

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Necessity of Public Writing

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Abstract

Researchers need to reach a new academic normal in which virtually every piece of scholar-facing humanities work generates a public-facing writing component. This essay recounts interactions with a colleague who, in a curriculum meeting, described public humanities as “a hobby.” I suggest arguments and strategies to lead skeptical colleagues to re-envision the value and possibilities – and occasional dangers and pitfalls – of the public humanities. Public writing is a practice that academic humanists should regularly engage in and a mode we must be willing to teach in order to win back public trust in higher education and to reinvigorate humanities research at a time of precarity.

Keywords: education; essays; hobbies; outreach; research; students

Public humanities is sometimes imagined too narrowly – especially by those who don’t already embrace it – as if it were primarily made up of snappy op-eds published in the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*. If that were all public humanities was, then even the most accomplished practitioners would produce only a few thousand words of it over the course of their careers. Committed public humanists know that such hard-to-place and thus more rare writing is just the tip of the iceberg.¹

A pressing task facing scholars now is developing “a complementary and enriching relationship between public life and humanities research,” as the editors of *The Routledge Companion to Public Humanities Scholarship* put it.² That effort must involve deliberately expanding what public writing means, then arguing for its value and making more space for it in one’s work life. I believe public writing is something all academics ought to do, some of the time. And we must not only get better at producing meaningful public-facing writing

¹ Public writing is defined here as writing deliberately addressed to audiences beyond the academy, made available for wider reading, viewing, or listening, especially in places that those without advanced training in a field or subfield might go to read, listen, or view. Research is imagined expansively to include not only subject-area scholarship but also scholarship of teaching or other evidence-based writing that strengthens, advances, and documents disciplinary, departmental, or institutional excellence.

² Fisher-Livne and May-Curry 2024, 3.

but also convince our hesitant or resistant colleagues that it's in their individual interest, and the interest of the discipline's more vibrant future, to join in.

Most who earn a graduate degree in the humanities complete a major piece of scholar-facing work – a thesis. Few humanities graduate programs involve a similar imperative to produce public-facing work. From that first milestone of the thesis – indeed, well before it – we ought to encourage humanists-in-training to think more deliberately about communicating research findings to, and seeking collaborations with, multiple publics.

For each piece of scholar-facing work produced, humanities researchers ought to commit to creating one or more public-facing components. We should deliberately and consistently seek and build audiences for research findings, beyond those who share our educational credentials and academic privileges.

The situation is urgent. A recently published report confirms that those of us working in higher education believe we're facing new external pressures.³ More than 60% of faculty and administrators identify growing negative public perceptions of higher education as of high concern. The humanities researcher's response shouldn't be "duck and cover" or even "build it and they will come." It must be "meet and greet."

One fortunate thing is that there's no shortage of spaces for such meeting and greeting. *The New York Times* runs only a small number of guest essays per year, but millions of items categorized as news are published per day. More academic humanities researchers ought to see public writing as a scholarly responsibility and overall good – not as extraneous to, unnecessary for, or, worst of all, "dumbing down" our expertise or findings. Such work should be envisioned as talking across, or "engaging with publics, plural, while understanding the limitations, possibilities, and imaginaries of publicness."⁴

If trust in higher education is low, then respect for intellectuals seems lower still, but conditions of distrust are merely replicated if we condescendingly cast this as a "them" problem. Some responsibility for rebuilding trust must fall on scholars, not only on administrators or public relations professionals. Faculty must start imagining ourselves sometimes as diplomats and ambassadors, rather than gadflies and wonks. Addressing public perceptions of the academic humanities should rank high on the list of priorities. To use another cliché, this is an "all hands on deck" situation.

Not all hands seem to understand that yet. I was in a curriculum meeting recently with a colleague who declared public humanities to be "a hobby." It was a comment meant to block opportunities for graduate students to produce public writing as a part of formal coursework, by casting it as lightweight stuff to do, if at all, only in one's free time. The colleague's remark was insulting, suggesting that much of the work I (and many of us) do isn't "really" our job.

By this traditional, hidebound view, the only kind of graduate student writing that ought to count as work and ought to be assigned, is scholar-facing writing – traditional seminar papers, academic conference papers, then the thesis or dissertation. From there, with luck

³ American Council on Education and Huron Consulting 2024.

⁴ Looser 2019; de Waard 2022, 144.

(and for the students who are “good enough”), there would be an eventual leap into the scholarly journal article, then perhaps a monograph pitched to a narrow audience of fellow scholars. Anything else faculty might teach as research-based writing was cast by my colleague as a disservice to our graduate students.

I’ve certainly heard this kind of thing before. But I don’t find this attitude, or this reluctance to learn to communicate ideas in different registers, nearly as often among our students. This stuff is already a part of the media air they’re breathing. Advanced undergraduate and new graduate students I’ve encountered seem hungry to learn and hone both scholar-facing and public-facing research and writing skills. They get it that work shared in many modes is crucial to getting one’s ideas heard and thus to increasing the potential to make an impact.

If I’m right that advanced students are more willing than senior colleagues to consider the need for ongoing professional development as both scholar-facing and public-facing writers, then the problem will eventually disappear by generational attrition. One concern, however, is that we don’t have that long. By disconnecting ourselves from public audiences, scholars are inadvertently joining the forces to hasten our demise. It’s recently been argued that the public humanities is weakening the discipline of literary studies. I disagree. A more accessible, outward-facing discipline isn’t a weaker one. It’s likely to be stronger, with more practitioners, more robust audiences, and potentially better conversations.

