

Seven First Principles for our Communication Workshop

Rolf Norgaard—University of Colorado at Boulder

Seven “first principles” will guide our work together in the writing workshop:

1. Writing and speaking are intertwined.

In professional settings, writing and speaking are closely related. In the workshop, we’ll likewise address both writing and speaking skills. The various deliverables for this summer will help you learn how to navigate your way between written and oral contexts.

2. Think in terms of strategies, not rules.

I prefer to think in terms of strategies for accomplishing specific purposes with particular audiences. Generalized rules about writing have their place, but are limited in their usefulness. I’d like for you to think strategically about your communication. My goal is to help you become savvy, adaptable writers who can adjust to different rhetorical situations.

3. A focus on readers and reading can improve your writing.

We’ll spend a lot of our time talking about how readers read. This will help you to adapt your writing so that it serves the needs of readers. Our goal is to move from “writer-based prose” to “reader-based prose.” Our peer-editing activities in the workshop are one way we can make readers and reading concrete and tangible for you.

4. Writing as social and collaborative

Romantic notions of the solitary writer waiting for inspiration from a muse have little applicability in scientific and professional settings. Writing is social and collaborative. More generally, communication is the chief means by which scientific communities sustain themselves and accomplish their work.

5. Writing is an integral part of inquiry

Writing is not something you do when the thinking and the science are finished. Writing is far more than working up the results. Writing and speaking (and related literate behaviors such as keeping lab notebooks) are essential to your inquiry. We’ll take a broad view of communication activities. Our workshops are about far more than just writing up your final paper.

6. Progress in writing is best described through an apprenticeship model.

The conventional way to think of progress in writing is according to a linear model: the writing always improves as one moves from basic to advanced courses. I don’t believe we are well served by this model. I much prefer to think in terms of an apprenticeship model of progress: your growth as a writer involves entering and becoming familiar with different but overlapping communities of practice. When you are new to a community or take on challenging ideas, the writing can fall apart. The communication workshops intentionally take you out of your comfort zones and expose you to challenging tasks precisely so that you will grow from apprentice into master scientists.

7. Becoming a member of a discourse community involves knowing the (often unspoken) discourse moves.

For every “body of knowledge” there are “bodies of knowers.” Entering a community of knowers means understanding and using the “secret handshake” of that discipline. Discursive moves in science often “go without saying,” and thus are poorly communicated to apprentice scientists. Our workshops will talk about what is assumed but rarely communicated. We’ll pull back the curtain to expose and better understand the messiness of writing and the social activity of science. We’ll occupy a middle ground between abstract theory (*theoria*) and particular application (*praxis*)—a middle ground where the focus is on *techne*—strategy, craft, know-how, and knack.