

GUIDING STUDENTS TO BETTER WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Through our contact with potential employers of business students, we've learned two things. First, employers of marketing and other business students place a high value on students who can write well. Second, employers are not entirely satisfied with students' writing skills.

The purpose of this special session is to address the importance of aiding our marketing students in improving their writing and to discuss what is being and might be done to succeed in this regard. We begin by addressing the importance of the topic generally. We then present research that we have conducted using marketing student subjects with regard to their perceptions and challenges surrounding writing. Finally, we present a program that has been implemented in the business school at our college to develop and refine students' writing.

Good written communication skills are important to employers of marketers, because writing is generally a significant part of the job. However, while new word processing technologies purport to improve the user's writing, these new tools often serve, instead, as permanent crutches and, therefore, impediments to skills development. The shortcuts involved in email and, particularly, texting further erode skills, as well as the motivation to "get it right." So, in our advanced world of bits and bytes, our jobs to create successful marketing communicators can become even more difficult.

The more we know about the specifics of students' writing challenges, the more likely we are to be able to help them improve. To that end, we report on two research studies that address marketing students' writing. The first of these studies examines the incidence of particular student writing problems in the areas of grammar, usage, and punctuation. Understanding the kinds of problems that are most common can alert professors to become more vigilant with regard to the specific problems and perhaps make some of them the subject of brief classroom lessons or tutorials.

Our second research study examines students' perceptions of their writing abilities with regard to four important components of good writing. It also investigates their confidence in their skills. This study, in combination with the first study, tells us two things. First, in what aspects of writing do students feel most and least proficient? Second, how well do students' perceptions of their abilities align with their actual abilities with regard to writing skills?

The last component of our special session addresses our business school's "Writing Initiative." This initiative was originally developed with six objectives, most of which have now been implemented or are in the process of being implemented. These objectives are as follows:

1. Create a business-oriented writing and critical thinking assessment
2. Administer the assessment in two core courses at the beginning and end of students' program
3. Designate writing-intensive courses throughout curriculum
4. Offer a business writing elective
5. Designate Writing Center consultants as business writing consultants
6. Offer business writing-related professional development opportunities to faculty

Currently, every other month workshop/meetings are being held for faculty to share insights and to discuss progress on these objectives.

One component of the Writing Initiative as listed above is the designation of various business courses as "writing intensive" courses. In writing intensive courses, faculty are encouraged to incorporate as many of the following elements as is appropriate:

- Create several assignments involving a significant amount of writing
- Teach a short module on business writing
- Use a common business writing rubric
- Give students explicit feedback on writing

- Offer opportunities to revise written work
- Make models and examples available
- Use peer review
- Recognize strong writers

These elements are briefly discussed toward the end of our presentation as suggestions for marketing educators interested in developing their students' skills in written communication.