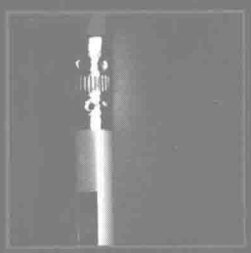
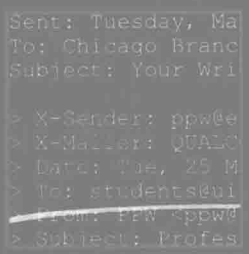
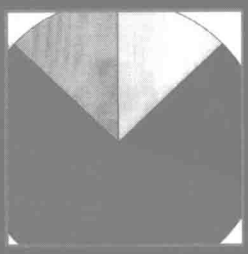
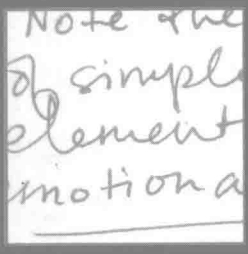
READINGS IN

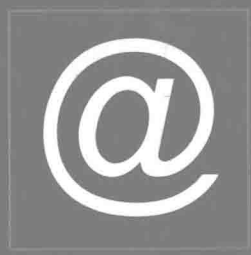
Professional Writing











PROGRAMS IN PROFESSIONAL WRITING
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

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Professional Writing

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UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

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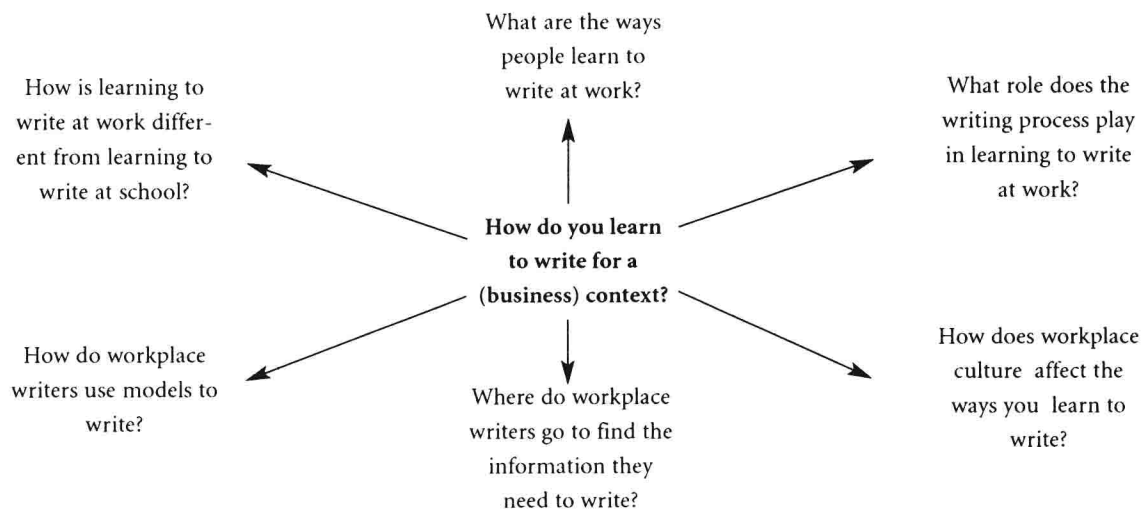
INTRODUCTION

What Is Professional Writing?

Many professional writing textbooks ask and answer one basic question: "How do you write at work?" *Readings in Professional Writing* replaces this question with another, even more fundamental one: "How do you *figure out* how to write at work?" Writing situations and demands are unpredictable, and thus exploring *how to figure out* how to write will prepare you best for the real-world writing tasks you'll face.

