

LAY TRANSLATION ASSIGNMENT

TERRY HÉBERT, Professor

Pharmacology and Therapeutics
Faculty of Medicine



COURSE:

RESEARCH TOPICS IN PHARMACOLOGY

(PHAR 508)

SUMMARY

Students read a piece of scientific scholarship and write a one-page essay in the style of a New York Times article that makes the content understandable to lay readers. A panel of lay readers provides students with feedback on the effectiveness of their communication. Students revise their work based on this feedback and then submit their revised writing to the instructor.

GOALS

- Deepen students' understanding of course content by challenging them to write clearly and concisely
- Teach students to make arguments and engage with a broader, non-scientific audience

“We’re in the business of forming citizens who are engaged and can engage. For the rest of their lives, they’re going to have to convince people who don’t think what they do is important or interesting that it is important and interesting.”

- Terry Hébert

STEPS

- 1 The instructor shares examples of lay translations and [provides students with advice](#) on how to “translate” science for lay readers.
- 2 Students read a scientific article and then “translate” the content into a 1-page essay in the style of a New York Times article.
- 3 For the first essay (5%), students receive detailed feedback from the instructor.
- 4 For the second essay (10%), students provide each other with feedback prior to submission to the instructor.
- 5 For the third essay (15%), students receive feedback from lay readers, who have received a copy of the assessment criteria. Students revise their work based on the feedback and then submit it to the instructor for assessment.

ASSESSMENT

This assignment has three iterations, totaling 30% of the final grade. The first iteration is worth 5%, the second 10%, and the third 15%. Students receive feedback from the instructor on all three submissions, and on the third, they also receive feedback from a panel of lay readers. Assessment is based on the following criteria:

- Key message from a scientific perspective
- Key issue with respect to disease, drug or societal concern
- Why should the public care?
- What is the aspect most relevant to the general public?
- Spelling and grammar check

READY TO TRY IT OUT?

HERE'S SOME ADVICE ...

- Start small. Depending on class size, you might want to assign fewer than three submissions in order to ease instructor feedback demands.
- Consider building lay “translation” into different types of assignments. For example, have students write a lay summary as part of their proposal for a research paper.

BENEFITS

- Students hone their ability to write concisely and gain a more practical understanding of course content.
- The assessment structure allows students who are weak writers to improve over time.
- Dialogue extends beyond the classroom, as lay readers learn from reading students' essays.

CHALLENGES

- Students must receive feedback in a timely manner so that they can act on the feedback in subsequent submissions. Keeping the assignments short (e.g., 1 page) makes assessment go quickly. Finding lay readers can be difficult.
- After participating several times, lay readers become less “lay” as they learn from reading the essays. The instructor may need to recruit new, “naïve” readers.

 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-4.0 International License](#).

Please cite as follows: Teaching and Learning Services. (2019). *Beyond Grading: Assessment Strategies from McGill Instructors* – T. Hébert. Montreal, Canada: Teaching and Learning Services, McGill University.