

# Facilitating Process and Practice for Improving Business Writing Skills

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*This paper describes a pedagogical approach for teaching and facilitating a step-by-step process to improve business-writing skills. Participants were enrolled in a business-writing course that included 6 writing assignments. The students were taught a process of brainstorm, organize, rough draft, review, revise, and reflect for completing writing assignments and were required to document each step for each assignment. Feedback from students indicated a more positive view of the process and more confidence in writing ability by the end of the term. In addition, a majority of students scored higher on later assignments and were less likely to make common mistakes.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Effective communication skills are critically important for both academic and career success. Educators and employers emphasize the importance of oral (Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997) and written (Bacon & Anderson, 2004) communication skills. In recent years, more emphasis has been placed on writing as technological advancements such as e-mail, text, and instant messaging devices have become more common (Brandt, 2005). There is a consensus among business educators and employers that effective writing skills are important in higher education and the work place (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007). However, research suggests that many business students (Quible & Griffin, 2007; Ashton, 2007; Henricks, 2007) and graduates (May, Thompson, & Hebblethwaite, 2012) lack this important skill that could contribute to their career success.

Although previous studies have addressed methods for improving writing skills, limited research has focused on strategies for teaching and applying a systematic process for writing. Effective writing requires knowledge and application of rules; however, developing effective writing skills is significantly more difficult than just applying the rules. This study extends the existing literature by proposing a systematic process for writing with techniques for teaching and applying the process as a strategy for improving writing skills.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Educators and employers agree that effective writing skills are critical for success in higher education and the workplace. Department chairs perceive writing skills as an important skill for business graduates (Wardrope, 2002), and college alumni have ranked communication courses as the courses that contributed the most to their career advancement and promotion (Gustafson, Johnson, & Hovey, 1993). The importance of effective communication skills is further evidenced by the fact that the National Association of Colleges and Employers lists communication skills as the most important soft skill for

college graduates (NACE, 2010), and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business lists the ability to communicate effectively as one of the core competences that should be emphasized in accredited programs (AACSB, 2011).

Effective writing skills are consistently ranked by employers as one of the most important skills for business graduates to possess (Mitchell, 2008; Young & Murphy, 2003). Previous studies suggest that effective writing skills are correlated with job placement (Stevens, 2005), career success (Rowh, 2006), and financial rewards (Fisher, 1999). However, research indicates that many graduates lack the effective writing skills that could contribute to their career success (Quible & Griffin, 2007; Ashton, 2007; Henricks, 2007).

Business educators frequently express concerns about the writing deficiencies of students (Marcal, Hennessey, Curren, & Roberts, 2005; Rieber, 2006). Research suggests that many students enter college with writing deficiencies (NAEP, 2002), and that writing skills do not substantially improve through four years of college (Bacon & Anderson, 2004).

Business educators have been criticized for not developing students' writing skills and are facing pressures to implement curriculum changes to address writing deficiencies. This is especially true for business educators attempting to meet assurance of learning (AOL) standards set by accrediting agencies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2006). Consequently, there is a consensus that effective writing is an area in which improvements need to be made, and that college courses should include more rigorous writing and editing standards (Stevens, 2005). Despite the importance placed on effective communication skills, many alumni and graduates indicate that the skill lacked most in their educational training was communication skills (Page, 2005).

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, employers list communication as the most important soft skill for college graduates to be successful in the workplace (2010) however, many of them express concerns over the writing deficiencies of newly hired college graduates (Henricks, 2007; NACE, 2010). In an attempt to rectify this deficiency, employers have spent billions of dollars on training to improve employees' writing skills (Quible & Griffin, 2007; Smerd, 2007).

Business educators are experimenting with various techniques for assessing and improving business students' writing skills. Several of these techniques have proven to be effective such as practice and feedback (Ericsson, 2006; Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007), peer review (Rieber, 2006), grade incentive for improvement (Bacon & Anderson, 2004), intensive training (Beeler, Burke, & Turner, 2001), and continuous instruction on the fundamentals of writing (Pittenger, Miller, & Allison, 2006). However, no previous study has combined successful techniques into a process for developing effective writing skills.

Although assessment practices can be instrumental in evaluating writing and identifying writing deficiencies, it is necessary to implement techniques for improving writing to address any deficiencies. A significant amount of research has focused on methods for improving writing skills; however, many of the studies simply give a list of tips (Rowh, 2006) or state what to do or what not to do. While suggestions such as knowing the rules, being clear and concise, and using the right tone, should be followed, these tips are insufficient for developing effective writing skills. It is necessary for students to follow a systematic process for writing, and engage in continuous practice for real skill development.

Imparting information about writing to students is insufficient. They also need to be trained as writers with opportunities to practice applying their skills and knowledge (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007). Thus, students learn by actually writing documents and receiving feedback.

