunteer coordinator at a major metropolitan zoo surprised one student in a service-learning placement when she emphatically instructed him to stick exclusively to the cold, hard facts in writing his fact sheets about animals at the zoo. The student's job was to inform teenage volunteers about the birds of prey that they handled in demonstrations; the volunteers, in turn, used what they learned in reading these fact sheets to educate younger visitors. The coordinator did not want the student writer to inject emotion into his writing or personify these animals in any way in describing their natural habits and habitats. It was her view that if children appreciated these animals because they were interesting and remarkable in their own right, rather than because they were cute, they were more likely to grow into adults who were willing to see to it that these species were protected simply because they had a right to exist, not because they served any human purpose.

In the Appendix, you can find another example of community writing the exclusive purpose of which is to inform: Jenny Bernstein's report, "Water Quality: Tap Water," from *Indicators for a Sustainable San Mateo County: A Yearly Report Card on Our County's Quality of Life,* published by the private nonprofit organization Sustainable San Mateo County, in California. Students from Stanford University as well as local high school students, other local citizens, and agency staff have collaborated and contributed for years to this annually published report. The publication consists of factual reviews of data related to various indicators of quality of life in the county, including employment trends, per pupil funding, air quality, and homelessness. Sustainable San Mateo County's mission is to educate the public without advocating any specific approach to remedying the county's ills. Because of the organization's reputation for providing accurate information in an unbiased fashion, city and county officials have come to rely on this annual report in order to ascertain what areas of the public welfare need most attention. Although Sustainable San Mateo County advocates the basic principle that overall quality of life must be measured holistically, taking into account the community's economic and environmental health as well as social equity issues, the organization is effective in its work precisely *because* it does not take a political stand.

Practical Genres That Explain

Very often in community writing, *explanation,* which requires some degree of analysis, accompanies information, especially when an agency wants to expose the public to a particular way of looking at the facts that is in line with its mission and that supports its work in the community. Some of the common practical genres that *explain* in community writing are fact sheets, newsletter articles, Web pages, position and policy statements, project proposals and assessments, letters to policy-makers, opinion editorials, and letters to the editor.

It is sometimes difficult to clearly distinguish explanation from overt argument, or persuasion. Very often, explanation leads quite naturally to persuasion. However, whether explaining is your ultimate purpose in a practical document or a stop along the way toward argument, your first task will be to approach your subject reasonably. In explanation and analysis in community contexts, as in academic ones, the key objectives are clarity, logic, and demonstration of fact. It is possible to explain any given subject in any number of ways, but you want your reader to accept your explanation as the most credible one.

A good example of explanation in a practical document is the voters' guide that arrived in your mailbox before the last election. In voters' guides, opponents and proponents of every proposition or ballot measure have the opportunity to make brief statements that explain their positions, offering analyses, projecting costs, benefits, and other ramifications from their differing points of view. These are position statements, and they are not so much political argu-

ments as explanations, offered from a particular perspective. The object is to get the voter to accept the credibility and reasonableness of one analysis over the other.

Practical Genres That Persuade

Persuasion or *argument* in community writing contexts is frequently *explicit.* Although a credible piece of persuasive writing must also provide information and explanation, its final objective will be to persuade the reader of something very tangible: you want to convince your reader to adopt a specific position or to take a specific action. Persuasive documents in community writing make recommendations, appeals, and requests; they include project proposals or assessments, letters to policy-makers, opinion editorials, letters to the editor, fundraising and solicitation letters, and grant proposals. Sometimes a document that we might think of as being essentially informative or explanatory in nature—for example, a flyer or fact sheet—culminates in an explicit argument.

All arguments, including those made in practical documents, need four essential elements:

1. *A claim* to be supported.
2. *An audience* to be persuaded.
3. *Exigence,* or a reason for the argument to be made.
4. *Reasons* in support of the claim.

