



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## WHERE DOES YOUR DISCIPLINE FIT?

Some of my students hate and/or fear the thought of taking a three-credit-hour writing class. When I began teaching technical writing at OSU-Okmulgee, many of my students frequently voiced their complaints (“Making Basic Composition Relevant,” *Innovation Abstracts*, Volume 19, No. 7, February 28, 1997) and just demanded that I justify what I teach. I was forced not only to justify what I teach, but also to change how I taught it. Teaching writing so that students learn was not the only option—nor was learning for learning’s sake. Students wanted an explanation about where what they learn in a writing class could and would fit into the grand scheme of things.

As a result of those experiences early on in my teaching career, I began to take a much more critical look at the assignments I created and how I presented them. Now, when I present assignments, I tie them to something relevant in students’ lives, to their college studies, and/or to the work they will perform after graduation. In some cases, assigning relevance can be a stretch; so when relevance is not so obvious, I remind students that they may not always work at the job for which they are being trained currently nor even pursue jobs in the same career. I use myself as an example—in my early college days, many topics that seemed “useless” at the time turned out to be quite beneficial as I began a new career teaching at the college level.

I remind students that the future is uncertain and that they and I cannot identify all of the skills they might need later in their personal and professional lives. I use some of these examples: diesel technicians might be promoted to service manager or warranty clerk, which would require a completely different set of writing skills; culinary arts graduates might become executive chefs, which would require specialized writing and communication skills necessary for managing an upscale restaurant; if they become parents, they might choose to volunteer their services to civic organizations, places of worship, parent-teacher organizations, or a

Boy Scout or Girl Scout troop. In effect, skills that appear unrelated to students’ current personal and educational endeavors and goals may be relevant to and necessary in future situations.

As I reconsidered the materials and activities I would use in future writing courses, I turned to useful student examples and explanations related to the particulars of students’ other courses of study. Student-generated materials became a study guide and a valuable support tool for completing writing assignments more successfully. By focusing on more relevant assignments to students’ current training and future professional needs, I help them draw some of their own connections between current and future writing activities. This instructional strategy has raised student interest levels and eliminated many of the “why” questions I heard when I began teaching technical writing classes.

I enjoy justifying what I teach and what I expect students to produce in my writing classes. Being realistic about many students’ negative attitudes, early on, has compelled and helped me design more relevant and, thereby, more interesting assignments. Creating a more interdisciplinary course has helped me engage students in their own learning. Justifying our work to the skeptical, as well as the not-so-skeptical, student works to our advantage and is a compelling argument for painting bigger pictures and engaging students in important discoveries of their own.

**Stuart Tichenor**, *Instructor, Communications*

For further information, contact the author at Oklahoma State University-Okmulgee, 1801 E. 4th Street, Okmulgee, OK 74447. e-mail: [stich@osu-okmulgee.edu](mailto:stich@osu-okmulgee.edu)



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## FACULTY OFFICE – MAKING IT WORK

Sociology teaches us that people have both a front-stage and a back-stage presence. Too often, the back stage for faculty—the office, or “theatre”—is a mess and can affect students’ perceptions of the front stage—the classroom. These 12 easy steps for “cleaning up our act” have helped many of us create the balanced image we want to achieve.

- **Ownership.** Remember that it is not your office; it belongs to the college. Check first before you paint the walls mauve or hang swinging lamps.

- **Responsibility.** Post office hours, and be there. If you need to be away (darn those committee meetings), leave a note about when you will be back.

- **Health and Safety.** Clean the office, and disinfect it regularly. (Your mother doesn’t work here!) Remember to lock it even if you are just going down the hall. Keep anything you consider valuable out of sight. Don’t leave your keys in the door, even if you are only going to be away for a few seconds.

- **Personalization.** A few pictures of the family (not rock stars) are nice, but everything your spouse doesn’t want at home doesn’t belong in the office. Artifacts go to museums. Old texts go to libraries. Old tests go to the shredder. Old notes go to the bottom of the birdcage.

- **Compulsivity.** If you absolutely cannot take time to eat away from your office, at least don’t eat during office hours and do remove student work from your desk. BBQ sauce on term papers and /or computer keyboards should be avoided at all costs.

- **Planning or Organizing.** Keep everything, including your gradebook, up-to-date and ordered logically. If you should be sick for an extended period, you want to avoid having substitutes cursing your very existence because they can’t find important, useful information.

- **Communication.** Arrange your office so that students can see you and visit without looking over a pile of books or a file cabinet, or around a computer monitor. Avoid having your back to the door, even if you are lucky enough to have a window.

- **Ecology.** Keep a plant or two growing, but don’t create a jungle. Oxygen is a basic human need, but a rain forest is not.

- **Professionalism.** Unless the lighting is very poor, use fluorescent lights, as they are the least expensive way to illuminate your space and keep temperature down at the same time. The office should be fully lighted; you aren’t trying to create an expensive restaurant-like ambiance.

Dress for business all the time. Shorts, cut-offs, tank tops, and flip-flops are inappropriate attire, even if you do not have classes.

- **Variable Costs.** Remember that all appliances use electricity and that refrigerators, hot plates, and coffee pots have been known to cause fires.

- **Ergonomics.** Do not make your office your living room. Offices are for working, not lounging. Besides, you should get up every hour or so and go out to see what the rest of the world is doing.

- **Mission.** The office is an extension of the classroom. It should look like and be a place to learn and teach.

*Jerry Clavner Professor, Social Sciences*

For further information, contact the author at Cuyahoga Community College, 700 Carnegie Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44115. e-mail: [Jerry.Clavner@tri-c.edu](mailto:Jerry.Clavner@tri-c.edu)