PART 11

Special Writing Situations

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CHAPTER 54

Writing Online

Both in and out of college, you will write extensively online. Many forms of online writing expand your options as a writer, but they also present distinctive challenges, both conceptual and technical. This chapter discusses some of the options and challenges of
e-mail (below), online collaboration (p. 829), and Web composition (p. 832).

54a Writing effective electronic mail

You may be using e-mail every day to converse quickly and casually with friends and family. In college you'll also use e-mail for a host of academic reasons, from collaborating with classmates to conducting research, and you'll want to communicate both purposefully and efficiently. This section covers composing and responding to messages and observing Internet etiquette. For more on using
e-mail to interact with the other students in a course, see pages 829–32. For more on using e-mail as a research tool, see page 592.

1 Composing messages

To use e-mail productively, pause to weigh each element of the message. Consider especially your audience and purpose and how your tone will come across to readers. In the message shown opposite, the writer knows the recipients well and yet has serious information to convey to them, so he writes informally but states his points and concerns carefully. Writing to the corporation mentioned in the message, the writer would be more formal in both tone and approach. Although e-mail is typically more casual than printed correspondence, in academic settings a crafted message is more likely to achieve the intended purpose. Proofread all but the most informal messages for errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

2 Responding to messages

When you respond to a message, consider whom you're addressing and what your readers will see. The Reply function will automatically address the person who wrote you, whereas the Reply All function will address others who may have been sent copies of the original message. The *Subject* line will automatically contain the original subject heading preceded by *Re:* (from Latin, meaning "In reference to"), so change the heading if you change or expand the subject. Many e-mail programs can be set to reprint the entire original message, allowing you to insert your responses where appropriate or to respond to part of the message and delete the rest. If you add more recipients to your response, make sure not to pass on previous private messages by mistake.

3 Observing netiquette

To communicate effectively online, you'll need to abide by some rules of behavior and simple courtesies. You won't always see others observing this **netiquette,** or Internet etiquette, but you will see that those who do observe it receive the more thoughtful and considerate replies.

- **Addressing messages**

- **Avoid spamming.** With a few keystrokes, you can broadcast a message to many recipients at once—all the students in a course, say, or all the participants in a discussion group. Occasionally, you may indeed have a worthwhile idea or important information that everyone on the list will want to know. But flooding whole lists with irrelevant messages—called **spamming**—is rude and irritating.
- **Avoid sending frivolous messages to all the members of a group.** Instead of dashing off "I agree" and distributing the two-word message widely, put some time into composing a thoughtful response and send it only to those who will be interested.

- **Composing messages**

- **Remember that the messages you receive represent individuals.** Don't say or do anything that you wouldn't say or do face to face.
- **Use names.** In the body of your message, address your read-er(s) by name if possible and sign off with your own name and information on how to contact you. Your own name is especially important if your e-mail address does not spell it out.
- **Pay careful attention to tone.** Refrain from **flaming,** or attacking, correspondents. Don't use all capital letters, which SHOUT. And use irony or sarcasm only cautiously: in the absence of facial expressions, they can lead to misunderstandings. To indicate irony and emotions, you can use **emoticons,** such as the smiley :-). These sideways faces can easily be overused, though, and should not substitute for thoughtfully worded opinions.
- **Avoid saying anything in e-mail that you would not say in a printed document such as a letter or memo.** E-mail can usually be retrieved from the server, and in business and academic settings it may well be retrieved in disputes over contracts, grades, and other matters.

- **Reading and responding to messages**

- **Be a forgiving reader.** Avoid nitpicking over spelling or other surface errors. And because attitudes are sometimes difficult to convey, give authors an initial benefit of the doubt: a writer who at first seems hostile may simply have tried too hard to be concise; a writer who at first seems unserious may simply have failed at injecting humor into a worthwhile message.
- **Forward messages only with permission.** You may want to send a message you've received to someone else, but do so only if you know that the author of the message won't mind.

- **Avoid participating in flame "wars,"** overheated dialogs that contribute little or no information or understanding. If a war breaks out in a discussion, ignore it: don't rush to defend someone who is being attacked, and don't respond even if you are under attack yourself.

54b Collaborating online

Writing often involves collaborating with others as much as it does working in solitude. Indeed, many businesses and teachers expect writers to collaborate on generating ideas and producing and revising drafts. Computers have vastly expanded the options for collaboration, ranging from simple e-mail exchanges to video conferencing and virtual environments.