For example, imagine that you are writing a flyer for a free clinic in your city for distribution in a neighborhood known for its drug trafficking. Your *claim* is that intravenous (I.V.) drug users should participate in the clinic's needle exchange program. Your *audience* is I.V. drug users. Your *exigence* is the fact that the rate of HIV infection among I.V. drug users in your city is on the rise. Your *reasons* in support of your claim, succinctly stated in your flyer, are that (1) using new needles instead of shared ones will reduce the user's chances of contracting HIV/AIDS; (2) using new needles will reduce the chances of the user's loved ones and unborn children contracting HIV/AIDS; (3) widespread use of new instead of shared needles will reduce the general rate of HIV/AIDS infection; (4) these needles are free; and (5) participation is confidential.

Because of their purposeful and practical nature, arguments in the context of community action tend to be, in certain respects, easier to make than academic arguments, which tend to be more theoretical. In defining your project with your agency mentor, you will probably know in advance to what extent your writing will be an argument, and you will probably know what essential claim you will make, since that claim will be inherent in the writing's purpose. You also will know who your readers will be, and since there will be both a clearly defined audience and a clearly defined purpose, exigence will be established.

A practical argument made in a community context tends to be most successful when it meets the following criteria:

- *The argument is specific.* Practical arguments advocate. Your reader should know exactly what he or she is being asked to do and should be given the necessary information and resources to do it.
- *The argument is well-supported.* Your reasons must clearly support your claim and, in turn, must be well supported by credible and convincing evidence, whether that evidence is statistical (based on facts and figures), anecdotal (drawing from people's experience or testimony), or reasoned (relying on logical explanation).
- *The argument appeals to logic.* Your claim, the reasons for it, and the evidence supporting it need to make sense.
- *The argument appeals fairly to emotion.* Your argument may well ask your reader to sympathize or empathize, or it may call upon your reader's sense of what is right or just, but it should not play on your reader's prejudices or fears.
- *The argument anticipates hesitancy or opposition.* Based on a clear understanding of your specific reader, you will want to anticipate and respond to the reasons your reader might not go along with your argument.

These are essentially the same qualities that are stressed in academic arguments, although some qualities that are stressed in academic writing are not as relevant or practical in community writing. For example, many practical arguments appeal to emotion more patently than do most academic arguments, partly because something very tangible is at stake and many community agencies deal with the actualities of people's lives rather than with ideas about them. There tends to be more latitude in using emotional appeals in practical arguments, although no reader, whether in an academic or community setting, enjoys feeling emotionally manipulated by an argument. Argumentation in academic writing stresses acknowledging the complexity of an argument, including opposing views, in order to provide fair coverage of a topic as well as to strengthen an argument. In practical arguments, for practical reasons, you will certainly want to anticipate and address factors that might dissuade your reader from taking the position or action you are advocating; however, providing "fair coverage" to opposing views is not a value or an obligation inherent in practical arguments. In practical arguments, the goal really *is* to win an argument, whereas in academic arguments the goal more often is to contribute to an ongoing intellectual dialogue or debate.

You will find two examples of practical arguments, presented in different genres, in the Appendix. The first is the brochure "Landmine Awareness" written by Jessica Gray for the American Red Cross. Her readers are people who have a general interest in the humanitarian activities and programs of the American Red Cross. First informing her readers about the devastating effects that abandoned landmines have on civilian populations worldwide, Jessica mounts a powerful appeal to her readers, urging them to get involved in the international

movement to ban landmines by (1) learning the facts, (2) raising others' awareness, (3) pressuring political leaders, and (4) joining organizations that support the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. Jessica's argument is supported by both factual evidence and photographs that attest powerfully to the extent of the problem and to the actual damage that landmines inflict on innocent civilians. You will also find in the Appendix, as an interesting comparison, Jessica's research paper on the same topic, "Landmines: Distant Killers." This research paper is not only an example of an academic project that evolved from a community one, but it is also an example of an academic, as opposed to a practical, argument.

