

Skimming the News

How to engage audiences with curated newsletter content

Idea: Email newsletters are a popular way to disseminate news and information. Traditional news outlets use email newsletters to push out their content. But other outlets — including nonprofits, universities and corporations — also use email newsletters to deliver information to their readers' inboxes. Incorporating an email newsletter assignment into an editing or reporting class gives students real world, practical experience in this form of communication.

Goals: By creating an email newsletter students learn to:

- Think critically by exercising news judgment.
- Evaluate and curate information from myriad sources.
- Write clearly and concisely in a tone appropriate to the content.
- Edit their own work and the work of peers.
- Write headlines and accurately summarize content.
- Craft captions, subheads and lead-in text.

How It Works: We've each crafted the assignment somewhat differently for our classes, but the learning outcomes are the same.

In one version of the assignment, students work in teams of two to create a weekly newsletter. The newsletters recap the week's news for a student audience and offer a glimpse of the week ahead. The student-written teaser for the newsletter explains: "Want to sound smarter to friends, professors and parents? We harvested the past week's news and handpicked what to keep an eye on next week."

Before starting their newsletter, students are required to subscribe to several newsletters including theSkimm, Vox Sentences and New York Times Now. In addition, they also create Twitter lists to find news of particular interest to college students. The lists include HuffPost College, College Media, USA Today College, the Associated Press and more. Students create a template for the newsletter in Google Docs.

Team members divvy up the work — one might gather national, international items while the other looks for local or campus news. They write summaries and headlines, find photos and write captions. Team members edit each other's summaries and headlines. Their goal: 12 stories about the week's news and another three items looking at the week ahead. They write in a conversational yet professional style with their audience in mind (fellow students). Students also learn about the ethics of attribution and devise a style to ensure proper credit. The grading rubric for the assignment spells out that students must recast stories in their own words. Students post their newsletter on a student news site, hosted by WordPress. This allows students to be comfortable with a content

management system. Links to the newsletters are tweeted and emailed around the university community.

After completing the newsletter, students write brief reflection papers evaluating their own work and the work of their teammates. They also explain what they learned from the assignment. Students are graded using a rubric that evaluates story selection, writing, headlines, mechanics (including style and grammar), formatting and their reflections.

Another approach to the assignment is to create a prototype for an email newsletter for a niche audience. Here, students work in pairs to brainstorm ideas on an email newsletter, and they research possible topic areas such as sports, pets, cooking or travel. They also consider how often the newsletter will be disseminated and at what time of day. The students discuss the tone and format of the newsletter. They then put together a prototype using a Google doc or email service such as MailChimp. As with the other version of the assignment, the students write headlines, summaries and captions. They find and place copyright-free images and GIFs as appropriate. When the prototypes are complete, students share them with classmates in an informal critique session.

Reaction: Students say they've learned that curating an email newsletter is challenging but rewarding. They say they've learned that it can be particularly hard to summarize a story in a few lines without copying the original article. The assignment, they say, taught them how to write more concisely, made them more aware of audience in story selection, and gave them a published example of their work.

Each version of the assignment has inspired students beyond the classroom. One student at Nebraska, who will be the college newspaper's editor next year, said after this assignment she plans to create a newsletter for the campus as part of the newspaper's efforts to reach audiences in new ways. A student at UNC-Chapel Hill had a similar experience, helping the campus newspaper launch several email newsletters during the 2015-16 academic year after completing this assignment in an editing course.