My “public humanities are a hobby” colleague is shortsighted. Approaches that would have us double down on the habit of turning in on ourselves, or putting up new fences around disciplines, are both student unfriendly and self-defeating. To care now about humanities scholarship and higher education should also involve sometimes turning outward. Yet, oddly, the most pressing “outreach” work may be better described as in-reach – that is, persuading a subset of scholars to stop sneering at public humanities work and to seek to change how it’s valued and counted.

This sneering is perplexing. Perhaps it harkens back to the mistaken notion that scholar-facing writing is necessarily superior research. This way of thinking would have it that articles and books readable only by other subject experts are smarter, better, and harder to compose. Yet public-facing writing, as anyone who tries to do it well knows, isn’t any easier than scholar-facing writing. All kinds of writing may be done poorly and well, with little effort or much. Shifting one’s audience isn’t “dumbing down.” It’s a kind of translation, which is an art. This work shouldn’t be cast as a zero-sum game either. Few of us would claim that using only one style of teaching in the classroom – all lecture or all discussion or all workshop, all the time – results in the best pedagogy. We use many methods, depending on content, context, and audience. More of us need to start thinking that way about research-based communication, too. Anyone exclusively producing scholar-facing writing is no longer engaging in best practices.

So how do we encourage more humanists to transform or translate scholarly findings into public writing? There’s no secret sauce at the level of the individual. It’s been an evolving skill for me. One thing I set out to do now, whenever I produce a piece of writing, is to recast and amplify it to try to engage with audiences beyond the academy. When publishing a book, I build in time for the additional pitching of and writing of what are known as tie-in-essays for mainstream publications. (Most trade nonfiction writers understand this as an expected part of the book publication and publicity process; many scholars don’t yet – and should.)

But public writing doesn’t have to be so regimented or grand. You might begin by pitching a lively, conversational guest post for a library or a nonprofit organization, especially any

place that played a part in your scholar-facing research. Such venues are often seeking content and further collaboration – when it “gets” their audience and when it’s of mutual benefit. One trick, as many scholars who’ve “gone public” have described, is moving your writing from prioritizing argument to prioritizing storytelling.⁵

Not every attempt will be a success. It’s important to acknowledge that public writing sometimes ends up feeling like it was wasted time, without positive, visible, or measurable results. I’ve certainly produced public-facing writing that appeared to fall entirely flat, failing to connect with people or groups I hoped might care. (Of course, scholarly articles may land with a greater thud, with one study showing 75% of essays in literature and literary theory failed to be cited even once in the 5 years after their publication.⁶) Some of us have the good fortune to work on material with robust popular audiences, hungry for new information based on original research. But even if you’re working on a subject about which you think, “It’s too specialized for non-academic audiences to care,” I encourage you to reimagine that take.

Much specialized research, even of supposedly arcane material, may be made more interesting beyond the academy when its origins or its process are shared. What made you care about starting this research? Or you might tell a story that demystifies your process. What resources did it take? Were there any hiccups, false-starts, or ah-ha moments? You could pull back the curtain on how scholarly discoveries or insights happen. In doing so, you could advocate for the importance of an organization’s staff and materials. When you make this sort of process-oriented thinking a habit, you start to conceive of projects themselves in both scholar-facing and public-facing ways.

Rarely will you be going it alone. Public-facing writing also takes a village. I recently co-edited a collection of eighteenth-century short stories with three students, producing the first modern edition of Anna Maria Porter’s *Artless Tales: Romantic Effusions of the Heart* (1795–1796), published when this once celebrated author was just 16.⁷ Our edition, which includes an introduction, appendices, and annotations, was published by the Juvenilia Press at the University of New South Wales. That press specializes in literary writings by authors under 21, producing books that are routinely co-edited by faculty–student teams.

No one expects *Artless Tales* to sell thousands of copies, and that’s okay. But that doesn’t mean we don’t have an interest, and even an obligation, to share what we did and learned as widely as possible. In getting the word out, the student-editors and I had the support of an English department videographer – an incredible privilege in my forward-thinking department. The videographer interviewed our editorial team to create a beautiful 3-minute video.⁸ The department agreed to use its resources in this way because the video not only shared our findings and but showcased the student internship program that fostered it. We also worked with ASU Library to get the book featured in its “Shelf Life” series.⁹ We shared the book’s beautiful cover on social media. I wrote about our work in my Substack author newsletter, sharing brief stories of our pandemic labor of love. I’ll continue to seek ways to

⁵ For advice on how to do this pivoting from argument to storytelling at the level of the book, which is also applicable for essay writing, see Mazzeo 2024.

⁶ Baker 2018.

⁷ Porter 2023.

⁸ “Internship” 2024.

⁹ “Artless” 2023.

remind people this edition exists and to describe what collaborative faculty–student humanities research might look like.

Not everything we do as scholars is, or should be, written up for a major newspaper or magazine. But any subjects we deem important enough to pursue as scholar-facing research ought also to be ripe for sharing with wider audiences, including those beyond the academy. Public writing is not an academostar’s extra fun-times lark. It’s a growth-oriented, connective practice that may help us win back public trust; may bust negative stereotypes about self-satisfied academic researchers and research; and may prompt more of us to talk about and across differences of all kinds. Public writing is a necessity because it promises to reinvigorate and transform humanities research, as we seek to engage with and enlist non-academic audiences, and potential allies, at a time of precarity.

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