In this section we look at strategies for online collaboration in your courses. Your instructors or your school's technology advisers will introduce you to the system and help set you up. Here we focus on nontechnical matters of participating in discussions and working on drafts.

1 Participating in discussions

Many instructors use online conversations for discussing class readings and other topics and to help students generate ideas for writing. There are two basic types of online conversation: delayed conversation, such as that occurring by e-mail or on a Web forum or blog; and real-time **chat** (also called **synchronous communication**), which occurs immediately, like a telephone conversation.

- **Delayed conversation**

E-mail, Web discussion groups, and Web logs allow detailed, thoughtful messages and responses, so they are good places to try out ideas, explore assignments, and respond to others' work. When writing in such media, observe the netiquette guidelines on pages 828–29.

The screen shots on these pages show part of a discussion thread on *Blackboard* courseware and a query and responses on a course blog. The writing is casual but also thoughtful and specific. In the *Blackboard* examples, notice that the second writer actually challenges the first writer's assumption but frames the challenge productively in the context of the issue being discussed. Disagreements are bound to occur in online conversation, but they need not be unpleasant.

- **Online chat**

You may be familiar with chat conversations from using instant messaging with friends and family. In academic settings, chat will likely occur with courseware such as *WebCT* or *Blackboard*.

Collaborating via chat discussions will be more productive if you take a few tips:

- **Use the chat space for brainstorming topics and exchanging impressions.** The pace of online chat rarely allows lengthy consideration and articulation of messages.
- **Focus on a thread or common topic.** Online chat can be the electronic equivalent of a party, with different conversations occurring in the same space. If you have trouble tracking all the messages, concentrate on the ones that relate to your interest.
- **Write as quickly and fluidly as possible.** Don't worry about pro-ducing perfect prose.

2 Working on drafts

In writing and other courses, you and your fellow students may be invited to exchange and respond to one another's projects by e-mail or over the Web. To guide your reading of others' work, use the revision checklist on page 51 and the collaboration tips on pages 66–69. Focus on the deep issues in others' drafts, especially early drafts: thesis, purpose, audience, organization, and support for the thesis. Hold comments on style, grammar, punctuation, and other surface matters until you're reviewing late drafts, if indeed you are expected to comment on them at all.

Exchanging drafts online generally requires a file-naming system that identifies each project's writer, title, and version. Your instructor may establish such a system, or you and your classmates can develop one. See pages 53–54 for tips.

54c Creating effective Web compositions

Creating a Web page or site is sometimes as simple as saving a document in a different format, but more often it means thinking in a new way.

The diagrams on the facing page show a key difference between traditional printed documents and Web sites. Most traditional documents are meant to be read in sequence from start to finish. In contrast, most Web sites are so-called hypertexts: they are intended to be examined in whatever order readers choose as they follow links to pages within the site and to other sites.

When you create a composition for the Web, it will likely fall into one of two categories discussed in this section: pages such as class papers that resemble printed documents in being linear and text-heavy and that call for familiar ways of writing and reading; or “native” hypertext documents that you build from scratch, which call for screen-oriented writing and reading.

These general guidelines will help you create effective Web sites:

- **Plan the site carefully.** A hypertext can disorient readers as they scroll up and down and pursue various links. Page length, links, menus, and other cues should work to keep readers oriented.
- **Anticipate what readers may see on their screens.** Each reader’s screen frames and organizes the experience of a Web composition. Screen space is limited, and it varies from one computer to another. Text and visual elements should be managed for maximum clarity and effectiveness on a variety of screens.
- **Integrate visual and sound elements into the text.** Web compositions can include not only tables, charts, and photographs (which printed documents may also have) but also video (such as animation or film clips) and audio (such as music or excerpts from speeches). However, any visual or sound elements should not merely embellish the text but contribute substantially to it. In addition, you should find out whether your readers’ equipment will likely be able to handle multimedia elements and whether readers themselves may have disabilities that prevent their seeing or hearing such elements (see the note below).
- **Acknowledge your sources.** It’s easy to incorporate material from other sources into a Web site, but you have the same obli-gation to cite your sources as you do in a printed document (see pp. 629–34). Further, your Web site is a form of publication, like a magazine or a book. Unless the material you are using explicitly allows copying without permission, you may need to seek the copyright holder’s permission, just as print publishers do. (See pp. 635–37 for more on copyright.)