In other words, *Readings in Professional Writing* invites you to take a step back to consider some things you might take for granted about writing. It asks you to pause and think, first, about how you learn to write. You might, for instance, compare the ways you've learned to write research papers, lab reports, and essays at school, and in different classes at school, with the ways you've learned—or expect to learn—to write letters, memos, and emails once you're on-the-job. It asks you to think, second, about what it is you've actually learned to do as you've learned to write. When you sit down to write a paper, a letter, or an email, what are the things you're actually trying to accomplish: communicate data? analyze a situation? reassure a reader? make a decision? confirm an understanding? get information? Finally, it asks you to think about what elements you have to consider when you try to accomplish these tasks. For instance, you often have a wide range of media from which to choose to compose or send a message—from a handwritten post-it left on a desk to emailed text to an emailed file to a typed letter delivered by snail mail to information posted on a web page, and so on.

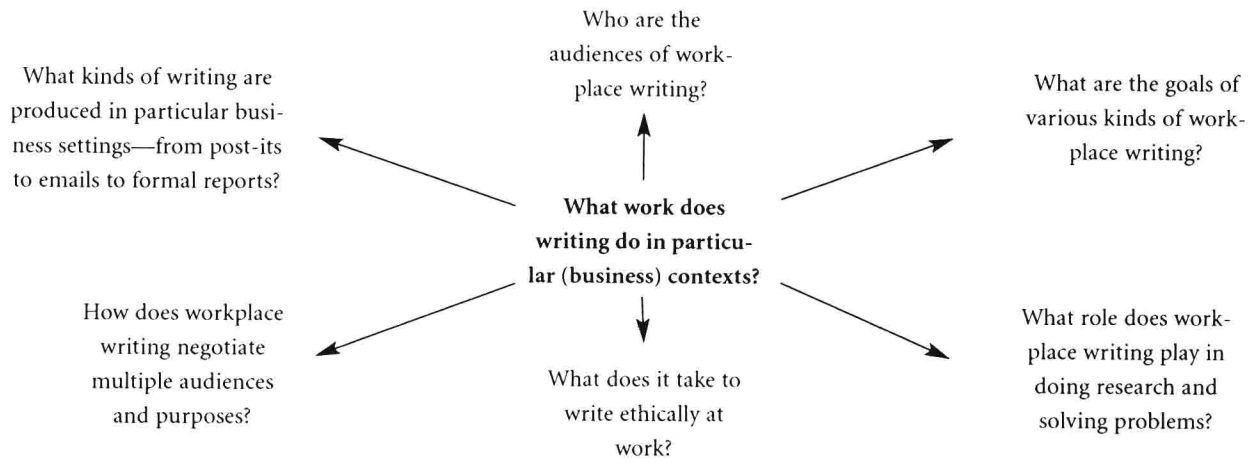


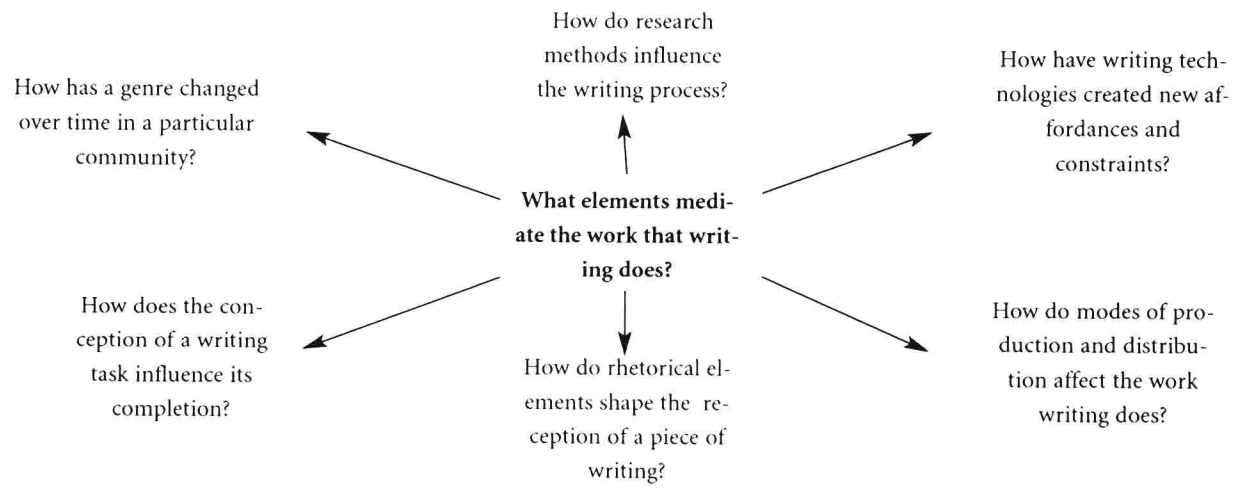
How do you learn to write for a (business) context?