Specifically, the ability to write effectively requires more than just the knowledge of correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, diction, thesis statements, topic sentences, links in paragraphs, and organization of text. Although knowing and being able to apply rules of writing correctly is important, students must also be able to think critically and creatively in order to develop content for a writing assignment (Locke & Brazelton, 1997). It is also beneficial for students to identify their own specific writing weaknesses or challenges faced in order to make improvements in their writing skills (Ortiz, 2012). Recently, researchers have learned that improvements in confidence and self-efficacy relevant to writing ability can lead to improvements in writing skills (Likkell, 2012; Mascle, 2013).

Although significant importance is placed on effective writing skills by recruiters and employers, the development of these skills receives limited attention in most business programs (Page, 2005). Most business students take one business communication course during the sophomore or junior year, leaving room for concern about the effectiveness of a single course to improve business students' writing skills (Wardrope, 2002). Furthermore, research suggests that students could benefit from developing proofreading and editing skills early in the curriculum for improvements in writing skills throughout college (Enos, 2010).

Despite a plethora of research documenting the importance of effective writing skills for academic and career success, few studies have focused on a systematic process of writing that includes these techniques. This study extends existing literature by providing techniques for teaching and applying the process as a strategy to improve writing skills.

## **WRITING PROCESS**

The writing process was introduced in a sophomore level writing course that requires the submission of various writing assignments including business letters, a targeted sales package, and a research report. This course is listed in the schedule as a W course or writing intensive course. Enrollment in the course typically includes business majors (economics, finance, marketing, management, or accounting) and health science majors (physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, or pre-med).

Prior to teaching and facilitating the writing process, there are two important objectives that should be accomplished. The first objective is to make students aware of the importance of effective communication skills for both academic and career success. It is fairly common to hear students comment that effective writing skills are not important for their career because they are majoring in accounting or finance or physical therapy. The beginning of the semester includes two basic activities to facilitate awareness of the importance of effective writing skills for students in any major. The following is a description of each activity:

1. On the first day of class, I do a complete overview of what this class will cover from start to finish. As I explain that I will teach them professional communication skills, I have a PP slide up with either professional or communication misspelled. Of the students that notice the mistake (not all do), the looks range from amusement to disbelief to disgust. When a student is finally brave enough to mention the error, I pretend to be really embarrassed. I then flip to the next slide where both words are spelled correctly, proving that I actually do know how to spell. When asked about their reaction, many students admit that the error impacted their opinion of me. I finish by explaining that the impact will be the same if they send an email, memo, or letter that contains any type of error. It can impact others' opinion of you and your organization.

2. The next activity to emphasize the importance of effective communication skills involves a job search. Students are instructed to find five job advertisements relevant to their major as if they are graduating. During class, we develop a master list of the skills from the job advertisements and record how many advertisements mention each skill. Effective oral and written communication skills always rank at the top of the list, regardless of major.

Once students realize the importance of effective writing skills for any career and the negative impact of poor writing skills, the second objective is to help students identify their writing weaknesses in order to make improvements. It is much easier to do it right, when you know what you are doing wrong. The following activities are conducted at the beginning of the semester:

1. Students are instructed to develop a list of personal writing weaknesses based on a self-analysis of writing challenges and reviewing previously graded writing assignments to identify common mistakes.

2. The first writing assignment (a one page reflective paper) is graded and returned prior to covering the writing process. This assignment is used as a diagnostic tool to identify any additional writing weaknesses or challenges for each student. Students are instructed to add any weaknesses not previously recorded to their list.

3. Students are assigned a series of worksheets that cover the weaknesses identified from the diagnostic assignment. The worksheets include the applicable rules and practice sheets for applying the rules.

Next, students were taught the steps in the writing process and informed that all subsequent assignments would require them to complete and document each step. For the first couple of papers, the instructor facilitated application of the steps during class meetings to allow students to become familiar with the process. The following paragraphs describe the steps in the writing process. Although the steps seem very simplistic, the key is facilitating application of the steps and requiring documentation of each step. Like any new skill or process, improvement requires practice and repeated application of the steps to different writing assignments. The writing process consists of the following steps:

### **Topic Introduction and Discussion**

The instructor introduces the topic and facilitates brainstorming of relevant ideas, which students record in random order. The teacher explains the importance of beginning any writing task with a brainstorming session to generate ideas about the topic before actually beginning to write. It is a common mistake to skip this step in the writing process leading to a lack of creative ideas on the topic.

### **Organize and Outline**

Students refine their list and by adding or deleting ideas and then grouping and categorizing related ideas. The ideas are then arranged in a logical order to develop an outline of the information. It is also common for students to skip this step in the writing process resulting in disorganized information that does not flow.