The second example of a practical argument is a grant letter, written by Adryon Burton on behalf of her agency, Helping After Neonatal Death, appealing to a grant foundation for funding. Adryon's claim is clear and concrete: HAND needs funding from the Foundation to purchase a laptop computer and necessary hardware and software. Her audience (the foundation board) is specific, and exigence (the organization's work is limited by the lack of these important tools) is established. Her reasons, which draw on reasoned explanations, are persuasive. In order to compose this argument, Adryon had to know her agency, its work, and its needs, as well as the potential funder. She needed to persuade her readers not only that HAND was a worthy organization, but also that the specific request for funding was reasonable and well-matched to the granting foundation's mission and values.

The truth is that most practical documents in a community context have overlapping rhetorical purposes; one purpose may be primary or explicit and others secondary or implicit. For instance, your primary rhetorical purpose in writing a simple agency brochure may be to inform the community about the agency's mission, programs, and services. But in providing this information, you may well explain the need for these programs and services in the community. Your implicit argument is clear: your agency meets an important need in the community and is worthy of community support. In an explicit argument that you articulate in a fundraising letter, your primary rhetorical purpose might be to persuade your organization's membership to ante up. But your appeal will fail unless you provide concrete information about agency goals and programs and explain why people's donations are needed and how they will be spent. In fact, any document the primary purpose of which is to explain will be built on information, and any document the primary purpose of which is to persuade will be built on both information and explanation.

In spite of the fact that practical documents tend to have multiple and overlapping purposes, both explicit and implicit, you will probably find that any document you write for your agency has a primary or ultimate rhetorical purpose—to inform, to explain, or to persuade. Understanding this purpose will provide you with important clues about the content, presentation, and tone of what you write. In understanding your practical writing assignment as a practical application of *rhetoric,* you will understand the ways in which it is similar to and different from the rhetoric that you practice in academic writing.

RHETORICAL PURPOSES OF PRACTICAL DOCUMENTS			
	To Inform	*To Explain*	*To Persuade*
Press Releases	**inform** the public through newspapers and other news media about agency services, programs, and events		
Reports	**inform** the public or agency insiders, in-depth, about subjects closely related to agency work	*sometimes...* **explain** to the public or agency insiders subjects closely related to agency work from agency perspective	
How-To or Instructional Guides	**inform** the public or agency insiders how to do something	*sometimes...* **explain** to the public or agency insiders the reasons for doing something or doing it in a certain way	
Brochures and Pamphlets	**inform** the public about • agency programs and services; • subjects and issues closely related to agency work	*sometimes...* **explain** to the public • the need for agency programs and services; • subjects and issues closely related to agency work from agency perspective	*sometimes...* **persuade** individuals • to donate time or money; • to participate in agency programs or to use agency services; • to take a stand or action on issues closely related to the agency's work
Flyers	**inform** the public and specific individuals about • agency-sponsored or supported events, programs and services; • issues closely related to agency work	*sometimes...* **explain** to the public and specific individuals • the need for agency and other programs and services; • issues closely related to agency work from agency perspective	*sometimes...* **persuade** the public and specific individuals • to participate in agency programs or to use agency and other services; • to take a stand or action on issues closely related to the agency's work
Fact Sheets	**inform** the public about issues related to agency work •	*often...* **explain** to the public issues closely related to agency work from agency perspective	*often...* **persuade** the public • to get involved in agency activities; • to take a stand or action on issues closely related to agency work

