

EXPERIMENTAL TECHNIQUES FOR IMPROVING BUSINESS
STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS - AT LITTLE COST
TO DEPARTMENTS AND FACULTY

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Many business school faculty recognize writing as the perpetual "weak link" in students' preparedness for career-entry positions or graduate education. It is a critical link, for the ability to express oneself clearly and convincingly is essential for effective job performance and career success. Faculty have long shared this concern for students' weak writing skills, but have felt that the solution is out of their realm: English departments and public school systems have failed to teach these students to write, and certainly business school faculty and their departments as well have far too many more urgent demands to take on this added responsibility. Or do they? A closer look at the problem suggests there may be ways to strengthen this weak link significantly, at little, if any, net cost to faculty or course content.

Research affirms a close tie between writing skills and thinking skills (Griffin 1982). The connection works in two directions: In the process of organizing and articulating ideas, students learn a subject more readily than do counterparts whose experience does not include a writing component (Taylor 1982, Fulwiler 1982). And in the process of learning to think clearly about a subject, students find clear, successful writing easier to achieve (Pittendrigh and Jobes 1982). Briefly, it can be said that good writing reflects good thinking and that poor writing suggests poor thinking. Thus, we can no longer blame exclusively high schools, junior highs, elementary schools and English departments for students' weak writing skills. Any success they have in teaching students mechanical writing skills does not guarantee "good" writing, that is, writing that develops ideas clearly and convincingly. Nor are students always able to apply their command of style or even their knowledge of mechanical correctness when they are struggling with the development of ideas in their papers. Thus, our role of teaching students to think about the content of our courses should include as well the teaching of how to express that thinking.

With this broadened concept of writing instruction, we must now look at where in most curricula that instruction takes place. Few people would disagree that the sooner in students' coursework writing skills are developed, the better. Yet, in practice, writing in business courses is emphasized primarily in senior level classes with the writing of case analyses and term papers, providing too little writing assistance too late. We need to be able to offer students continual instruction throughout their courses of study.

Is it realistic, though, to suggest that business school faculty take on responsibility for their students' writing skills? Certainly there are some significant constraints to consider:

1. Faculty are not likely to be willing to change the design of courses that have proven successful.
2. Faculty are going to be reluctant to sacrifice precious class time for writing instruction when large quantities of material need to be covered in a course.
3. With the need to pursue research and other commitments that are highly valued in their institutions, faculty are not likely to have the time to read and comment copiously on students' writing.
4. In the face of new emphasis computer skills and research design courses, and concurrent budget cutbacks, departments are hard-pressed to direct resources toward writing instruction by, for example, adding to courses or funding graduate readers.
5. In connection with these limitations, class sizes are increasing, and methods must be sought to maintain quality of students' education in larger classes.

It is the intent of this paper to demonstrate that these constraints need not be obstacles to the successful incorporation of writing instruction in business courses. The strategies presented are based on several important premises, some of which may be surprising to many faculty, but all of which have sound pedagogical bases.

1. In order to "teach writing" an instructor need not, indeed cannot, teach "everything." Piaget's developmental theory underscores the fact that no instructor can "teach" writing in a single course. Rather, students' abilities to write will develop slowly along with their general intellectual growth (Bean 1981). Thus, we have a convincing case for incorporating at least some clearly-directed writing tasks in every course. These should be writing tasks that advance specific thinking skills, such as moving from specific through various levels of generalizations.
2. Writing assignments need not take the form of formal term papers. In fact, composition research tells us that frequent, shorter, more directed and focused assignments are better (Pittendrigh and Kirkpatrick 1982).
3. Writing assignments can be designed to complement already-existing course content as the examples discussed below demonstrate.
4. Writing is ideally taught in conjunction with, rather than separate from, a content course. Students need to have guidance in their thinking about the material for their papers; an excellent setting for such guidance is in a course already designed to teach students to do such thinking.
5. To be of value, writing instruction need not focus on mechanical correctness and style. Indeed, teachers often comment on such matters prematurely, at points in the writing process that really require discussions

of concepts, principles, and logic. Often stylistic problems disappear when students have a firm grasp of the ideas they are trying to convey (Pittendrigh and Jones 1982).

6. Students are able to evaluate the success of their own writing if they are given clear models of successful versions of the assignments (Pittendrigh and Kirkpatrick 1982).

