

WRITING SKILLS FOR THE PRE-PROFESSIONAL STUDENT

JANET E. HILDEBRAND

In recent years administrators of medical, law, and graduate schools have found that students often lack basic preparation for advanced study.¹ New graduate students may exhibit deficiencies in writing, oral communication, knowledge of their chosen profession, and ethics — areas that can critically affect their performance in their fields of endeavor. To remedy some of these problems at the undergraduate level, Texas Wesleyan College, at the instigation of its president, Dr. Jon Fleming, instituted a comprehensive program for students entering the learned professions. Below are a description of the program, a detailed explanation of the important place of writing skills within it, and some conclusions drawn from experience.

The Pre-Professional Program

In the spring of 1981, Texas Wesleyan College received a generous grant from the M. D. Anderson Foundation to establish a pre-professional program. Students who intend to pursue careers in the learned professions — defined as medicine, dentistry, law, college teaching, or the ministry — enroll in a required one credit-hour course each semester during their undergraduate years. Pre-Professional Studies, as the course is called, meets one or two times each week and is structured on the four levels as follows:

1. Freshman year: Introduction to the learned professions
2. Sophomore year: Communication skills
3. Junior year: Mentorship in the chosen profession;

preparation for graduate entrance examinations (GRE, MCAT, LSAT, etc.)

4. Senior year: Seminar in ethics

The Director of Pre-Professional Studies is Dr. Allen Henderson, the Associate Provost of the College, and each level of the program has a coordinator. I am coordinator of the juniors in the fall and the second-semester freshmen in the spring, and I help them mainly with their writing skills.

During their years in Pre-Professional Studies, students have many opportunities to meet local and national professionals in their fields, receive first-hand experience by working with a mentor, and participate in student professional associations — the Health Professions Organization, the Pre-Law Society, the preministerial fraternity, or the association for future college professors. Doctors, dentists, lawyers, ministers, and college professors who are well-known both locally and nationally address the pre-professional students in group panels or as lecturers at special meetings and dinners. In talking with students, these members of the learned professions often stress the importance of good communication skills and sound ethical judgment.

Students receive a pass-fail grade for the course. Contract grading is sometimes used when student activities for the semester include gradable assignments. In that case, for a grade of “pass,” a typical contract might specify that students hand in one or two writing assignments, attend class and organizational meetings, and arrange an interview with either the level coordinator or the director of the program, or both.

The Role of Writing Skills

Writing skills are one important facet of pre-professional study at Texas Wesleyan. Within the program, students practice them, not duplicating the content of freshman or sophomore English, but doing assignments directly related to their future chosen professions. As faculty coordinator for writing skills, I have previous experience in teaching college English. In Pre-Professional Studies I have several functions:

1. To direct freshman students in writing and revising an essay on their personal goals, an exercise that is directly applicable to their graduate school applications;
2. To help students prepare a Curriculum Vitae or resumé;
3. To tutor individual students on their writing assign-

ments and term papers for English and other non-science classes, in effect providing a special writing clinic for them;

4. To present seminars in the course in such areas as finding a term paper topic, writing for different disciplines, and using library resources; and
5. To interview upper-level students and help them write applications to professional schools.

Each writing assignment is important to the pre-professional student's career and will be discussed below.

1. *Writing an essay on personal goals.*

This paper is written early in the freshman year. College freshmen may never have thought about their future plans or attempted to articulate them. Written in class, the essay is a beginning stage of that part of the application to graduate school that requires a statement of future plans. I correct it for students, giving them pointers on how to revise it.

2. *Writing a Curriculum Vitae or resumé.*

Writing a resumé is applicable to all levels of pre-professional studies, beginning with freshmen. As the coordinator, I interview each student, finding out about his or her career goals, past accomplishments, current employment, college study, activities, and future plans. The result of the conversation is twofold: a good acquaintance with the student and a rough draft of the vitae. Writing a resumé in an interview setting clearly shows students three things:

1. What they have already accomplished
2. What goals they should now articulate
3. What areas of coursework, employment, and extra-curricular interest they should now develop.