Every time we participate in a new community, we learn a new way to write. Think about the first time you posted to an online message board or began a new job—these activities required you to learn new habits, procedures, and terms. Moreover, you probably weren't sure at some point exactly how to get the information you needed, and you had to figure that out, too. Our first group of readings raises a series of questions related to how we learn to write:

What work does writing do in particular (business) contexts?

Professional communities use writing to accomplish a wide range of tasks, from recording conversations (e.g., taking minutes at meetings) to motivating people to take action (e.g., asking an anonymous reader to volunteer their time). These tasks inevitably influence many people who are entirely removed from the writing community itself. When we enter new writing communities, then, we need to figure out when they tend to use writing (as opposed to phoning, for instance), for what purposes, and with what social consequences. Our second group of readings raises a series of questions related to what work writing does in the world:





What elements mediate the work that writing does?

Certain basic elements come into play in any writing community; what changes is the form those elements take. For instance, all writing communities develop "genres" or styles of documents; what changes is the way these genres look—so that a writer trying to persuade someone could produce a letter of recommendation, a direct marketing letter, or a formal report. Our third group of readings raises a series of questions about these elements that mediate the work writing does:

How can you get the most out of *Readings in Professional Writing*?

Most of the selections in this reader come from research journals and books on professional communication, and they were composed mainly for scholars, teachers, and working writers. The authors and intended audiences recognize writing as a rich process that involves many other social phenomena—like technologies, economies, and cultures. Like any complex document originally intended for a different audience, these readings demand serious engagement in exchange for the sophisticated understanding that they offer.

Some strategies will be useful for approaching them as efficiently and productively as possible:

Skim articles before reading any part of them closely.
Skimming a selection means looking for the parts of it that tell you something about its major topics and its organization. If you pause over the title of an article, you can often figure out its very general thesis. Read the section headings, as well, which can give you a sense of the article's major topics and points. Knowing these things can give you a framework for interpreting finer details.

Take note of what you don't understand.
Some of these selections may use unfamiliar methods or terms. Part of their interest is that they look at things in a new way that may not be immediately obvious. If you can note where a reading uses a term in an unfamiliar way or seems to connect separate things, you will often have hit on an interesting part of the article that your instructor can help you work through.

Don't stop because you can't figure something out.
If you can't figure out what a sentence or even a paragraph is saying, just go on to the next one. You can often understand many of the points in an article even without grasping all of the others. In addition, an idea may be restated later in a clearer way, or you may discover a new piece of information that helps you understand the earlier idea.

Try exporting the ideas to a situation you know.
Often an article explores a topic using just one or two examples. Connecting its points and terms to a situation that you know about will help you take the idea off the page and into the world, helping you figure out what the idea can actually do and what its limitations are. Sometimes this can help you figure out what an article's idea actually is. For instance, if you are reading an article on changes in technology, you might be able to evaluate its claims if you pause to think about your experiences using the kinds of technology the author is interested in.

Make connections to other readings.
Though all of the selections in the reader stand alone, they intersect with and complement each other in a variety of ways. Part of taking ideas off the page and into the world is figuring out how they intersect with other ideas. Try asking yourself what different articles have to do with each other—do they treat different topics, or different aspects of the same topic? do they use a similar, complementary, or opposing method?