RHETORICAL PURPOSES OF PRACTICAL DOCUMENTS *(continued)*			
	To Inform	*To Explain*	*To Persuade*
Newsletter Articles	**inform** agency insiders and the public about • agency programs and activities; • subjects, issues, and events closely related to agency activities	**explain** to agency insiders and the public • subjects and issues closely related to agency work from agency perspective; • news from agency perspective	*often ...* **persuade** agency insiders and the public • to get involved in agency activities; • to take a stand or action on issues closely related to agency work
Web Pages	**inform** agency insiders, other nonprofit agencies, and the public about • agency activities and programs; • subjects and issues closely related to agency work; • other resources, including other organizations and Web sites	**explain** to agency insiders, other nonprofit agencies, and the public • the need for agency programs and services; • subjects and issues closely related to agency work from agency's perspective	*often ...* **persuade** • individuals to participate in agency programs or use agency services; • the public to get involved in agency activities; • the public to take a stand or action on issues closely related to agency work
Position or Policy Statements	**inform** agency insiders, policy-makers, and the public about facts and background of issues and policies closely related to the agency's work	**explain** to agency insiders, policy-makers, and the public issues and policies closely related to the agency's work from agency perspective	**persuade** policy-makers and the public to adopt the agency's position on issues and policies closely related to agency work
Project Proposals and Assessments	**inform** agency insiders about background and logistics of proposed or current agency projects	**explain** to agency insiders the relative costs and benefits of proposed or current projects	**persuade** agency insiders that • proposed projects should, or should not, be undertaken; • current projects should, or should not, be continued; • proposed or current projects should be modified in certain ways
Letters to Policy-Makers	**inform** policy-makers about issues and policies closely related to agency work	**explain** to policy-makers • specific issues and policies closely related to agency work from agency perspective; • how these issues or policies impact the agency's constituency	**persuade** policy-makers to take a particular stand or specific action on issues and policies closely related to agency work

(continued)

RHETORICAL PURPOSES OF PRACTICAL DOCUMENTS (continued)

	To Inform	To Explain	To Persuade
Opinion Editorials and Letters to the Editor	**inform** the public about issues and policies related to agency work	**explain** to the public • specific issues and policies closely related to agency work from agency perspective; • how these issues or policies impact the agency's constituency	**persuade** the public to take a particular stand or specific action on issues and policies closely related to agency work
Fundraising and Solicitation Letters	**inform** potential donors about • the agency, its programs and services; • its plans for the future; • issues and policies crucial to agency work	**explain** to potential donors • the need for agency programs and services; • issues and policies related to agency work from agency perspective	**persuade** potential donors to donate their time, money, or goods to the agency and its work
Grant Proposals	**inform** the potential funder in detail about • the agency, its programs, services, record of service in the community; • subjects and issues closely related to agency work and objective of the grant; • agency plans for the future, especially related to use of grant	**explain** to the potential funder • subjects and issues closely related to agency work from agency perspective; • how the potential funder's mission relates to the agency's mission and grant request; • how the grant will be used	**persuade** the potential funder that • the agency is credible and has been effective in its work; • the grant would be well used; • the grant would produce positive and measurable results

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS
FOR JOURNAL-WRITING AND CLASS DISCUSSION

1. What does *rhetoric* mean to you? Does it carry positive or negative connotations? Why? Provide some examples of *rhetorical situations* that you encounter on a regular basis.

2. In what ways, and to what extent, can the management of a nonprofit organization be compared to the management of a business?

3. Who is the audience for the practical document that you will produce for your community agency? Describe your audience's discourse community. What are your readers' common interests, and what characterizes their language and communication styles?

4. To what extent do you identify with the discourse community that you will address in your practical document? Is it relatively familiar or unfamiliar to you? How will you gain the authority to write within and for a discourse community to which you do not belong?

5. With your practical writing project in mind, consult the table "Rhetorical Purposes of Practical Documents" presented in this chapter. What kind of document does your project call for? To what extent will the document have multiple or overlapping rhetorical purposes? What will the primary, or ultimate, rhetorical purpose of this document be?

TROUBLESHOOTING

WHAT IF...

you think your mentor has given you too much freedom to conceptualize your project? What if you need more guidance?

