

**I Learned About That in Class: Teaching Undergraduate Agricultural Communications
Students to Write Quality Press Releases**

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Introduction and Need for Idea

Students studying agricultural communications benefit from improved self-efficacy and application of skills going into the industry (Banwart & Qu, 2023; Clemons & Lindner, 2018; McKibben et al., 2024b; McKibben et al., 2022). As agricultural communication programs grow, it is vital to explore new ways to contribute to understanding the field and bolster students' confidence in the educational environment. A way to improve application of writing skills is through issuing tasks that build upon scenarios in the undergraduate curriculum. Alongside improved application of writing skills, an engaging environment within the classroom leads to positive classroom production and self-efficacy (Clemons et al., 2018; Cletzer et al., 2022). Identifying who is engaged or disengaged within the content is a vital step for student improvement within undergraduate education (Kuh, 2010).

In the Introduction to Agricultural Communications at Auburn University, students learned about and were tasked with developing a press release. Students were given an option to focus their press release assignment on the Greenhand and Chapter Leadership Conference (GCLC), a leadership workshop for FFA members in Alabama hosted on Auburn University's Campus (McLeod et al., 2022). The purpose of this assignment was to give students practical experience and the choice to engage with the content in a new learning environment. For decades, authentic learning has promoted real life application of knowledge that is critical in the engagement and success of students (McKibben & Murphy, 2021; McKibben et al., 2024a; Rule, 2006) and has been shown to be preferred by students in colleges of agriculture (McKibben et al., 2023).

How it Works

The 2024 GCLC was hosted in September, during the fifth week of Auburn University's fall semester. First year and senior FFA members came to campus with their SBAE teachers to engage in leadership and career workshops and learn more about opportunities in agriculture at Auburn University. Prior to introducing the task to students, the instructors connected with the GCLC leadership team to discuss the event and determine how to connect it to the Introduction to Agricultural Communications course. Following a lesson introducing press releases, students were presented with the assignment to create a press release relating to an agricultural topic. The instructors decided to incentivize meeting outside of class to write their report on GCLC by offering ten points extra credit. For students interested in writing their press release on GCLC, they had to make an appearance at the conference and interview students and teachers in attendance.

For students, there were six phases of creating their press releases:

- (1) Attending class and participating in a lecture about creating a strong press release.
- (2) Discussing with instructors about the direction students wanted to take their press release; this is when the incentive was offered.
- (3) Attending a portion of GCLC to conduct interviews with participants and their SBAE teachers about their experience.
- (4) Writing and submitting a rough draft of the press release in the class learning management system.

- (5) Meeting between students and instructors outside of class to revise rough drafts.
- (6) Submitting a final draft.

Results to Date

Overall, two of eighteen students in the class opted to focus their press release on the GCLC event. After coordinating with the professor and graduate teaching assistant, the students were able to meet during the conference. Altogether one student, one high school SBAE teacher and the conference coordinator were interviewed by undergraduates for the press release. The students who submitted a final draft covering GCLC earned an average of 90.6% on the assignment, not including extra credit given for attending out of classroom hours. The A-average highlights that students grasped the content and developed an exceptional final product. The students who took part in the extra credit task also indicated a positive experience with the assignment and appeared to show more engagement with class assignments throughout the remainder of the semester. Students who chose to write their press release about GCLC seemed to develop a positive rapport between the student and instructors, with these students staying after class to ask questions regularly.

Future Plans and Advice to Others

In the future, improvements could be made regarding the number of students who participate in writing the topic given to them. In 2024, students were given the opportunity to write for extra credit, which led to low participation. In the future, we plan to make the expectation of the assignment to be written about GCLC. Through this change, we believe more students will participate, allowing all our students to engage in real-world scenarios to practice their interview skills and then write a press release about a current event. We recommend that others interested in implementing a similar assignment in their course to fully understand the events you are asking students to attend and create a schedule with multiple time slots on the day of the event for students to attend and gather valuable information for their press releases.

Cost and Resources Needed

Although there are no financial expenses needed to implement this idea, there are several resources needed. Potential resources include facilities to hold classes, a teaching assistant to supervise the undergraduates, and an event with participants for the interviews. Lastly, a relationship with the coordinators of the event is important. Without a relationship to the coordinators, agricultural communications students would be unable to partake in interviews with the attendees and observe the event. Another vital resource will be the time that students and instructors give out of classroom scheduled time to implement this assignment. The total time spent outside of the classroom for this activity totaled approximately 12 hours. Time was spent preparing the assignment and students for the activity (3 hours), attending GCLC and interviewing the participants (5 hours), creating a rough draft (2 hours), providing guided feedback (1 hour), and finalizing the press releases (1 hour).

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