* * *

Your instructor may assign all of the readings or only some, and may pair or group them in a variety of ways. Your instructor may also use the readings in combination with another text—for instance, a business writ-

ing handbook like the *Business Writer's Companion,* or a style guide like *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace.* While *Readings in Professional Writing* helps you think about how to learn to write in various contexts, handbooks like the *Business Writer's Companion* present information about a range of conventions that have developed in contemporary business settings. Similarly, while the reader helps you identify and explore some considerations you need to take into account when you write, style guides present some principles for translating those considerations into actual sentences. Just as you think about how the readings intersect each other, you will also have many opportunities to think about how the reader intersects with these other texts, as well.

CONTENTS

Part I

How Do You Learn to Write for a (Business) Context?

Chapter 1

Social Constructionism

Brenda J. Allen

To study processes of organizing, communication scholars increasingly rely on social constructionism, a theoretical orientation to sociocultural processes that affect humans' basic understandings of the world. Scholars who take a social constructionist stance claim that anything that has meaning in our lives originates within "the matrix of relationships in which we are engaged" (Gergen & Gergen, 2000, "The Social Construction of Value and the Aging Self," ¶ 1). Social constructionists assert that meaning arises from social systems rather than from individual member of society. They contend that humans derive knowledge of the world from larger social discourses, which can vary across time and place, and which often represent and reinforce dominant belief systems. Social constructionists also stress the significance of language to construction processes, including its ramifications for identity development (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995).

Social constructionism infuses my scholarly endeavors. In research and teaching, I focus a critical lens on organizational communication, with an emphasis on social identity categories such as gender, race, and social class. Social constructionism helps me identify and illuminate ways that organizational actors make, modify, and maintain meaning about social identity.

In this chapter, I explore the significance of social constructionism to engaged organizational communication scholarship. I begin by tracing origins of social constructionism and discussing its main assumptions and critiques. Next, I narrate a few personal experiences to analyze relationships between social constructionism and my development as a scholar. Then, I review social constructionist research on organizational communication. I conclude by discussing implications of social constructionism for organizational communication studies. Throughout the chapter, Irefer to social identity issues to clarify or exemplify primary points.

Social Constructionism—An Overview

Social constructionism strives to understand how humans create knowledge—"anything a society holds to be true, real, and meaningful" (Hruby, 2001, p. 52). According to social constructionists, knowledge is an effect of social processes. Social constructionists maintain that humans construct the world through social practices. For example, practices such as encouraging girls to be docile or admonishing boys not to cry help to disseminate and perpetuate constructed "knowledge" about gender. This type of knowledge stems more from current connotations about femininity and masculinity (which are social constructions in their own right) than from preexisting, "natural" characteristics of human beings. Thus, social constructionists reject essentialist explanations that "certain phenomena are natural, inevitable, universal, and biologically determined" (DeLamater & Hyde, 2001, p. 10).

Social constructionism stems from, and is influenced by, diverse disciplines and intellectual traditions (Burr, 1995; Pearce, 1995). One root of contemporary approaches to social constructionism arose from late 19th-century German sociological studies on the development of intellectual or academic knowledge. From these studies branched a paradigm called "the sociology of knowledge," which delved into ways that members of scholarly communities create and agree upon what counts as scientific facts or descriptions of reality (Hruby, 2001). This new perspective challenged notions of objective reality.

The sociology of knowledge analyzed how sociocultural forces constructed knowledge, and it ascertained types of knowledge these forces produced. Scholars from various disciplines—including sociology, philosophy, anthropology, social psychology, linguistics, and communication—applied this approach to their respective fields (Burr, 1995). In 1966, sociologists Thomas Berger and Peter Luckmann published a seminal book about knowledge development titled *The Social Construction of Reality* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). They drew upon the tradition of the sociology of knowledge as well as theoretical perspectives of social philosopher Alfred Schutz (Burr, 1995). Berger and Luckmann's treatise extended the sociology of knowledge beyond intellectual history to encompass "knowledge that guides conduct in everyday life" (p. 19). When they asserted that "the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality" (p. 19), they prompted changing "the sociology of knowledge" to "social constructionism." This new conception highlighted processes of knowledge development ("constructionism"), while stressing the significance of interaction ("social").