7. Students need many opportunities to write, but not all writing efforts need be graded or even read by a teacher. This dispels what is perhaps the most pervasive myth about student writing assignments, the belief that the instructor (or a grader, graduate assistant or SOMEONE) must read every word of every paper in order for students to benefit from the writing experience. Faculty assign less written work than they should largely because they feel they "cheat" as educators if they fail to honor this "necessary" condition of reading every word diligently. Or, in other cases, faculty feel guilty for turning the reading chore over to graduate students. The truth is that students can benefit largely, even primarily, from the writing process itself, and only peripherally from the professor's evaluation. Just as an aspiring pianist needs to practice, without the instructor continually peering over her shoulder, so the student who hopes to become an effective business communicator needs repeated practice composing concise and clearly articulated prose. Students need opportunities to write speculatively about a subject in order to relate to it personally (Fulwiler 1982). Obviously, to continue the piano student analogy, there must be periodic recitals, formal presentations of written work subject to thorough critique, for the writer must develop a sense of audience. The writer can also benefit from practice sessions supervised by the instructor, sessions free from the weight of an impending grade and open to discussion for ways to improve.

Once the instructor crosses this conceptual threshold, that not every written word written by every student need be read for the experience to be meaningful, then a number of practical alternatives to traditional writing assignments are available. Following are summaries of techniques currently or recently used by business and other faculty at our institution to address the writing problem. For each, the basic structure of the assignment is described, followed by a brief discussion of the benefits of the techniques.

1. Ungraded Journals: This is really a variation on the theme of "open notes during exams." The students summarize class notes, readings and even the text efficiently into a journal they are allowed to use during exams. They may also be asked to write short answers to key questions which the teacher has provided or which they have learned to discover for themselves. Students who haven't bothered to organize and write concisely in their journals are at a distinct disadvantage during exams which are designed to demonstrate their ability to synthesize concepts and information from the entire course. Thus, without the "threat" of a journal evaluation, students are motivated to write well and maintain comprehensive journals.

One variation of this technique is the guided journal, in which the instructor suggests quite specifically how the journal entries should be structured, via annotated sample entries or lecture. Such direction prevents students' vague wandering by outlining specific thinking patterns which students can then practice frequently in their journals.

The primary benefits of journal writing include the facts that, because the instructor need not evaluate each journal, the technique is fairly painless to put

into effect and that students are given opportunities for regular writing practice and provided guidance with their thinking about the course material.

2. Microthemes (Bean, Drenk, Lee 1982): These are, as their name implies, very short essays, usually on fairly narrow subjects. One instructor at our institution limits them to 250 words, another to a single, double-spaced typed page, and still another to what can be crammed onto one side of a 4" x 6" card. These themes can be done relatively quickly out of class or even spontaneously in class. The instructor provides the appropriate structure (e.g., "One sentence to describe the problem, then a transition statement, then one sentence for each of the three sub-issues, then a proposition statement," etc.) so that students are free to focus on composition and the particular issues at hand. The instructor can, but need not every time, collect the microthemes and grade all of them or just a sample. When they are returned, students may be asked to compare their efforts against some "model microtheme" prepared by the instructor or selected from better student pieces and shared with the class on an overhead transparency.

In a statistics and a physics course at our institution, microtheme assignments have required students to articulate, in writing, solutions to otherwise purely quantitative problems, including an explanation of the sequence of steps leading to the solutions. Forcing students to construct explanations for quantitative problems has led to improvements in examination performance on "traditional" quantitative problems (Taylor 1982).

One benefit of microtheme writing is that microthemes offer students frequent opportunities to practice developing one main point in a manageable format, giving students a firm grasp of workable structure and what it means to focus and develop their ideas. Students generally find the brief papers easy to write, once they "get the hang of it." This ease translates into improved writing confidence, which in turn becomes evident in greater fluency and coherence in their writing. Moreover, instructors can take advantage of the microtheme technique by assigning microtheme questions that clarify or reinforce important concepts in the course content. They can also build on the fact that students who prepare microthemes can better contribute to class discussions. And, if they choose, instructors can read and respond quickly to individual microthemes as a means of further helping students learn.

3. Group Writing: Informal groups of three or six students (opinions vary regarding the optimum number) respond collectively to an assigned writing task. Good group assignments may vary considerably but should not be of the sort that have a single right answer; the answer should benefit from the pooling of ideas and information from all group members, such as with short case analyses. After discussing the members' ideas about how the question should be answered, the group sets out to put their ideas into sentences in the form of a well-written paragraph. This effort often results in considerable discussion about content, wording, emphasis, sentence construction--all matters that often go neglected in the novice writer's process. A spokesperson for the group may be called upon to read the group's answer to the class, which the instructor can use to illustrate a point or accomplish some other objective.

