

THE RESEARCH PAPER IN THE PRINCIPLES OF MARKETING COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes techniques, adapted from the "Writing across the Disciplines" movement, by which students in the basic marketing course are required to revise the standard research paper before handing it in for grading.

IMPROVING STUDENT WRITING

Teaching students to revise their writing is a task that most professors today have abandoned. Two techniques that I have used for several years in the Principles of Marketing course are, first, to break the standard research project into two papers with two separate due dates, then to require the students to review each other's drafts before turning in a revised version for grading. I learned the techniques in a "Writing across the Disciplines" workshop and have used them successfully in sections as large as 160 students. The students are apprehensive at first but declare the effort well worth it after the second "peer review" session.

"Writing across the Disciplines" is a movement of English professors who have organized workshops to encourage their colleagues in other disciplines to teach writing skills as an integral part of all courses (Emig 1977) (Odell 1980) (Herrington 1981). Their premise is that writing is a learning process as important, if not more important than, reading, listening, and talking. As an expression of our thinking, writing draws together in coherent, organized form what we have read, heard, and discussed. Teaching such a skill, say these professors, must not and cannot be left to the English teachers alone; we all share the responsibility of developing in our students the ability to write. (See Zinsser 1988 for his view on the subject of "writing to learn.")

The purpose of the workshops is to motivate faculty to find ways to teach writing without succumbing to the onerous feeling that the grading of writing seems to evoke in many of us. Thus, workshop leaders provide tips and techniques by which to teach writing effectively, even in the least likely of courses, such as mathematics and finance. Two of these techniques are what I adapted to the Principles of Marketing research paper.

Breaking the assignment into two parts both distributes the time required for grading and increases student learning. Breaking the paper into two parts enables stu-

dents to better distribute their own energies throughout the term—instead of concentrating (or cramming) them into the last week—and to focus more directly on the portion of the paper that is immediately due. Further, returning the first graded paper in a timely manner enables students to learn from their mistakes before they have to write the draft of the second paper.

The draft-and-peer-review technique accomplishes several objectives. One is that it requires students to revise something that they have previously written. A second is that it enables students to get feedback from someone other than the instructor—the drafts are not collected or graded, thus making the peer review sessions an ungraded exercise. It also enables students to read what fellow students have written, which often is illuminating to novice writers. Finally, it leads to better overall papers than would otherwise occur under the cram and spit approach and a more pleasant reading session for the instructor.

Now let me explain the details of these two techniques. Under the subheading "Required Papers," a portion of my Principles of Marketing syllabus reads as follows:

Two two-page papers plus endnotes (typed, double-spaced) are required for this course. Each paper will go through draft and revision stages. (Actually, you should think of these as one paper, broken into two parts.)

These are descriptive papers—essentially exercises in library research, although you may support the research with interviews and other information collected from business people. Your assignment is to select a specific product, company, or industry, such as the Macintosh computer, the Los Angeles Dodgers, or subcompact cars, etc., then describe the marketing strategy practiced today by the marketers of your selected product, company, or industry. The assignment is broken into two papers to correspond to the two major functions of marketing: innovation and delivery. Consequently, your first paper should focus on the market definition (or target market), the product strategy, and the pricing strategy of your product, company, or industry. Your second paper should focus on promotion and distribution. Each of these components, incidentally, must be *labeled* as subheadings in your papers;

in other words, your final copy should look like a business report, rather than a literary essay. The papers are exercises in application—application of the concepts and principles of marketing to the topic or area you have decided to study.

I require at least five published references in the papers, to expand somewhat on the slogan “two references are research, but one is plagiarism.” I allow papers to spill over by one-third to one-half of the third page (especially on the first paper, which usually covers more material than the second). Thus, I usually tell the class to think of the papers as a four- to five-page assignment, broken into two parts. (I also limit type-faces to ten points in size and margins to one inch all around.)

Early in the course, when first discussing the assignment, I usually show the students one of my own drafts—well marked up with red ink. As the “Writing across the Disciplines” instructors point out, students often experience revision as punishment, rather than as a natural part of the writing process. This is largely because they tend to think that professional writers somehow always manage to write perfect prose when their fingers first touch the word processing keyboards. Showing students my own false starts and awkward, unclear sentences goes a long way toward reducing their anxiety and encouraging them that revision might actually be fun (or at least possess some value).

