

Social Advocacy Statement Writing for Entry-Level Public Relations Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This assignment is designed to focus on learning knowledge about social issues and developing public relations writing and critical thinking skills. The learning goals of writing a 350-500-word social involvement statement are to understand the concept and importance of corporate social responsibility and advocacy practice in the field of public relations, to apply the essential elements of excellent PR writing, and to deepen knowledge of diversity, inclusion, and social issues within and beyond the classroom. Empirical evidence of this class-tested writing assignment showed that students successfully applied the essential elements of good PR writing that they learned in the course. Additionally, this assignment helped students cultivate awareness of important current issues and a better sense of diversity and inclusion, as well as advance the competitive skillsets that public relations students are expected to develop for their career as a beginning PR professional.

Keywords: corporate social advocacy, diversity and inclusion, public relations writing, PR writing skill, social issues

GIFT Overview

Stakeholders' expectations of a business's role in society have only continued to grow (Edelman, 2019, 2023; USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2021). With the increasing expectations of organizations' leadership roles for society, many companies continue to perform their participation in society by taking a prominent stand on important current issues (Beard, 2021). Public relations practitioners anticipate the number of businesses that proactively advocate for important issues will increase in the next five years (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2022). According to a recent survey in a PR industry report about corporate activism (USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations, 2022), 93% of professionals reported spending more time addressing current issues, such as racial equity, healthcare, and climate change, and expected to be involved in multiple issues and dedicating even more time to these matters in the future.

Given these current and future situations in the field, building the ability to plan, implement, and evaluate prosocial initiatives becomes critical for entry-level public relations practitioners. Such critical demands in the industry indicate that it will be essential to help students develop the ability to think critically about social problems and values behind a sociopolitical issue and write an impactful statement regarding an important current issue.

As society has become more polarized, issues have also become more polarized in current information-limiting environments, meaning "encapsulating the primary concerns regarding echo chambers and filter bubbles" (Kitchens et al., 2020, p. 1620; see also Kuypers, 2002; McCoy et al., 2018). This means that these more polarizing social and media environments are a challenge for public relations practitioners who work for an organization that engages with current issues. When planning and implementing an organization's social initiatives concerning a current

issue, public relations practitioners should be aware of a situation in which an organization takes some risks due to the inherently controversial nature of current issues (Browning et al., 2020; Waymer & VanSlette, 2021; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

With the situation that public relations professionals will be facing, it is imperative for PR students to have the educational opportunity to gain knowledge of social issues and develop competitive critical thinking and writing skills through a writing assignment that reflects industry needs and social environments. PR educators should develop learning objectives that can advance students' understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) values and the shared responsibility that organizational communication practices have for bettering society (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018).

Assignment Learning Objectives

In this regard, the learning goals of this social advocacy statement writing were developed in three parts: (a) understanding the concepts of corporate social responsibility and advocacy and its importance to the field of PR; (b) applying the essential elements of PR writing to an impactful social engagement statement; and (c) advancing an understanding of important current issues and values underlying social issues, including diversity, equity, and inclusion.

When it comes to the first learning goal and the objectives of the assignment, students can develop knowledge of organizational communication involving current issues and learn from real-world organizations that have recently implemented social initiatives for various current issues. In addition, students are able to understand why social initiative practice matters to the field of public relations by receiving a 60-minute lecture about the associations between corporate social responsibility/advocacy and the outcomes that an organization can expect to achieve (e.g., relationship quality, reputation, word-of-mouth, attitude

toward company) before working on their own writing.

This social initiative statement assignment is designed as a writing assignment that uses a student's own client organization in a PR writing course at an undergraduate level. Along with a press release, a pitch email, and social media and blog writings, students learn the key elements of good PR writing from the beginning of the semester and practice writing skills through different types of PR writing assignments. Through this assignment, students apply a particular purpose of social involvement, thereby leading to further development of writing skills. For example, students can practice writing a clear first sentence that states a client organization's stance on an issue and considers the adequate and accurate word choice needed for its specific sociopolitical context. Furthermore, this assignment gives students the opportunity to develop critical thinking and research skills by having them choose an appropriate issue that an organization can speak on based on their understanding and knowledge of that organization's core values and key stakeholders.

The third goal and objectives of this assignment relate to deepening students' understanding of current social issues and developing a better sense of diversity, inclusion, and social justice. By including feasible and tangible action plans in a statement, students can learn how to develop ideas, which can make their statement more authentic to audience. This needs to include details about how a client organization will implement its communication practices in a way to show its shared responsibility and commitment to society. To emphasize the importance of having a better sense of social change and impact regarding ethics in PR practice, the instructor needs to provide detailed information about DEI-related seminars and workshops so that students can seek out and experience various resources available on their school campus, as well as public relations associations, institutes, or firms (e.g., Public Relations Society of America, Public Relations Student Society of America, or Institute for Public Relations).