The resumé interview may be first performed on the freshman level and then again in the junior year, so that students learn to update their vitas, and so that they have a document (besides a transcript) to present to the professional school when seeking admission. Of course, writing a vitae is an exercise in rhetoric. One might argue that resumé writing should be the function of a college placement office. In actual practice, students need one-on-one assistance in formulating a vitae, aid that can more easily be given by a coordinator on an individual basis. Moreover, pre-professional students have a special need to start working on a resumé very early, at the

freshman level, so that by their senior year, they can more readily compete for admission to professional school.

3. Tutoring individual students.

Most pre-professional students do receive good grades on their writing assignments. But nearly all of them need supplementary tutorial assistance in paper-writing: help with stylistic refinements, organization of material, and general revising strategies. Their essays and term papers must not merely be above average — they must be excellent in their clarity and readability. In the past several semesters I have tutored students in such diverse areas as finding a topic for a history paper, revising an English term paper on *The Scarlet Letter*, and organizing a short business or religion paper.

4. Presenting seminars.

Seminars on writing in the pre-professional program last from thirty minutes to an hour and are presented by the coordinator or by other faculty from the English department. One of the most difficult tasks of the program is to provide students with career-related information on library use. As freshmen or sophomores, they may have participated in many library tours, during orientation week or in classes requiring library research. Many tend to find these visits boring or repetitive; therefore, their attitude toward the library is usually very negative. In the pre-professional program, the librarians and coordinators have devised a "Library Treasure Hunt" based on an article by James B. Mathews (100). In their professional groups — e.g., pre-medicine, pre-law — students compete to find a number of specific sources (usually about eight items) related to their fields. For example, a question for the pre-medical students might read, "Where can you find out what narcolepsy is?" Answer: in a medical dictionary (students provide the complete bibliographical citation). The first group to complete all items wins a prize.

5. Applying to professional schools.

Application to seminary, or to medical, dental, law, or graduate school is a detailed process, and the readability of students' applications can determine their acceptance or rejection. Late in their junior year or early in their senior year, when they apply to professional school, pre-professional students visit me at my office individually with the rough drafts of their applications. These documents are tough exercises in essay-writing. Applicants may be asked to write up their per-

sonal strengths and weaknesses, their goals and reasons for pursuing them, their extracurricular activities, and/or their autobiographies. Again, the individualized instruction of an English teacher is necessary here, for a student and I may compose five drafts of an essay for a medical school application before reaching an acceptable final product. Generally, students' application essays are too vague and flowery, so revision consists in organizing and presenting specific details from their backgrounds. A well-written application essay should present the candidate in a favorable light, avoid clichés (such as the well-worn phrase, "I want to become a doctor/lawyer/minister in order to help people"), and show evidence of serious intent.

Concluding Ideas

One might argue that the above-mentioned activities could and should be used with all college students — not just the pre-professionals. If colleges and universities could find ways to provide all of these advantages to every student, so much the better. Most institutions of higher learning simply do not have the resources to do it. But the grant given to Texas Wesleyan College does recognize the acute need for specific supplementary instruction for pre-professional students, all of whom will be entering extremely competitive fields.

Furthermore, these students need writing assistance related to their professions. Within the total program for them, which includes the other aspects described at the beginning, pre-professional students can receive more writing instruction tailored to their needs than they might obtain in classes or at a regular college writing clinic.

In short, adding the dimension of special writing skills for the pre-professional student can be an asset. A program of this kind also utilizes college English teachers in a cross-curricular setting — a very desirable end. Cultivating pre-professional students' writing skills and nurturing them along in undergraduate years can only be helpful to them and to the professions they will ultimately enter.

Janet E. Hildebrand is a part-time Assistant Professor of German and Coordinator of Pre-Professional Studies at Texas Wesleyan College, Fort Worth, Texas. She has taught on the college level German, English, and several education courses.

NOTES

¹ See Hutton (134-47). Also, this was the consensus at the Conference of Texas Law School Deans, Austin, Texas, March 29, 1980.

² Bjork and Oye (112-16). See also Leon R. Kass (1305-10).

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