Note If you anticipate that some of your readers may have visual, hearing, or reading disabilities, you’ll need to consider their needs while designing Web sites. Some of these considerations are covered under document design on pages 125–26, and others are fundamental to any effective Web design, as discussed in this section. In addition, avoid any content that relies exclusively on images or sound, instead supplementing such elements with text descriptions. At the same time, try to provide key concepts both as text and as images and sound. For more on Web design for readers with disabilities, visit the World Wide Web Consortium at *w3.org/ tr/wai-webcontent* or the American Council for the Blind at *acb.org/ accessible-formats.html*.

1 Using HTML

Most Web pages are created using hypertext markup language, or HTML, and an HTML editor. The HTML editing program inserts command codes into your document that achieve the effects you want when the material appears on the Web.

From the user’s point of view, most HTML editors work much as word processors do, with similar options for sizing, formatting, and highlighting copy and with a display that shows what you will see in the final version. Indeed, you can compose a Web page without bothering at all about the behind-the-scenes HTML coding. As you gain experience with Web building, however, you may want to create more sophisticated pages by editing the codes themselves.

There are many HTML editors on the market. The Web site for this book (*ablongman.com/littlebrown*) provides links to free or low-cost editors.

2 Creating online papers

If an instructor asks you to post a paper to a Web site, you can compose it on your word processor and then use the Save As HTML function available on most programs to translate it into a Web page. After translating the paper, your word processor should allow you to modify some of

the elements on the page, or you can open the translated document in an HTML editor. The illustration below shows the opening screen of a student's project for a composition course.

3 Creating original sites

When you create an original Web site, you need to be aware that Web readers generally alternate between skimming pages for highlights and focusing intently on sections of text. To facilitate this kind of reading, you'll want to consider the guidelines on pages 833–34 for handling text and also your site's structure and content, flow, ease of navigation, and use of images, video, and sound.

Structure and content

Organize your site so that it efficiently arranges your content and also orients readers:

- **Sketch possible site plans before getting started.** (See p. 833 for an example.) Your aim is to develop a sense of the major components of your project and to create a logical space for each component.
- **Consider how menus on the site's pages can provide over-views of the organization as well as direct access to the pages.** The Web page below includes a menu on the left side of the page.
- **Treat the first few sentences of any page as a get-acquainted space for you and your readers.** On the page below, the text hooks readers with questions and orients them with general information.
- **Distill your text so that it includes only essential information.** Concise prose is essential in any writing situation, of course. But Web readers expect to scan text quickly and, in any event, have difficulty following long text passages on a computer screen.

Flow

Beginning Web authors sometimes start at the top of the page and then add element upon element until information proceeds down the screen much as it would in a printed document. However, by thinking about how information will flow on a page, you can take better advantage of the Web's visual nature:

- **Standardize elements of your design to create expectations in readers and to fulfill those expectations.** For instance, develop a uniform style for the main headings of pages, for headings within pages, and for menus.
- **Make scanning easy for readers.** Focus readers on crucial text by adding space around it. Add headings to break up text and to highlight content. Use lists to reinforce the parallel importance of items. (See pp. 116–20 for more on all these design elements.)

Easy navigation

A Web site of more than a few pages requires a menu on every page so that readers can navigate the site. Like the table of contents in a book, a menu lists the features of the site, giving its plan at a glance. By clicking on any item in the list, readers can go directly to a page that interests them.

You can embed a menu at the top, side, or bottom of a page. Menus at the top or side are best on short pages because they will not scroll off the screen as readers move down the page. On longer pages, menus at the bottom prevent readers from dead-ending—that is, reaching a point where they can't easily move forward or backward. You can also use a combination of menus.

In designing a menu, keep it simple: many different type fonts and colors will overwhelm readers instead of orienting them. And make the menus look the same from one page to the next so that readers recognize them easily.

Images, video, and sound

Exploring the Web, you'll see that site designers have taken advantage of the Web's ability to handle multimedia elements—images, video, and sound. Most Web readers expect at least some enhancement of text.

Note See pages 636–37 on observing copyright restrictions with images, video, and sound.

Images

Several guidelines can help you use images effectively in your Web compositions:

- **Use visual elements for a purpose.** They should supplement or replace text, highlight important features, and direct the flow of information. Don't use them for their own sake, as mere decoration.
- **Make the size of your files a central concern** so that readers don't have to wait forever for your site to download. If you are using lines or other icons, choose a limited number. If you are using photographs or other images, try to keep the file size below thirty kilobytes (30k).
- **Compose descriptions of images that relate them to your text.** Don't ask the elements to convey your meaning by themselves.
- **Provide alternative descriptions of images** to give a sense of them to readers with disabilities or readers whose Web brows-ers can't display them.