Assumptions of Social Constructionism

Since the late 1960s, numerous disciplines have adopted and adapted social constructionism. Within contemporary conceptions of social constructionism, several key assumptions reside (Burr, 1995). One primary assumption is "a critical stance towards taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world (including ourselves)" (Burr, 1995, p. 3). Social constructionism encourages us to be suspicious of how we understand the world and ourselves. For example, we should challenge categories of social identity such as gender and race because "the categories with which we as human beings apprehend the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions." (Ore, 2003, p. 5). We also might question why we highlight and classify some aspects of personhood and not others.

A second assumption of social constructionism stresses that all knowledge is historically and culturally specific. Labels, classifications, denotations, and connotations of social identity always are products of their times. Furthermore, processes of constructing social identities depend heavily on social, political, and historical factors, as humans rely on current ideologies to create social identity categories and their meanings. These meanings usually arise from political processes as the interests of certain groups take precedence over others.

For example, in U.S. society of the 17th and 18th centuries, discourse about sexual activity dictated that women and men should practice sexual self-control and discipline, engaging in sex only as married persons seeking to reproduce the species. This perspective

on sexuality arose from religious, economic, and political concerns about increasing the populations of the so-called New World. Consequently, heterosexuality was considered an abnormal manifestation of sexual appetite because it connoted sex as pleasure, and a heterosexual was defined as "an unequivocal pervert" (Katz, 1995, p. 21). In sharp contrast, contemporary positions on sexuality construct heterosexuality (or woman-to-man erotic desire) as normal.

A third assumption of social constructionism rests on the premise that social processes sustain knowledge. Among these processes, language is fundamental. We use language to produce and reproduce knowledge as we enact various roles within various contexts. Language helps us make sense of the world; it allows us to share experiences and meaning with one another. Language is a system we use to objectify subjective meanings and to internalize socially constructed meanings.

In daily interactions, we receive and repeat recurring versions of "the truth" about social identity groups. For instance, dominant discourses in the United States about aging and the elderly tend to be negative . These discourses portray aging as an undesirable state of decline. Most of us internalize those negative constructions, and we pass them on to others. When we interact with older persons, we often try to confirm our biases and ignore evidence to the contrary (Williams & Giles, 1996; also Ng, Liu, Weatherall, & Loong, 1997).

A final assumption of social constructionism warrants that knowledge and social action are interconnected. Consider, for example, the construction of childhood. Prior to the 20th century, children were valued more for their economic worth than for emotional reasons (Fass & Mason, 2000). During the Industrial Revolution, most children in working-class families held some type of job, often engaging in monotonous, sometimes dangerous work. Children as young as 5 years of age worked in textile industries, and in 1820, nearly half of textile mill workers were children working 10-hour days (Clay & Stephens, 1996). In the 20th century, as a result of a child labor movement and the development of compulsory education, children shifted from being "economically useful" to "economically useless" but "emotionally priceless" (Fass & Mason, 2000, p. 3). Childhood became constructed as a period of "leisured growth and development" (Fass & Mason, p. 3). Thus, contemporary constructions of childhood mandate that children will go to school instead of work.

To review, four primary propositions of social constructionism are that a critical stance should be assumed toward taken-for-granted knowledge, knowledge is historically and culturally specific, social processes sustain knowledge, and knowledge and social action are interconnected (Burr, 1995). Although most social constructionists probably would agree with these tenets, some of them might disagree about aspects of social constructionism. In fact, so many differences exist among social constructionists approaches that one scholar describes them as "varied beyond hope of compatible reconciliation" (Pearce, 1995, p. 108). Although I cannot cite or discuss all those differences here, I summarize a few below.