The assignment of short papers obviously reduces the grading burden relative to long papers. And, I should point out, these are all *individual*, not group, papers. But on principle I disapprove of assigning long papers to students—fifteen pages and up—because such assignments only increase what English teachers call the “lard” factor; they most assuredly fail to teach good writing. Further, long papers do not simulate real-world business writing, except the bad kind. Managers do not have the time to read dissertations; what they want are the models of concise writing found in the well-known Procter and Gamble one-page memos and the Conference Memos of advertising agencies. As many professional writers have attested, it is more difficult to write a short paper than a long one. Thus, the skill that my students are learning is how to essentialize their thought and data into two readable, highly concise pages. And, indeed, I am amazed at how much detail some of my “A” students can put into two pages.

Exhibit I, “Checklist for Marketing Papers,” is also included in my syllabus. I have found over the years that this checklist is a valuable aid to Principles of Marketing students who, coming into the course, know nothing about marketing. Some students even include the checklist questions on their drafts, writing their answers below each question; I do not discourage this at the

draft stage because it does ensure that nothing has been left out. I do tell students to write their final versions using good transitional prose, omitting the questions. The checklist also is a valuable aid in grading the papers. In the organization of the checklist, note that I disagree with the traditional McCarthy/Stanton ordering of the marketing 4Ps; logically, I think it should be as listed, dividing marketing into two main functions: innovation or creation of the product (at a price the consumer can afford and based on market research) and delivery (of both information and product).

Scheduling of the papers is as follows: a one-paragraph, ungraded proposal, including preliminary reference list, is required to be handed in during the fourth week of the quarter. The primary purpose is to ensure that students begin to think about the project. A few students actually give me an extremely concise five-sentence paragraph that describes their product’s target market and 4Ps; that is, they have already done most of their research. The draft of Paper I is due during the sixth week of the quarter; this occurs after target marketing, marketing research, and product and pricing strategies have been discussed in class. The revised paper is due one week later. Graded papers are returned during the eighth week. The draft of Paper II is due during the ninth week, after discussion of pricing and distribution have been completed, and the revision is due one week later. Graded second papers are returned at the final exam.

On the day that drafts are due, students choose a partner with whom to exchange drafts. I hand out Exhibit II, “Guide Sheet for Peer Review of First Draft of Papers,” which the students complete after reading their partner’s draft. (This guide sheet is adapted from one used by history professor Henry Steffens at the University of Vermont; I acquired it at one of the two “Writing across the Disciplines” workshops that I have attended.) I tell the students that the peer review will take about ten to twenty minutes at the beginning of the period—it usually takes thirty minutes, because students discover that it is interesting to read the product of someone else’s research, and I often hear questions from one partner to the other like “Where and how did you find that information on pricing?”

For the next week, students revise their papers in accordance with peer comments and, sometimes, their own desire to improve their thoughts on paper. I require the draft, peer review guide sheet, and final version all to be handed in on the day that the papers are due for grading. Some students, for whatever good or bad excuses they come up with, inevitably miss draft day. When that occurs, I give the students a peer review guide sheet and tell them to have someone—preferably a member of the class, but a roommate, friend or relative being acceptable, too—read their

draft and complete the guide sheet. This is not ideal, but it is expedient, given the problems of the non-residential education that we have today. In any event, I require without exception all students to have their drafts peer reviewed.

When grading, I first check to make sure that the draft and peer review guide sheet are attached, but I mark and grade the final version only. I do glance at the peer's comments, but because suggestions are uneven from student to student, I do not always mark down for failing to follow a peer's advice. Occasionally, however, I cannot resist writing this obnoxious comment on student papers: "You would have gotten a better grade if you had followed your peer reviewer's suggestions!"

This brings me to the quality of suggestions made by peer reviewers. They are uneven, because students are uneven in ability and motivation. Weak students reviewing the drafts of other weak students will not raise a "C" paper to an "A," but they will improve each other's papers. Strong students reviewing each other's papers either make few comments, because the draft is excellently written, or make detailed, almost professional suggestions. The weak student who has a strong peer reviewer, of course, learns the most. Overall, however, I think everyone does learn something, not least of which is that revision is a natural part of the writing process and that it is not as painful as students might have thought it was. By the end of the quarter, students testify that they did learn by having to write drafts and revisions.

One point that the instructors of "Writing across the Disciplines" workshops pointed out about the use of these two techniques—breaking the assignment into components and requiring peer reviews of drafts—is that plagiarism and the use of purchased papers is naturally discouraged. (On the latter, see Sipchen 1989.) This has been my experience, because the assignment does not fit the standard purchased paper and the student must look a peer in the eye on draft day. (Nevertheless, I still occasionally receive a ten-page, obviously purchased paper intended to count for a two-pager!)