Video and sound

Video and sound files can provide information that is simply unavailable in printed documents. For instance, as part of a film review you might place a short clip from the film on your Web page and then provide a close reading of the clip. Or as part of a project on a controversial issue you might provide links to sound files containing political speeches.

However, the advantages of video and sound in Web compositions are offset by at least two complications: the files are generally large and difficult to work with, and readers need a fast connection and special software to download and open the files. Before you incorporate such elements into your Web compositions, make certain that they have a legitimate purpose. They should add essential information that can't be provided in any other medium, and they should be well integrated with the rest of your composition.

Sources

For the multimedia elements in a Web composition, you can use your own or obtain them from other sources:

- **Create your own graphs, diagrams, and other illustrations using a graphics program.** See pages 120–25 for tips on creating effective images.
- **Incorporate your own artwork, photographs, video clips, and sound recordings.** You may be able to find the needed equipment and software at your campus computer lab.
- **Obtain icons, photographs, video, and other multimedia elements from other electronic sources.** Be sure that you have enough space on your hard drive or a disk to hold the file. Also be sure to acknowledge your sources and to obtain reprint permission if neeeded (see pp. 635–37).

http://www.ablongman.com/littlebrown

Visit the companion Web site for more help with electronic mail, online collaboration, and Web composition.

E-mail message

Consider who needs to read your message as you address it.

Use the *Subject* line to describe accurately the content of the message.

Attach files of shared work (see the box below).

Adjust the content and tone to the intended audience.

Use short paragraphs with space between them.

Incompatible or encoded attachments

E-mail attachments are not always readable because of incompatible file formats or because of compression or encoding that requires special software at the recipient's end. If you have trouble sending or receiving attachments, try these strategies:

- **Send your documents in rich text format (RTF) or in text-only format,** both of which can be read by most word processors. RTF preserves most formatting, whereas text-only format does not. With either option, save a *copy* of your document (not the original) in the new format. In your word processor's File menu, first choose Save to preserve the original document. Then choose Save As, give the document a new name, go to the Save As Type option, and choose Rich Text Format or Text Only.
- **Copy the document into the body of an e-mail message.** You will lose most, if not all, of your document's formatting.
- **Use special software to read encoded or compressed files**. Your school's technology advisers can help you obtain and use such programs, which are usually free and available over the Internet.

E-mail response

Make sure the *To* field addresses the appropriate person or people.

Use the subject of the original message unless you are changing or expanding it.

When quoting the original message, select only the parts you are responding to and delete the rest.

Discussion on *Blackboard*

Discussion on a course Web log

Traditional print document

Web site

Paper submitted on the Web

White background providing strong contrast

ReadingWorks

Springfield Veterans Administration Hospital

Making a Difference:A Service-Learning Project

Alex Ramirez

Illiteracy or low literacy skills among military veterans is a pervasive problem in Springfield County and around the US. Many veterans do not have the literacy skills to find high-paying jobs needed to own a home and support a family. The literacy center at Springfield VA Hospital, where I volunteer as a tutor and completed my service-learning project, aims to provide the education these veterans need to improve their literacy skills.

Literacy rates among military veterans
Tutoring at ReadingWorks
Preparing documents and a Web site for ReadingWorks

Literacy Rates Among Militiary Veterans

Most military veterans have basic literacy skills; very few cannot read or

Standard font for readability

Menu providing links to major sections in the paper

Heading marking major section

Original Web site

Banner identifying sponsoring organization

ReadingWorks

Springfield Veterans Administration Hospital

Introductory text
appealing to readers' interests

> About ReadingWorks
> Services for veterans
> About our tutors
> Resources
> For students
> For tutors
> Exercises
> Directions
> Hours
> Join us!

Do you know a veteran who needs help
with reading and writing?

Do you need to improve your reading
and writing skills to get a job?

ReadingWorks of Springfield VA Hospital can make a difference. We train volunteers to help military veterans achieve literacy and prepare them for lifelong learning.

Click on the links in the menu to the left
to find out more about ReadingWorks.

Menu providing overview of the site's organization and content

Invitation to use the site menu

ReadingWorks Springfield VA Hospital
111 South Springdale Drive • Springfield, MI 45078
(209) 556-1212