

‘Pity the Readers’ Peer Review as a Strategy for Teaching Writing to Business Students

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This article highlights research that argues the importance of teaching writing to college of business students. It shares the history of and best practices for peer review workshops in the classroom. A marketing department assignment is shared, and assessment and survey results are given, showing the impact of the classroom workshop on error correction during the writing process. A grading rubric and sample writing checklists are included in the appendices.

Keywords: peer review, business education, writing & editing, classroom workshops, marketing

INTRODUCTION

American author Kurt Vonnegut’s style advice to “pity the readers” by making your writing easy to read certainly applies to university business undergraduates, expected to write professional emails, memorandums, letters, reports, and proposals immediately upon graduation and entry into the full-time workforce. Employers and recruiters historically list excellent written communication as a skill expected from new university graduates, but one that often falls short of expectations after the hire (Bacon, 2017; Wright & Larson, 2016; Ferrell, et. al., 2015; Bacon, et. al., 2008; Mitchell, et. al., 2010; Pittenger, 2006; Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Taylor, 2003; Young & Murphy, 2003; McDaniel & White, 1993). Indeed, writing skills can be the hardest to teach in business curriculum because of increases in class size and the need for written feedback from professors. As a solution, most colleges of business have instituted at least one required writing class, business communications (Wardrope, 2002). This remedy begs the question—is one writing class enough to prepare our students?

Colleges of business need a strategy that will give our students more writing practice. One long-term strategy is for each professor to commit to a single writing assignment per semester with peer review workshops as a part of the assignment. Research shows that these workshops assist student proficiency in writing in many fields, including business (Baker, 2016; Crossman & Kite, 2012; Ngar-Fun & Carless, 2006; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Rieber, 2006). Business students will get more practice writing, and by integrating a peer review workshop, they will also receive written feedback.

What Is Peer Review?

Peer review is a pedagogical practice used primarily in first-year writing and writing-across-the-curriculum programs. In universities, composition and rhetoric teaching assistants are taught to peer review as part of their doctoral training, motivated by a history of scholarly research on the subject (Bruffee, 2006; Spear, 1988; Gere, 1987). This practice is not unique to recent pedagogy, nor is it unique

to English departments alone. Anne Gere notes that writing groups have taken varying forms through the years. Precursors to peer review like “self-help writing groups and college literary societies” even existed as early as the 1800s in America (Gaillet, 1994, pp. 93). Student-centered teaching philosophies have encouraged peer review in the classroom specifically because it is a “transformative practice... in which the amateur is valued, access is open, and power is shared” (Haas, et. al., 2011, pp. 381). In this space, the students can share the task of polishing their own prose.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PEER REVIEW WORKSHOPS

The professor determines specific writing goals for the peer review workshop and writes a checklist consisting of the learning objectives for that writing assignment. This checklist is what students use to create editing comments on their group members’ papers.

The professor posts a writing prompt outlining the due dates for assignment drafts. The professor can set one or multiple draft due dates, increasing the expectations for each draft. For the assessment results included here, the students submitted a draft one week before the final submission due date. On the draft due date, students workshopped in groups of three and exchanged papers with all group members. This checklist serves several purposes. It lets the students know exact expectations for the assignment and allows them the opportunity to show that they can put textbook theory into practice. It also gives the professor an opportunity to highlight specific page numbers or important sections of the textbook.

Example: Students 1, 2, and 3 are in a group together. Student 1 reviews Student 2 and Student 3’s paper, and vice-versa. Each student will fill out one page of feedback for each student in their group based on the checklist for that peer workshop. Each student leaves the workshop with a maximum of two pages of possible edits from two separate readers. The professor decides how the students should write their feedback. Students can print their papers and physically mark up one another’s assignment with pencil. Students can also bring laptops on that date and exchange computers, using notebook paper or track changes on a Word document to give each other written feedback.

