BUSINESS WRITING:
USING PERSUASIVE MEMORANDUMS ACROSS COURSES

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ABSTRACT

Employers consider communication skills as essential in new hires, but business students seem to lose some of their writing skills by the time they reach senior-level courses. This paper shares the experiences of three professors who used a persuasive memorandum assignment in four 3000- and 4000-level business courses and applied the same core writing rubric. Insights from using this assignment across courses will be shared along with ideas for future research. We hope other professors will be encouraged to standardize expectations for writing quality across courses. When students realize that they will be held to the same objective writing standards in other courses, they try to improve their writing in earnest and begin to engage on higher levels.

INTRODUCTION

Employers continue to expect communication skills, both verbal and written, in new college graduates with those skills being surpassed only by ability to work in a team, leadership, and problem-solving skills (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2015). The Graduate Management Admission Council (2014) reports:

> "Of five major skill sets employers consider most important when hiring recent business grads for a mid-level position, **communications skills top the list**, followed in order by teamwork, technical, leadership, and managerial skills. With the exception of one industry–manufacturing, where leadership skills were in greatest demand–this finding was true across all world regions and employers, regardless of industry or company size." (para. 6)

Despite the clear need for strong writing skills, undergraduate programs seem to rely primarily on their university's English department to develop grammar knowledge and writing skills during the composition courses (see Smith, 2011). Business professors are doubtful that students retain that competency once they reach their major courses (Smith, 2011). Students' writing skills seem to have faded when they reach our courses. Adding to the problem, business professors on an international level view students' writing proficiency as being outside their area of responsibility (Annous & Nicolas, 2015; Bacha & Bahous, 2008).

This paper presents how three professors address this problem using similar experiential writing activities with a standard rubric, writing codes, and an excerpt on memorandum components (Guffey & Loewy, 2015) in the following courses: Writing for Business, Recruitment and Selection, Performance Management, and Operations Management. Most students falsely believe their writing skills are better than they actually are (Bacha & Bahous, 2008). When professors from different courses focus on the same types of writing problems, students begin to acknowledge their writing weaknesses and learn to improve. Our hope is that by resetting the students' knowledge and skills in the Writing for Business course and by continuing the expectation of quality writing in other courses, we are reinforcing this competency that students will need to be successful in the workforce.

WRITING A MEMORANDUM

Written business communication is often in the form of emails, letters, or memorandums. Students are very familiar with emails and somewhat familiar with letters. However, most students do not know how to write a memorandum. Preparing memorandums helps students learn the method as well as the importance of clarity and conciseness using a realistic task. Admittedly, students will write many more emails than memorandums in their careers; however, we propose that the writing skills that are developed by this assignment will transfer to any written communication.

Students write three types of memorandums in the Writing for Business course, which is a prerequisite for all business capstone courses at our university: direct, negative message (indirect approach), and persuasive message (indirect approach). The direct approach can be used in any situation in which there is no conflict, while the negative message uses the indirect approach to delivering bad news in a sensitive way that reduces potential conflict (Guffey & Loewy, 2015). The persuasive message also uses the indirect approach and is used to make a request despite the likelihood of receiving a negative response (Guffey & Loewy, 2015). The persuasive memo is our focus for this common assignment because, as Dan Pink said, we are all selling something (Pink, 2013). Students must be able to explain their viewpoints and convince others to follow their recommendations to be successful in the workforce, regardless of the career they pursue. In the other courses we teach, a discipline-specific persuasive memorandum is used so that students gain expertise in the course content while also developing their written communication skills.

THE RUBRIC

We use a standard rubric that was developed in response to our university's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), which helps reinforce the rules of writing and clarity in the different courses. The rubric consists of seven main areas, called outcomes:

1. *Uses sources that are appropriate and relevant*. This outcome is used to evaluate the student's credibility in validating claims made in the writing assignment. For many memorandum assignments in business courses, this particular outcome may not be relevant. For example, the writer of a memorandum is the workplace typically does not cite outside sources. For memorandum assignments that do not include the use of sources, the instructor can mark this outcome as *N/A*. For the Writing for Business course, this outcome is used; however, further explanations are included to guide the student in establishing credibility. One assignment that uses outside sources is a memo report which is a 2-3 page report that makes a particular argument using credible sources as a validation for the claim being made (usually a call for a particular action). The majority of memorandums, on the other hand, do not include research and are used to request or give information, make a claim or an adjustment, or deliver bad news in a sensitive manner. For these memorandum assignments, explanation is added to this outcome to show that "sources" are reasons and explanations that validate the particular action requested or denied.

2. *Spelling is generally error-free*. This outcome can be used to show that spelling is important and that there are limits to autocorrect features that do not distinguish incorrect use of *aisle* versus *isle* or *to* versus *too*. Typos can also fall into this outcome, and many instructors find a single typo to be unacceptable for any type of document.

3. *Exhibits standard rules of grammar, syntax, and punctuation*. While grammar rules can become very complex and debatable, the majority of instructors find certain types of writing errors to be unacceptable. Students can learn good writing techniques from any professor who assigns a writing assignment, not from English professors only. Any department who uses this rubric can establish a set of rules with corresponding codes (see Hardison, 2013) that everyone agrees to enforce, and students will then learn these rules of writing as they move from course to course and see consistency among the professors in grading for these issues.

4. *Language and content serve the intended purpose of the communication*. There are various purposes in business writing, so the way the content is conveyed should reflect that purpose. For example, when requesting or giving out information, using active voice and a more direct approach serves that purpose. However, when the writer is the bearer of bad news, using passive voice and the indirect approach may be a better strategy.

