

Mission: Omission - Teaching Students to Leave Out Information in Professional Writing

Eric Holmes, Composition

What's this all about?

- In the long tenuous relationship between higher education and the workforce, a lot of hand-wringing has occurred regarding the way that students are taught to write in college vs. how they are expected to write in the workforce. This invariably has led to an underprepared crop of entry-level graduates who, “struggle in their transfer of writing skills learned in college to the writing tasks of the workplace” (Kohn, 2015)
- One employer recently noted that recent graduates have a, “real issue with putting together short, concise, and clear written communication about something, whether it's a project or a problem that they're trying to solve. This is a real problem, and it's getting worse, not better.” (Sparks, 2018)
- While this problem cannot and will not be solved in a brief presentation at the 2020 Gen Ed Conference, this presentation will at least draw attention to the virtue of teaching brevity in professional writing and will demonstrate why two of the standard six questions of non-fiction writing (Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?) are best left unanswered.

Learning Outcomes

- You will learn about the need to omit certain information in professional writing
- You will learn the virtue of writing selfishly, which sounds like madness but is a completely sound professional writing strategy

A Scenario

- You are the owner of a small inbound call center in a rural area that operates 24/7/365. The building that houses your business is desperately in need of new carpet, as the existing carpet is stained, worn, and even torn in spots.
- During a historically slow work period, you plan to have new carpet installed. To do this, the business has to shut down for a 24 hour period and a team from a local carpet store will come to the center to deconstruct the computers and cubicles, remove the old carpet, install the new carpet, and reconstruct the computers and cubicles.
- You plan to provide the staff (some of whom would normally work at some point during the 24 hour period of the closure) with four weeks of notice, which will allow staff to reschedule themselves, to use vacation time, etc. during the closure.
- Your task is to craft a memo that explains the situation to the staff.

Is all types of
information of
equal value?

- Who?

Is all types of
information of
equal value?

- Who?
- What?

Is all types of
information of
equal value?

- Who?
- What?
- When?

Is all types of
information of
equal value?

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?

Is all types of
information of
equal value?

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- How?

Is all types of
information of
equal value?

- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- How?
- Why?

The last thing that you want

- In the context of professional writing, your objective is avoid the most dreaded thing of all (at least as far as professional writing goes): Questions.
- The entire purpose of a memo like the one detailed in the scenario is to avoid interaction with the staff, as it is often time intensive and can (as aforementioned) lead to strife. You primarily write a document like a memo as it is faster than having conversations/meetings.
- However, if the document is vague, contradictory, or incomplete, you will rightfully be inundated with questions from the audience, which is entirely counterproductive to your entire purpose in writing the document in the first place.

The Virtue of Writing Selfishly

- Your objective as a professional writer is to craft documents that are so clear, so consistent, and so complete that there are no questions of any kind from the audience.
- This is The Virtue of Writing Selfishly; writing in such a way that you invite no unwanted interaction with the audience and thus no time and effort wasted.
- However, writing selfishly is also an act of selflessness. How can an act be both selfish and selfless?

The Virtue of Writing Selfishly

- Your objective as a professional writer is to craft documents that are so clear, so consistent, and so complete that there are no questions of any kind from the audience.
- This is The Virtue of Writing Selfishly; writing in such a way that you invite no unwanted interaction with the audience and thus no time and effort wasted.
- However, writing selfishly is also an act of selflessness. How can an act be both selfish and selfless?
- Your efforts to save yourself time and effort also save others time and effort, as they don't need to reach out to you for more information and/or explanation.

The End

- In professional writing, some information is best left out, as including it would be unnecessary and even counterproductive.
- There is virtue in writing selfishly, as your efforts to avoid interaction with the audience benefits it as well.

References

- Kohn, L. (2015). How Professional Writing Pedagogy and University–Workplace Partnerships Can Shape the Mentoring of Workplace Writing. *Journal of Technical Writing & Communication*, 45(2), 166–188.
- Sparks, S. D. (2018). When Book Reports and Essays Aren't Enough. *Education Week*, 38(6), s15–s17. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=132974315&site=ehost-live>

Contact

- Send all questions, comments, concerns, criticism, allegations, and accusations to eric.holmes@purdueglobal.edu
- Thank you!