TRY TO...

talk with your mentor and request a brainstorming session. If your mentor does not have a very clear idea of the specific content or form of your practical document, thinking through the possibilities together might help to clarify the project for both of you.

look at examples of the kind of document that you think you will be creating. Your agency mentor may be able to provide you with these examples.

ask your instructor for help. She or he may also be able to brainstorm your document's content and form with you and may also provide you with examples of similar projects.

WHAT IF...

the feedback that your instructor offers on your draft suggests that he or she does not entirely understand the audience and purpose of your practical document?

TRY TO...

explain your project's audience and purpose again. Sometimes, the purpose of a project evolves with the project itself. Your instructor's understanding of your project's audience and purpose may be based on an earlier description of it. Try not to look at this as challenging your instructor's authority, but rather as ensuring good communication about your project as it evolves.

WHAT IF...

the peer collaboration breaks down and you are left holding the bag?

TRY TO...

avert this disaster before it strikes. If the group members' contributions to the project are significantly uneven, explain the problem to your instructor and ask

him or her to intervene. If one or more of your group members drops out of the project, try to redistribute the work among the remaining members. If this work is too much to absorb, see if your instructor can suggest another person for inclusion in your group.

do the best you can to bring the project to conclusion, given the time you have and your own limitations. In a worst-case scenario, in which a project partner or partners ceased to participate, no one, including your mentor and your instructor, will expect you to do everyone's work, although everyone, especially you, will be disappointed if the project is incomplete.
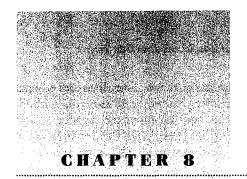
WHAT IF...

in your practical writing assignment you have trouble identifying a primary rhetorical purpose?

TRY TO...

check in with your mentor and confirm your understanding of the assignment. Do you understand clearly the subject of your writing, the kind of document you are creating, your reader's identity, and what you need to say to your reader? In order to determine the rhetorical purpose of your practical document, you will need to answer these questions first.

consider the extent to which your document may involve multiple or overlapping rhetorical purposes. Refer back to the chart "Rhetorical Purposes of Practical Documents" presented earlier in this chapter and note that most kinds of practical documents do have more than one rhetorical purpose. Try looking at rhetorical purpose in your document as a set of building blocks: it is quite likely that information will provide the foundation, explanation will provide the structure, and persuasion—whether implicit or explicit—will top it off.

CHAPTER 8

Academic Writing in a Service-Learning Context

I wrote a six-page paper on the issue of utilizing volunteers in a nonprofit organization setting, focusing on the situation at my agency. I discussed various methods to attract, inspire and maintain volunteers. I later extended this topic into a twelve-page research paper on altruism. I discussed the various philosophical and biological explanations for altruism and extended these theories to assist nonprofit organizations in harnessing the altruism of their volunteers.
—JENNY BERNSTEIN, FIRST-YEAR STUDENT

When you are asked to write about your service-learning experience for your class, you are being asked to make the vital connection between what you learn in your community work and what you learn in the classroom. Most students find that the work they do in the community through service-learning placements—whatever kind of work that is—inspires their academic work. It lends crucial importance to academic study, bringing to life information and ideas that might otherwise remain abstract or theoretical. Community work provides students with concrete and relevant writing topics, and makes writing about them more purposeful than it would have been in a strictly academic context.

There are various ways in which you might be asked to write about your service-learning experience in an academic context. Some involve informal writing, while others focus on formal writing. The immediate purposes of and audiences for these kinds of writing are academic; that is, they are primarily intended to facilitate your learning and to demonstrate what you have learned to your instructor and perhaps to other students in your class. However, even when they have not explicitly planned to do so, many students share this academic writing with their agencies and mentors because it is so highly relevant to the work that their agencies do and the communities that they serve. Many community-based academic writing assignments, therefore, have very real secondary purposes, and extended audiences. When this happens, students open up the academic community even further to include the community at large, and vice versa.