

WR387, Technical Writing: Ethics Case Study

Workplace Ethics

For this assignment, read the Johnson-Sheehan chapter on ethics in professional writing. Use the guidelines he discusses to decide what you would do in one of the case study situations below. When you write your response—a memo addressed to me—first explain what ethical issues are in conflict. Then explain the decision(s) you would make and why you would take that path of action. Reference specific guidelines/ideas from the Johnson-Sheehan text, and other readings if applicable, to explain your decision. If you have already completed case study #1 in one of my other courses, choose case study #2.

Case study #1: You are working as an entry-level technical writer at one of Baltimore's largest bio-medical research organizations. Your job requires you to read medical research articles in peer-reviewed journals and summarize them for a general online audience. You also write grant proposals, marketing material, and instructions for colleagues using the organization's content management system for the website. As part of a team of three, you are also in charge of the organization's style manual.

You have two co-workers in your division, Organizational Communication: Nathan, who handles standard operating procedure manuals, and Beth, who basically does the same thing you do and who was hired along with you. Your team leader, Cybil, is your immediate boss. She is strict, but fair, and you've noticed that she follows all of the organization's rules, which are outline in the company manual. You don't really know the boss above Cybil; you've only met her once, and she seems mean.

You, Nathan, and Beth aren't making much money, but you don't care about that because you all have roommates, and you have jobs after college working in an energetic and interesting atmosphere, writing about cool medical research in the city. However, the intense deadline schedule is crushing, and all of you, including Cybil, are overwhelmed. Adding to the stress is the rumor that due to the recession, budget cuts may be coming and one of your team might be let go.

Ethical dilemma: While trying to overcome writer's block as you prepare your weekly summary of a peer-reviewed article on new drug cocktail treatments for HIV/AIDS, you finally give in to your curiosity about Beth's writing and read one of her articles from last summer. For her piece, she summarized a peer-reviewed article on a new surgical procedure for repairing torn rotator cuffs in the shoulder. While reading Beth's summary, you recall Cybil's November piece that was on a similar surgical procedure because the wording from both articles seems familiar. So you pull up Cybil's article, and sure enough, one paragraph in her piece is exactly the same as Beth's. You quickly figure out that Cybil, your boss, has lifted an entire paragraph from Beth's article to use in her own piece.

Case study #2: You are an entry-level professional writer and communications specialist for the city; specifically, you work for the Office of the State's Attorney of Baltimore City. Your job requires you to work with lawyers with the State's Attorney to read complex legal cases, summarize them, and write press releases. Because of your coursework at Loyola in web writing, you are also in charge of the State's Attorney website. Congratulations; it's a thankless job that requires a lot of labor but has no extra pay. However, you get to network with everyone in the office, and your job is secure because no one else knows how to work on the site—nor do they want to learn. You are also in charge of the office's style manual.

Ethical dilemma: While putting in extra hours reading through a legal case late on a Friday night, while your friends are having a good time in Canton, you stumble across a memo folded inside of a file. The memo falls to the floor and unfolds; you see that the subject line and case number do not match the case you're working on, so you read the memo out of curiosity. The memo is from the Baltimore Police Department's Office of Internal Affairs, and it is addressed to one of the lawyers you know in the State's Attorney's office, Brenda. The memo details a current investigation that is looking at "strong interrogation techniques" used by some narcotics officers when dealing with gang members in Baltimore. While reading the memo, you notice that that Brenda has written something in the margin—you recognize her messy handwriting. She writes: "Bury this. Call Jason at IA and tell him to cease investigation, then delete files. Triple scrub hard drive."