How the Assignment was Class-Tested

Students craft a 350-500-word statement supporting sociopolitical causes to help their client organization foster audience engagement in social change. For this assignment, students assume that this statement will appear on their client's announcement webpage to promote social values regarding a sociopolitical issue. Students are required to choose one of the social or political causes, such as racial/gender equality, climate change, abortion laws, gun policy, immigration, and so on.

To teach this social initiative statement assignment, two 75-minute class sessions are necessary. In the first session, the instructor gives a lecture about the concept, importance, backgrounds, and examples of corporate social responsibility, corporate social advocacy, or brand activism to help students develop their knowledge about these concepts. Additionally, the lecture needs to cover writing strategies on the basis of students' understanding of the essential elements of good PR writing. Then, the instructor overviews the format of a social advocacy statement with students. The instructor encourages students to develop ideas to decide what social issue would be adequate based on their client organization's core values and mission before they come to the next session of class.

The second session for this assignment can be run as a writing workshop to provide immediate one-on-one feedback to students. Students are asked to bring their laptops or use a school computer and start writing a draft. Before beginning an in-class writing session, the instructor needs to briefly explain the key elements of a social initiative assignment that students should consider and include for an authentic and impactful statement. While working on their own writing, students can discuss writing strategies by asking questions to the instructor. At the end of the workshopping session, students are asked to write several short open-ended questions on Canvas (a course management system) that is designed

for instructors to check whether students have a good understanding of the assignment's prompts. Example questions are "What social issue did you choose?" and "How much would that social issue be aligned with your client organization's mission and business values?"

Students are given an additional two to three days to submit their assignments. After grading and providing feedback to the students' individual assignments, the instructor gives a short lecture to provide general feedback, including common errors in word choices, grammar, or AP style. In addition to writing strategies based on the student's performance, the instructor needs to provide more information about seminars, workshops, and educational/professional programs regarding diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice. This is critical in this assignment to motivate and encourage students to participate in more opportunities to advance their understanding of social, political, and cultural differences and develop a better sense of approaching important current issues for their competitive career preparation and responsibility as good citizens and beginning PR practitioners.

Evidence of Learning Outcomes

As for the empirical evidence of actual learning outcomes, student performance demonstrated that students successfully applied the essential elements of PR writing they learned and practiced in the course to a social involvement statement. Some students experienced difficulty in choosing the most relevant social issue for their client organization during the workshop session. However, with one-on-one feedback during the session, students had a chance to discuss their client organization's mission and vision, so they were able to decide on an issue that was more adequate for their organization's social engagement. All students completed social advocacy statements, showing a better understanding of CSR and corporate social advocacy concepts and finding a relevant social issue that aligned with their client's core values and effectively reflected their

client's situational factors in terms of social involvement partnerships and collaborations.

However, student writing performance suggested that developing effective action plans for an impactful social initiative program would require more time for research and revision to enhance writing quality. For this reason, students were given the opportunity to resubmit this graded assignment. This encouraged students to revise their work based on instructor feedback; this work was regraded. This second chance to revise their initial submission after receiving instructor feedback was an effective way to have students rethink and polish their writing.

One of the critical elements that students were expected to include in the statement was to provide adequate backgrounds to let the audience know about how proactively a client is involved in the cause. To effectively achieve this learning outcome, it is important to encourage students to continuously monitor what is happening regarding current sociopolitical issues and help them further advance information literacy and critical thinking skills to grasp the main points of social, political, and cultural topics. This prepares students well for their job as entry-level public relations practitioners by developing their ability to find an adequate issue and make a proper decision based on their understanding of a client organization and its situation.

Additionally, the instructor needs to focus on several more learning outcomes specifically related to writing skill development. First, it is important to guide students to write a clear first sentence and paragraph presenting a client's stance on the cause. When students begin with a strong and succinct first sentence about a client's position on a social issue, their social advocacy statements were more likely to have coherent arguments and included more feasible action plans. Furthermore, it is critical to teach students how to reduce redundancy and provide strong supporting evidence. For example, students wrote their rationale for

why the organization spoke out on an issue by simply repeating “it is an important issue” or “it is critical” instead of providing specific reasons, possible social effects, or potential outcomes that an organization achieves for society.

In terms of word choices based on a sense of diversity and inclusion, some students’ statements could have included more inclusive words or expressions from enhanced diversity and inclusion perspectives. When the instructor gives comments and feedback on grading and a follow-up lecture, it is necessary to help students understand the differences between words and expressions so that they can improve their writing, develop a shared responsibility and ethical approach, and expand their viewpoints on the diversity and inclusion values underlying current issues.

Template Assignment Guide

Specific guidelines in a writing template were provided for an effective learning experience, including purpose, hypothetical situation, and formatting of the assignment.