Ideally, all group members will give both written and oral responses to each other by the end of the workshop. Once they have read their peers’ comments on their writing, students will discuss what they mean. Students can use the Genius Scan mobile application on their phones to upload the written comments to Canvas to get credit for the assignment so that the professor does not need to collect the actual notes. Genius scan, even aside from this type of assignment, is a useful tool for professors to use when students need to scan a document into Canvas, as the app turns every document into a PDF. The professor can grade these for participation only instead of reading through each set of comments. For pedagogical purposes, most peer-reviewed writing assignments should be implemented with this face-to-face component. Scholarship about peer review celebrates the social interaction that occurs through that face-to-face contact, specifically the importance of oral communication (Breuch, 2004).

Advantages

There are multiple advantages to peer reviewed assignments. Peer review pedagogy goes hand in hand with what professors are incorporating in large numbers: a “flipped classroom,” which “frees lectures for hands-on activities and discussion” (Green, 2015, pp.179) instead of a traditional lecture format. When students catch their own errors through peer reviews, the professor saves much-needed time in grading the final product because the quality improves from the first to the final draft. Timeliness is also a key advantage. Both oral and written responses can give the student writer a response with “an immediacy impossible in teachers’ marginalia” (Gere, 1987, pp.3). Students don’t have to wait days or weeks for a teacher’s response when their classmates can peer review the assignment a day or two after it was written, with the ideas still fresh in the writer’s mind. Another benefit of peer review is that it helps the writer develop a sense of audience, which is an essential part of business communications (Cardon, 2016). Douglas Park writes that generally, the idea of audience is “the awareness in the writer’s consciousness that shapes the discourse as something to be read or heard,” or “an ideal conception shadowed forth in the way the discourse itself defines and creates contexts for readers” (1999, pp. 311-

13). When peers write to a specific audience, each other, and then share their writing, they can compare their own skill-level while observing another writer's content and writing process. A peer-reviewed writing assignment also helps catch grammatical and spelling errors, and assures that someone else, other than the teacher, looks at form and content within the context of that specific assignment. Peer review also allows a student the opportunity to ask the professor about their work in a face-to-face discussion, by raising their hand during the workshop to ask a question. In contrast, when professors assign a writing topic and do not incorporate peer review, the writing process for that assignment lends itself to asynchronous communication, generally, a less-rich communication channel, which is ultimately more demanding on a professor's time as multiple students email the professor for clarifications.

ASSIGNMENT AND ASSESSMENT

A writing assignment was given in a marketing class in the college of business at a large urban university. The students were prompted to write a letter and an email that incorporated business writing strategies and case studies from the textbook. Students participated in a peer review workshop where they submitted two separate drafts due one week apart. Each student was given a checklist at their peer review workshop (examples and context from two different writing assignments are shown in *Appendix A*). This first draft was not graded, but the students received participation points for completing it and using it for the workshop. The final draft was graded by the professor using the rubric in *Appendix B*.

Pre- and post- assessments are shown here. The pre-assessment used a student's first draft and the post-assessment used their final submission after incorporating peer reviews in class. Four full-time marketing department faculty members assessed the writing assignments using the rubric in *Appendix B*. The control group consisted of 104 papers that had been submitted for the same assignment before these peer review workshops were incorporated. The average grade on the 104 papers was a 58%, using a similar writing rubric. Table 1 shows the pre- and post-assessment comparisons. Every section scored at least one letter grade higher in the post-assessment after completing a peer review and every section scored higher than the control group, which did not complete a peer review workshop. The highest performing section was 8, which scored 33% higher than the control group.

TABLE 1
ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Section 5		
PRE		Percent
	12.15	0.61
POST		
	14.31	0.72
	% Difference	0.11

Section 8		
PRE		Percent
	8.56	0.43
POST		
	15.28	0.76
	% Difference	0.33

Section 10		
PRE		
	10.28	0.51
POST		
	14.32	0.71
	% Difference	0.20

Section 4		
PRE		
	9.91	0.45
POST		
	12.9	0.65
	% Difference	0.20

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study are such that assessment results between sections cannot conclusively prove that the peer review activity was the cause for the up to two-letter grade increase. Additionally, there was no way to control for the major differences between sections: instructor or class time. However, our results do support the research cited in this paper. Sections whose professor incorporated peer-reviewed workshops scored higher than the control group.