5. *Uses language, jargon tailored to audience understanding*. Vocabulary used in writing assignments will vary from discipline to discipline. In the business writing course, the vocabulary must be kept to a 9th or 10th grade readability level since education levels will vary with a business audience.

6. *States a clear conclusion that is consistent with the evidence presented*. Regardless of whether the memorandum is a report that makes a particular argument or a simple memo requesting information, the conclusion should not leave the reader wondering what the message was about or what specific course of action should be taken.

7. *Presents paper with a professional level of polish*. This outcome is used to teach and assess students on the proper format of a memorandum. Spacing and alignment are not only aesthetically pleasing to the eye but also establish the professionalism of the writer.

Each of these seven outcomes are given a score of 2 (exceeds expectations), 1 (meets expectations), or a 0 (did not meet expectations). As designed, there is no middle ground, such as a 1.5; either the student met expectations, did better than what was expected, or did not meet expectations at all. Limiting the score to a 3-point system rather than a 5-point system reduces the debate over grades or "grade grubbing." The 3-point system is also very effective as a teaching tool as students learn what their particular errors are and that eliminating those mistakes – not just improving somewhat – is very important to improving writing skills.

Professors were encouraged to adapt the rubric to fit their assignments depending upon which outcomes aligned with the given writing assignment. Some professors weighted the outcomes that were most important, for example. Still, the use of the same frameworks by other instructors shows the student that there really are a set of standards that are the same and that the grade is not based on just one instructor's personal stylistic preferences.

THE WRITING CODES

When multiple professors consistently use the same rubrics and basic writing codes (see Hardison, 2013) to evaluate persuasive memos, students should be able to see that the critique and comments are not just the one professor's opinion but that multiple management professors are following the same standards for written communication. We adapted Hardison's (2013) code sheet to fit our discipline-specific writing assignments, including the memorandums. The basic codes remained the same, such as codes for errors like pronoun reference, punctuation, and spelling.

PROFESSOR INSIGHTS

Most of our students are overconfident in their writing skills (Bacha & Bahous, 2008). However, the antecedents of that overconfidence are not the subject of this paper. The consequences of that overconfidence can be a great source of discomfort for students and professors alike when those students receive their first graded written assignment. How many times have we heard statements like, "I have never scored below an 80 on a paper before!" or "My other professors have told me that I am a great writer!"? When faced with a rubric that is strict and somewhat rigid, students almost immediately complain. Over time, however, they make improvements in the areas where points were lost in earlier assignments. The *does not meet expectations* score category makes rational arguments for higher grades difficult, and students must make adjustments in their writing to earn more points on their future assignments. Incidents of grade grubbing have declined in the Writing for Business course since implementing the QEP rubric. Using the same core rubric across courses reinforces the same writing standards so that students begin to see that evaluating one's writing quality is not nearly as subjective as students seem to think. When students realize there is objectivity in the process, they are less likely to believe the instructor is being too harsh or overly critical.

Building upon the theme of overconfidence, students may need 1-2 low stakes writing activities or exercises that are completed during class before being expected to complete a writing assignment that is a large portion of their course grade. Feedback using the rubric and code sheet can be provided, which should introduce the students to the process. Electronic games, like Kahoot, can be used to engage the students in writing quizzes that are low stake and entertaining. We sometimes offer courtesy 5-minute reviews for the high stakes assignments if students submit them at least 48 hours before the deadline. Doing so reduces the anxiety some students feel with high stakes assignments, and additional learning opportunities arise as a result of receiving that feedback.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our efforts to address students' written communication skills have led to several ideas for future research. The first idea addresses the seemingly pervasive problem of students not following instructions. If students do not fully understand the expectations as they are described in an assignment's instructions, the students will have a harder time meeting the expectations. Further, students are more likely to make silly little errors, like line spacing and font, which may add up to substantial points. One strategy to address the problems students have with following instructions is to provide the instructions in a multimedia format so that students may view them on multiple devices. Instructions that are delivered via video are more likely to be consumed effectively than those that are shared exclusively through a written document – think video marketing because students are like consumers who expect it (Bowman, 2017).

Another area for future research is the influence our own writing skills have on our approaches to students' writing. Students may not be the only ones who struggle with writing, particularly clear and persuasive writing. Cornelissen (2017) stated "Writing theory papers is challenging and asks a lot of us as authors. Complex and big ideas may be hard to present in a focused and persuasive line of argument" (p. 1). Even academicians sometimes find writing in a clear and convincing manner to be a challenge. We must be willing to admit our weaknesses and step out of our comfort zones to tackle the writing problem if we are to adequately prepare our students for successful careers.

Finally, we are curious about the extent to which control variables like age, gender, grade point average, marital status, work experience, and writing lab usage correlate with the quality of students' writing. If we can learn more about which students are more likely to struggle or more likely to succeed, then we could be more deliberate about aspects of course design, such as weighting of writing lab activities or how we conduct group assignments and activities in the courses.

CONCLUSION

This paper describes how three professors, who teach totally different courses in a business program, collaborated to address a skill deficiency that is recognized in today's students: written communication. By applying the same expectations for quality using a university-level rubric to the same type of writing assignment in four different courses, we reinforced the expectations for quality writing across the program. Students realize that they cannot focus on just surviving a particular course or a certain professor. Instead, they learn a little bit more about their own strengths and weaknesses as writers in each course. This progress reflects baby steps toward an important goal. Students should have effective written communication skills by the time they graduate because employers place a premium on that competency.

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