The prompts used for students are as follows: “You’re writing a social initiative statement about supporting a specific cause related to a current sociopolitical issue. Assume that this statement will appear on your client’s website’s announcement page to promote social values regarding a current issue that they choose to cultivate key stakeholders’ engagement in social change for our society. Choose a social issue that is relevant and adequate to your client organization. Examples of sociopolitical causes are racial and gender equality, climate change, gun violence, and reproductive rights, but not limited to those issues. Your social advocacy statement should be between 350-500 words. The body copy of your social advocacy statement should be single-spaced, flush left, and ragged right. One space between paragraphs. Do not indent paragraphs. Remember short sentences, paragraphs, and word choices are important principles of

good PR writing. You should apply the AP style to this writing statement. Before you submit your work, double-check grammar and punctuation (e.g., commas going inside quotation marks mid-sentence or periods going inside quotation marks at the end of a sentence). Be sure to use plain English because a social initiative statement needs to be understandable to everyone, not just economists or academics.”

To help develop more impactful and persuasive social advocacy statements, several specific prompts are required. These are the prompts provided to students: “Begin your statement with the first sentence of the statement showing your client’s clear stance on the cause. Then, explain why that cause and its speaking out on a current issue matter to the client organization, readers, and community. Include a short paragraph to summarize a current issue related to the cause the organization is supporting/opposing. Add one hyperlink to an external news article to provide background on the issues for readers so that readers can look for more information about a social issue that you are writing about. Remember that it is crucial to create a truly authentic social responsibility and advocacy statement for PR practitioners. As we discussed during class, provide details about at least two action plans to actualize the social value (e.g., how to collaborate or partner with other businesses, nonprofits, or industry thought leaders, increase local community participation in advancing the cause or include some sort of component internal to the client organization’s structure and employees).”

Additionally, here is an example of an assignment posting on a classroom webpage, e.g., Canvas: “The purpose of your social advocacy statement is to deliver a clear stance on a particular cause of a current sociopolitical issue and ultimately foster your key stakeholders’ engagement in social change for our society. Details of the social advocacy statement assignment will be discussed in class. There is also a template for the social advocacy statement, with formatting and content

instructions, posted here. You should read this entire document, so you understand the content of the social advocacy statement, and then follow the layout of this document and messaging elements so you get the statement formatting correct. There is a grading rubric for this assignment — please review it below to see how your writing will be graded.”

Assignment Grading Criteria or Rubric

With detailed information in a social advocacy statement writing template, the following criteria were used for student learning outcome assessment:

1. Evaluate the quality of content (50 points out of 100) based on these rubrics: Is the student’s statement clear, incorporating key messages about their client’s stance on a social issue? Does it include all relevant details (e.g., a clear first sentence, a paragraph about an issue, and two action plans) as noted in the assignment description and the classroom discussions?
2. Improve a presentation format (25 points out of 100) based on these rubrics: Did the statement follow the format and template specified for this assignment, including a hyperlink to a news article that provides backgrounds behind chosen current issues and describing at least two action plans?
3. Evaluate students’ works for accuracy, clarity, grammatical correctness (25 points out of 100), as follows: Is the student’s writing free from spelling and grammar errors? Did the student follow appropriate AP style guidelines? Are their sentences/ paragraphs short and to the point? Does the student explain everything in plain English?

Teaching Note

As a class-tested writing assignment, this social advocacy statement assignment is most useful for public relations writing courses and DEI-related courses. If the instructor wants to develop it as a full-

semester or half-semester group project, it can also be suited for a PR research and planning course or a PR campaign course. In such a case, students can have several weeks to conduct a client's situation analysis and audience analysis before selecting a social issue that is more relevant to a client organization's business and social values. Additionally, case studies about real-world social responsibility and advocacy initiatives for another week will be helpful in researching and planning students' social initiative projects: for instance, doing research on social advocacy statements or posts on owned media (e.g., Ben & Jerry's, Nike). In addition, instructors can lead a class discussion about a recent crisis related to a social responsibility and advocacy communication program. As one of the possible examples, Hershey's 2023 International Women's Day Canadian campaign featuring trans activist Fae Johnstone generated both support and backlash from consumers on social media. In response, the company affirmed its stand, stating it was aligned with the company's core values and those of its target audience, emphasizing a commitment to togetherness, diversity, and inclusive celebrations of women over the past three years (Wiener-Bronner, 2023).

Instructors can find recommended reading materials that help students' knowledge of social and political issues and situations by using quality reports published by the PR industry and its institutions (e.g., PRSA) or social science research institutions (e.g., Pew Research Center). To teach the concept, importance, and examples of social initiative practices, it is beneficial to use recent reports written by PR companies (e.g., Edelman's Trust Reports or Special Reports or Cision) and PR research centers, including the Page W. Arthur Center for Integrity in Public Communication or USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations. Given the inherent controversy underlying social values, instructors may face challenging teaching moments when leading discussions about some sociopolitical issues. It is necessary to provide an open-minded

educational environment when students speak up on their opinions about a particular issue or topic. For that reason, this social advocacy writing assignment can bring a valuable opportunity for public relations educators and students to discuss and practice how to respect others' thoughts and different perspectives in a higher education community.

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