

Academic vs. Business Writing

The five primary differences between work and academic writing are

1. Writing at work focuses on problem solving. Unlike academic writing where you write to persuade your professor how much you know, at work you write to help you perform your job. Primarily, you are trying to achieve a specific goal and to complete a job task.
2. Work-related writing targets multiple audiences with different perspectives. In college our primary and, typically, only audience is our professor. Professors approach student writing similarly. They want to read what you've written and they're trying to determine if you've mastered the course content. The professor is also an expert or authority on the subject matter. But, as an employee you may write to many readers with varied backgrounds—some highly educated experts and some less knowledgeable than you are. You will also write to people within and outside your department and organization. These readers won't necessarily read what you've written unless you persuade them your message is relevant and will help them perform their jobs. You have to make your message relevant, clear, and easy to read.
3. Writing at work may be read by unknown readers. At school, professors rarely share students' writing with others, and students rarely target multiple audiences. But, on the job, you not only target a primary reader but also secondary and tertiary readers who may or may not be known to you. For example, your boss (the primary reader) may decide to give your report to her boss (secondary reader) who decides to pass it along to one of her employees (tertiary reader).

You always need to assume that others will read your documents, that photocopies could be mailed, and that copies of your documents could be filed for further use.

4. Writing produced at work can be used indefinitely and can be used in legal proceedings. While college papers have a limited life span (typically for 1 class), work documents can be filed and used indefinitely. Moreover, parts or all of documents can be used out of context in situations unrelated to the original scenario. Thus, work documents could be used in legal proceedings. You should word your documents carefully to prevent them from being misused. Ultimately, you are responsible for the document, and others can use parts or all of it to support their claims in litigation.
5. The format for work documents varies greatly from the format for academic documents. In school, you primarily write essays, research papers, lab reports, etc. But you rarely write memos, letters, procedures, policies, or employee evaluations—all common work documents. You need to become very comfortable with different organizational patterns and different formats for your writing.

Information adapted from <http://www.uhv.edu/ac/business/academic.asp>