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Writing Buffet

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Writing Buffet

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

Students identify and articulate differences between three contrasting writing styles, then apply their knowledge in their own brief writing examples. This activity can be used to prepare students for an upcoming writing assignment, such as program notes or a research paper.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

The goal of this activity is for students to recognize different styles of presenting information, including popular versus scholarly style.

COOKING TIME

25 minutes

NUMBER SERVED

20 students

INGREDIENTS AND EQUIPMENT

Topic prompts

PREPARATION

Write enough prompts for your class (one prompt for every two to four students). Print prompts.

COOKING METHOD

1. Organize students into groups of two to four. Make sure at least one student in each group has something to write/type with.

2. Inform groups that they will each receive a different prompt and that their task is to craft three brief written responses to the prompt in the style of (1) a tweet, (2) an email to a friend from high school, and (3) a scholarly journal article. They have 10 minutes to work.
3. Let them know they will be asked to share what they wrote with the rest of the class.
4. After groups have responded to the prompt in all three styles, ask each group to share what they wrote. Discuss the distinctive stylistic qualities of each style with the class.

ALLERGY WARNINGS

- When you write the prompts, consider making the content relevant to topics you have recently covered in class. (This is what we've done with the example prompts in Figure 1.) By doing so, the new activity doubles as an opportunity for review. Depending on the prompts and groups, student responses can be on the silly side. To keep students on track, you might need to remind them of the purpose of the activity (see Chef's Note).
- Students might enter the activity believing that one style is "right" and another "wrong," but the goal of the activity is to

Examples of recommended prompts for graduate students in a music research class:

- Group 1: Congratulations! You have just discovered the only surviving early printing of PDQ Bach's *Potato Chip Mass*. Tell the world about your finding in ... (1) a tweet, (2) an email to a friend from high school, and (3) a scholarly journal article.
- Group 2: Congratulations! You clicked on the uniform title for *The Rite of Spring* and discovered a recording titled *Ritus des Frühlings*, an arrangement for a German polka band. Tell the world about your finding in ... (1) a tweet, (2) an email to a friend from high school, and (3) a scholarly journal article.
- Group 3: Congratulations! While flipping through the *Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments*, you discover that Robert Moog's original purpose in inventing the synthesizer was to mimic beagle howls with great accuracy. Tell the world about your finding in ... (1) a tweet, (2) an email to a friend from high school, and (3) a scholarly journal article.
- Group 4: Congratulations! You saw the movie *Florence Foster Jenkins* and loved it. So, you searched the library catalog for the singer's autobiography. You loved the book even more than the movie! Tell the world about your finding in ... (1) a tweet, (2) an email to a friend from high school, and (3) a scholarly journal article.

help students gain a more nuanced view of how to use writing style to convey meaning. In other words, the “right” style might be any of the three used for this activity (or any number of other styles), depending on the author’s intended audience, medium, and purpose.

CHEF’S NOTES

- Students will probably be aware of surface-level elements of each writing style but might need guidance identifying deeper-level elements. For instance, they will probably know that Twitter has strict guidelines for length (280 characters, formerly 140), but they might not realize that email and scholarly articles also have expectations for length. (Which one is a better medium for 30,000 words?)
- Similarly, they might recognize that tweets and email use specialized vocabulary or abbreviations that might be baffling to novices but are obvious to expert users (RT, yolo, tbt, smh, bff, ttyl); they might, however, be surprised to realize that scholarly sources do the same thing (*ibid.*, *op. cit.*, *idem*, *et al.*, JAMS). Still another point of comparison involves references. Students might resist the idea that footnotes are important but acknowledge the value of effective hashtags. It might even be worthwhile to discuss in some detail Twitter’s version of metadata (user names, replies, retweets, favorites) as well as something analogous to cross references (hashtags and tagging individual Twitter users).
- Get students to think about audience and the purpose for each of the three styles in this activity. Be prepared to talk about why these styles are different and how they are used in different situations. Emphasize that each style has its purpose—no one style is better or worse than another—and that by understanding the purpose of each style, they can become better researchers and writers. Some questions to help generate discussion might include the following: If you heard about a controversial performance that took place in 2015, which source would you use to find the artist’s official statement? Which source would you use to find your friend’s personal, private thoughts about the performance? Which source would you use to find a long-form analysis of the controversy, including references to specific authors on all sides of the issue? A good discussion will help them see that each style has its own purpose, and in a given situation, one style/source might be more appropriate to use than another.