Differences in Social Constructionist Approaches

A primary difference among social constructionists is their opinion about reality (Pearce, 1995). Although social constructionists agree that there is no such thing as objective reality, they disagree about what that means. For instance, some scholars want to understand *how* humans make things real. Consequently, they study *processes* of social construction. For example, a realist, non-objectivist position known as the coordinated management of meaning contends that "the activities performed by persons in conversations are themselves real. Persons are not only cognizing entities, we are embodied; our activities are real" (Pearce, 1995, p. 95; see Pearce, 1995, for an in-depth treatment of differences between social constructionists).

In contrast to a focus on processes of reality construction, other scholars are interested in *what* humans construct as reality. These scholars attend to *products* of social construction, such as symbolic forms, symbols, and meanings.

Another approach to dealing with reality (Lannamann, 1995) includes process *and* products. This "materialist" approach to social constructionism

urges researchers to attend to details (products) of interaction (processes) because those material details influence and are influenced by sociohistorical contexts. For example, studies about gendered discourse should investigate differences in subjective worlds that women and men inhabit (Lannamann, 1995).

Numerous other differences exist among social constructionists. Scholars variously claim that social constructionism serves epistemological, ontological, and empirical purposes (Hruby, 2001). Others distinguish strong/extreme versions of social constructionism from weak/mild versions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). They also differentiate strict constructionists from contextual constructionists (Fox, 1999). One author maps three waves of social constructionism: sociological, postmodernism, and neorealist (Hruby, 2001). Despite these differences, or maybe as a result of them, social constructionism continues to be popular in and across multiple disciplines. Of course, however, social constructionism also has its detractors.

Critiques of Social Constructionism

Some critics contest social constructionism's antirealist stance. For instance, they believe that an objective reality is the basis for human sensations. They contend that theories of knowledge and identity development should allow for material contingencies such as brain functions, bodily sensations, visceral responses, and the physical world at large (Hruby, 2001). This critique applies to "strong" versions of social constructionism which contend that *everything* is socially constructed, and which imply deep philosophical analyses about what is real. However, most social science work stems from "mild" approaches to social constructionism, which do not delve into these issues. Rather, they focus on *social* rather than physical realities and their implications (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Another challenge to social constructionism cites the paradox of critiquing concepts such as power relations, oppression, and domination when the concepts themselves are social constructions. Here's a summary of this viewpoint:

> The notion that there is not truth or objective reality, for example, provides a convenient objection to any claim about the (real, actual, material) existence of injustice, inequality, exploitation, and oppression. The philosophical implication is that people are not really oppressed, they just think they are. This renders the perception of injustice as just one among many equally (in)valid social constructions. (Jost & Kruglanski, 2002, p. 175).

Related to this paradox, some authors accuse social constructionism of extreme, "anything goes" relativism that can depoliticize constructs related to social (in)justice (Burr, 1995). However, social constructionism invites us to discern various conceptions and to "generate alternative understandings of greater promise" (Gergen, 1999, p. 40). These critiques do not allow that social constructionism can discover and challenge profound material consequences of constructions such as poverty conditions, joblessness, illness, morality, and so forth. Indeed, the goal of much constructionist work is just that.

Some critics state that conceptions of social constructionism assign too passive a role to the individual by overemphasizing the power of socialization processes (Burr, 1995). They believe that such formulations overdetermine individuals by portraying them simply as entities that embody roles that society prescribes (Christensen & Cheney, 1994). Basically, this line of criticism argues that some models of social constructionism neglect to address the role of agency and individual differences in knowledge construction. However, postmodern perspectives on social constructionism stress agency. They assert that identifies are fluid and subject to change. Postmodernist approaches endorse employing social constructionism to illuminate the role of sociocultural forces in creating social groups, so that individuals can imagine and enact alternative understandings (Gergen, 1999; Lewis, 2003).