The benefits of group writing are surprisingly many and significant. One primary benefit lies in the interaction that results. Many student writers suffer from the "early closure syndrome"; that is, they tend to be satisfied with the first ideas that occur to them, the first wording that happens to hit the paper, the first

organization that evolves. The need to reach consensus on one version for all group members prevents such early closure: Group members will have differing ideas. The process of considering all those ideas is often an eye-opener for many students.

Another benefit is the reduced grading load. Some instructors use such group writing as a "final product" and assign a grade to each group member. Other instructors choose to avoid the controversy of the same grade going to all group member regardless of the amount of effort exerted by each individual; these teachers may provide considerable commentary but simply a pass/fail grade. In either case, instructors read only one-third to one-sixth the number of papers they would have read had each individual student completed the task. In addition, the group discussions that follow the evaluation of a group effort can be as productive as the writing task itself. Some instructors provide an example of a "good" group effort and ask each group evaluate their own or another group's paper. Both settings take advantage of the fact that many students make similar mistakes or otherwise merit similar feedback, providing high efficiency on the reader's part with little or no net loss of feedback to the students, compared to individually written assignments. In still other situations, the group writing tasks serve mainly as springboards to class discussion, or perhaps as interim activities between parts of a lecture.

Another obvious benefit of group writing is that business school graduates enter an organizational environment geared toward group efforts, including reports, proposals, and other written work. For example, many business school and other university faculty find that co-authorships can boost their overall productivity tremendously. Group writing assignments are in this respect good practice for the kind of problem solving and writing our graduates will be expected to do.

A final advantage of group writing can be found in most collaborative learning activities: Students are compelled to become involved with the topic and, thereby, in the course. Facing a deadline, usually quite imminent, the group must get right to work and must demand contributions from all members. Even groups of six are not so large that recalcitrant students can slide through without involvement. Furthermore, students feel less risk speaking out in a small group of peers than in a classroom of sixty. The result is a spontaneously active classroom.

4. Models Feedback: The three strategies presented above all suggest models feedback as one method of helping students understand what they did and did not do well, without the instructor having to comment on individual papers. Models feedback is an explanation by the instructor of why one paper deserves a high grade; students then assess their own efforts in light of this explanation. One of the most valuable consequences of preparing such feedback is that the instructor must articulate specific criteria for a successful paper. These criteria provide students with the information they need to improve their writing performance.

Discussion

All of the strategies presented call for clear, well-defined assignments. Some instructors are concerned that such specific guidelines might insult the intelligence of their students. However, most students welcome the specific criteria, and although the guidelines might be viewed as a "crutch" for weaker students, it is the role of good teachers to provide such help to the students who need it. Those students who do not need the "crutch" can benefit from the specific assign-

ment criteria because of the intellectual exercise involved in meeting the requirements; certainly many of their "real world writing" tasks will designate formats.

Students will benefit from the techniques presented here because they all make explicit the thinking skills and patterns used by people who successfully complete the assignments, making good performance accessible to even those students who do not discover the "mental tricks" on their own. By assisting students in learning how to think systematically, we are helping those students learn to write effectively; at the same time we can provide some of the frequent writing practice students need. As we accomplish these important objectives, we will not have sacrificed coverage of course content, existing course design, professional development time, or department budgets.

These techniques are practical. Good writing instruction is highly feasible in our current course structure. However, something beyond the viability of these and other techniques is necessary to move faculty "off dead center," away from complacency. We have noticed at our institution, for example, that colleagues have not raced to experiment with these and similar techniques. Diffusion of ideas takes time and requires, at the start, a few bold individuals who are willing to try something new. Those willing to try need to realize that they are not alone, and that there is an impressive and growing body of knowledge from which all can draw. As more instructors experiment with and improve upon these techniques, and as their effectiveness is demonstrated in longitudinal studies, momentum will build, encouraging more faculty to get involved with solving students' problem of poor writing skills.

Certainly, faculty recognize that students need to be better writers, but it is tempting to continue placing responsibility elsewhere. The positive correlations between the development of writing skills and thinking skills should help us overcome that temptation. And having accepted some of the responsibility for students' writing skills, we can, with little difficulty, place significantly greater emphasis on writing in our courses.

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