Additionally, all sections who participated in a peer review workshop were surveyed about their experience, with overwhelmingly positive results as shown in Figure 1. Approximately 174/181 students believe this exercise was helpful in both finding and fixing errors in their writing assignments (some participants did not answer every question).

**FIGURE 1
SURVEY RESULTS**

Please describe your experience **during** the Peer Review workshop by using the following criteria:

The Peer Review Workshop caught an error in:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The content of my assignment (For example: what I was attempting to say or communicate in my document, etc.)	83	80	14	4
The format of my assignment (For example: bullet points, spacing, font, etc.)	62	81	26	11
The grammar of my assignment (For example: spelling or punctuation, etc.)	48	60	54	18

Please describe your experience regarding your behavior **after** the workshop by using the following criteria:

After the workshop, I changed the:	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Weighted Average
Content of my assignment based on feedback from the peer review	84	78	11	7	3.33
Format of my assignment based on feedback from the peer review	62	84	29	5	3.12
Grammar of my assignment based on feedback from the peer review	56	61	50	13	2.89

The Peer Review Workshop:	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Weighted Average
Helped me get a higher grade	91	83	7	0	3.47
Helped me find errors in my assignment	94	80	6	1	3.46
Allowed me to point out mistakes in another student's assignment	63	111	4	2	3.31
Allowed me to see what other students wrote, therefore giving me ideas to incorporate	76	86	19	0	3.30

The Peer Review Workshop:	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Weighted Average
into my own assignment					
Did not help me in any way	11	8	63	99	1.60
	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Weighted Average
I wish all marketing classes with writing assignments would use peer review workshops	66	98	17	4	3.23
I learn more in marketing classes when there are writing assignments in the curriculum	44	70	48	19	2.99

Students directly correlated their workshop feedback with the quality of their work on this writing assignment. Approximately 194 students participated in the workshop, and of those, 184 found and fixed at least one error in the content, grammar, or format of their writing assignment. This is important because workshops assist in the students' editing process, resulting in a more polished final draft. Another interesting finding in this survey is that in addition to the errors during the workshop, even more students found errors on their own *after* the workshop was completed. This shows that part of the effectiveness of a peer review workshop is teaching students how to proofread their own documents. Essentially, professors teach writing, editing, and proofreading by incorporating these peer review workshops into the classroom. A majority of students also expressed a desire for more peer-reviewed writing assignments in their classes.

To assist with the goal of helping our business students become better writers, professors would be wise to consider incorporating short writing assignments with at least one peer review component into their curriculum. This assignment can be duplicated for any management, marketing, or other college of business writing assignment, including advertising copy, direct marketing pitches, or one-page paper assignments (Wright and Larsen 2016). Furthermore, as seen in this survey, many students enjoy the process of becoming better writers, critical thinkers, and proofreaders, activities which prepare them for the full-time professional workforce.

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APPENDIX A: PEER REVIEW WORKSHOP CHECKLIST EXAMPLE #1

This assignment incorporated case studies that the student used to create a persuasive letter and a bad news email. This was the checklist the students used in their peer-reviewed workshop.