I stated earlier that I have used this approach to the Principles of Marketing research paper in sections as large as 160 students. I have done so while hardly missing a beat, although a graduate assistant has been an invaluable aid in managing the details of such a large section. The assistant and I each grade half of the papers—eighty twice a quarter. Their brevity is what minimizes the grading burden, while the benefits of peer review and revision are maintained for the students.

One additional technique learned in "Writing across the Disciplines" workshops that I have used in the past is the personal conference. During the third or fourth week of the quarter, I have required all students to meet with me for five to ten minutes in my office to discuss their proposals. The benefits of this are many, not least of which is that the students and I get to meet one on one. In addition, I can clarify the students' thinking and direct their research, sometimes saving them much grief from spinning wheels over a misconceived project. I have not always used this technique because it is time consuming, requiring about seven hours of appointments per forty-student class outside of class time. (I do not cancel classes in order to substitute appointments.) The experience nevertheless is extremely rewarding, and I think it encourages students, who otherwise would not do so, to come back later in the term during office hours to ask questions and sometimes just to talk.

It is my hope that this description of how I have adapted "Writing across the Disciplines" techniques to the research project in the Principles of Marketing course will encourage other marketing faculty to explore creative methods of teaching writing. As Herrington (1981, p. 387) puts it: "No matter what our discipline, we should be using writing in our courses, as one student commented, 'not for writing improvement, but for focus on course material.' Writing has an integral role to play in any course as a medium for learning and for teaching how to learn. For these goals to be realized, we as teachers must first believe in the value of writing as a discovery process and be willing to commit our efforts to teach this process to our students."

Exhibit I

Checklist for Marketing Papers

- I. First Paper:
 - A. Target Market
 1. What is the size of your market (and of the total market you compete in)?
 2. Who is the competition of your product? What market share does each hold?
 3. What legal and other environmental variables affect your product?
 4. What demographic and psychographic variables describe your product's typical customer? I.e., who is your target market? Why do they buy your product?

Exhibit II

Guide Sheet for Peer Review of First Draft of Papers

Please fill out this sheet completely. Be as helpful as you possibly can. (Use the back of this sheet, if needed.)

- B. Product strategy
1. How would you classify your product? Why?
 2. What are your product's primary features and benefits?
 3. What stage of the product life cycle is your product in? Why?
 4. What branding (national or private, family or individual) and packaging strategies does your product exhibit?

- C. Pricing strategy
1. What pricing objectives are relevant to your product?
 2. What method of pricing is used by your company to set an approximate price?
 3. What pricing tactics and final adjustments are made to the price of your product? Give examples of actual prices.

1. List the points in the draft that interested you the most.
2. List the points about which you would like more information, or that you would like to know more about.
3. Write down your suggestions for better development of the topic, or for better organization.
4. Write down your suggestions to the writer for adding more information, or for better use of supporting information.

Please be sure to discuss all these points fully with your classmate. Give this sheet to your classmate, to be turned in with the final version of the paper.

YOUR NAME: _____

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Odell, L. (1980). Teaching Writing by Teaching the Process of Discovery: An Interdisciplinary Enterprise. in L. Gregg and E. Steinberg, eds., Cognitive Process in Writing: An Interdisciplinary Approach. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 139-154.

Sipchen, B. (1989). The Campus Ghostwriter. Los Angeles Times. March 1, Part V-1.

Zinsser, W. (1988). Writing to Learn. New York: Harper & Row.

II. Second Paper

- A. Promotion strategy
1. Which of the four methods of promotion is used most heavily by your product? How is it used?
 2. What positioning theme or unique selling message is communicated by the promotion strategy of your product?
 3. How is this theme executed? For example, what are the ads like and which media are used? Or, if personal selling is the primary method of promotion, how large is the sales force and how is it structured?
 4. How are the other methods of promotion used to support the major method?

- B. Distribution strategy
1. Is your product distributed through middlemen? If so, what kind and how many in a given area? Name some of the middlemen, also. That is, how long and how broad is the channel system?
 2. What kind of target market exposure is practiced?
 3. How is physical distribution used to move the product from producer to consumer? If the transportation function, for example, is extremely important, which mode of transport is used? And why?

- III. Both Papers – does each paper have at least five published references?