### **Rough Draft**

Each student then types and prints a rough draft. The key is to finish the rough draft and then allow sufficient time to pass before completing the review in the next step. To facilitate this step, students were required to submit the assignment several days before the self and peer reviews were conducted in class. This is a common mistake made by students who typically consider the rough draft and the final draft to be one and the same.

### **Review and Feedback**

This part of the writing process requires a multi-step review of the rough draft. First, students to review their own paper individually. It is important to allow sufficient time to elapse between the rough draft and the review to avoid skim reading. It is difficult to proof read a paper you just wrote. You are more likely to overlook mistakes because you know what you meant to write. Additional suggestions include reviewing a printed copy instead of an electronic copy and reading the content aloud. Both approaches make it easier to identify errors or mistakes. Second, students review the rough draft with guidance from the instructor on important points to look for such as direct opening, personalized close, topic sentence, etc. Next, students do peer reviews to provide and receive feedback from others in the class. This step is facilitated during class meetings so peers can provide written comments and then verbally discuss the paper with the author.

### **Revise and Reflect**

Students are encouraged to review all feedback and add any new weaknesses to the list developed at the start of the semester. The final step in the process requires students to revise the paper based on the feedback and submit the final assignment for grading. The most important part of this step is for students to compare the final version of the assignment to the rough draft to see the improvements made from start to finish. Another suggestion is to use a rubric for grading and to provide students with a copy of the rubric when the assignment is given.

Which step in the process is the most important? Every step is critical for improvements in writing skills. The brainstorming step contributes to more quality ideas on the topic, and then the ideas are better

organized during the next step. Developing and submitting a rough draft encourages students to avoid procrastination and start the assignment, and then the review process gives students feedback on needed improvements. The reflection step allows students to identify specific weaknesses in their writing. Finally, making any revisions or corrections and then comparing the final paper to the rough drafts allows students to see the improvements in their writing.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The use of a multi-step process for writing and the continued practice of the steps can be instrumental in improving writing skills and providing students with a skill that is vital for both academic and career success. There are several keys necessary for realizing improvements in writing skills from adopting the writing process. First, educators should inform students of the critical role of effective writing skills for academic and career success. Convincing students of this fact could make a powerful impression on the need to hone their writing skills. Second, educators should assist students in identifying their personal writing weaknesses and challenges. Awareness of where changes and/or improvements need to be made is a good starting point for developing effective writing skills. Third, it is necessary to teach and facilitate application of the steps in the writing process. Rather than simply teaching or explaining the steps, it is necessary to require students to complete and document each step to realize improvements. Lastly, educators should introduce the writing process early in the curriculum and emphasize the use of the writing process and the importance of effective writing skills throughout the curriculum, not only in writing-specific courses. Given the importance of effective writing skills for academic and career success, business programs could benefit from emphasizing these critical skills and the use of intervention strategies early in the program and throughout the curricula.

There were two trends that emerged during the semester. Throughout the semester, informal feedback was solicited from students to determine their reaction to the writing process. Initially, the reaction was slightly negative as many students felt the process was time consuming and stated that they basically already do all the steps. In reality, many students later conceded that they typically use a one step approach where they create, write, and proof all at one time. Later in the semester, the feedback was more positive as students started seeing the benefits of the process. Many students commented that they were actually spending less time because they had developed and organized ideas before they started writing, and because they were not as likely to repeat common mistakes made on earlier assignments. In addition, many students commented that they felt less apprehensive about writing and were more confident in their ability to write.

The second trend was relevant to the scores received on the writing assignments. There were minimal improvements from paper one (without process) to paper two (with process), and the improvements were primarily in the quality and organization of the content. Overall, the scores improved for most students with each assignment. Many of the common mistakes made in earlier assignments were made less frequently in later assignments such as spelling errors, use of topic sentences, correct use of commas and other punctuation, and correct sentence structure.

The importance of effective business writing skills for academic and career success support the need for additional research on the techniques and practices necessary to assist business students in developing this vital skill. In addition, the emphasis placed on the ability to communicate effectively as one of the core competences that should be emphasized in accredited programs warrants additional attention to the development of this skill for colleges of business (AACSB, 2011). One important area for future research is to evaluate student perceptions relevant to the importance of effective writing skills. An understanding of current perceptions could be instrumental in identifying effective strategies for changing perceptions. A second area of research should concentrate on identifying specific weaknesses to determine where techniques for improvement should be focused. A final suggestion is to collect data using both direct and indirect measurement techniques to assess business writing skills by comparing student perceptions on improvements in writing skills to actual improvements. This would move colleges of business one step

closer to compliance with AOL standards that require evidence of student learning by directly and indirectly measuring the attainment of effective writing skills (AACSB, 2006).

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