Directions:

Your role is to serve as a “friendly reader.” You are helping one another workshop to get to a final draft. Find two classmates to exchange papers with. Read each piece through one time without marking anything on the piece. Then, answer the following questions:

- 1) Do the persuasive letters do all of the following? If not, make notes on the paper where something is missing. (See Table 10.9 in Chapter 10 in our textbook for explanations of these).
 - Gain attention
 - Raise a need
 - Deliver a solution
 - Provide a rationale
 - Call to action
- 2) Does the persuasive letter use psychological tools of influence? (Consistency, reciprocation, social proof, authority, liking, scarcity? (pages 280-281)
- 3) Does the letter have a professional, formal tone?
- 4) Please mark up any grammar issues that you are 100% sure of; if not sure, don't mark.
- 5) Now read the email. Does it follow the basic outline of bad news messages: Ease in with a buffer; deliver the bad news; provide a rationale; explain impacts; focus on the future; show goodwill (page 320)?
- 6) Does the email follow the basic format of Figure 11.4 “More Effective Bad-News Message to Employees” (page 327)?
- 7) Does the email have a professional, formal tone?
- 8) Please mark up any grammar issues that you are 100% sure of; if not sure, don't mark.
- 9) Give the documents back to your classmate. Discuss what your mark ups mean.
- 10) After reviewing your classmates' feedback on your project, make edits so that you have a polished, final draft.

RÉSUMÉ AND COVER LETTER WORKSHOP EXAMPLE #2

This assignment required the student to find a job description online and write a résumé and cover letter to fit that job. This was the checklist the students used in their peer-reviewed workshop.

Résumé

- 1) Is the correct information in the Name Block portion of the résumé? (name, contact information including address, phone, email, LinkedIn link, e-portfolio link).
- 2) Is the person's name highlighted? Is the font larger than 10 points?
- 3) Is Education highlighted in a unique way? (e.g. a list of related coursework, class projects, practicum, service-learning projects or other experiences that highlight your key abilities and attributes).
- 4) Is Work experience included in chronological order? (If not, this needs to follow the functional résumé format).
- 5) Are dates lined up and in the exact same format throughout?
- 6) Remember: MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION AT THE TOP of the résumé – make sure this is true of the résumé as a whole and within each main section.
- 7) Are section headers uniform throughout? Is spacing between sections uniform?
- 8) Which of the following should this student include if the résumé is not long enough: Technology skills, professional associations, school clubs, honors and awards, certifications, licenses, community activities, volunteer work, training, or language abilities?
- 9) Are accomplishments emphasized with ACTION verbs? (list on pg. 490 in textbook).
- 10) Do you see any accomplishments that can be QUANTIFIED?
- 11) Are there any irrelevant details that can be DELETED?
- 12) Do you see CLICHES, BUZZWORDS, OR JARGON that have lost all meaning that can be deleted?
- 13) Do you see any typos? (misspellings, grammar issues).
- 14) Is the information grouped for ease of reading?
- 15) How can we improve the formatting? Small caps? Bold? Underline? Spacing? Mark any formatting issues.

Cover Letter

- 1) Does the letter follow the exact spacing of the letters in our textbook appendix?
- 2) Does the letter have the following: Letterhead, Date, Complete Address, Signature, etc.?
- 3) Does the letter incorporate KEY WORDS from the job advertisement? (link should be attached on final page of assignment).
- 4) Does the letter persuade the employer that the applicant is a good match? Is the tone professional and confident?
- 5) Is the closing statement assertive and specific?

APPENDIX B

Assessment Rubric

	4 Exceeds Expectations	3 Meets Expectations	2 Needs Improvement	1 Unsatisfactory
Organization & design <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Follows standard résumé template (As per textbook) ▪ Information is relevant and in logical order ▪ Use of white space ▪ Use of headings and subheadings ▪ Use of font style and size ▪ Overall attractiveness of document 				
Coherence & clarity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Openings & closings ▪ Clarity of content in message 				
Paragraphs & sentences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appropriate Length ▪ Bullet points ▪ Topic sentences ▪ Void of spelling, grammar, & typographical errors 				
Style of document <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Professional Tone ▪ Professional Word Choice 				
Audience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Message adapted to audience ▪ Fulfills purpose of assignment ▪ Overall effectiveness of document 				
Total for each row:				
Grand Total (20= Perfect Score)				