What First-Year Composition Textbooks are Beginning to Say about Writing in Business

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Despite increasing concern from employers about college graduates' communication skills, as reported in articles and in surveys by the National Association of Colleges and Employers and other organizations, colleges and universities have been reluctant to revise first-year composition programs to explore ways to prepare first-year students for writing in their careers as well as in their studies. However, first-year composition textbooks have begun to include information about business writing, especially in discussion of common forms such as letters and resumes, less so in discussions of style and rhetorical strategies. As more composition textbooks discuss business writing (and do so more fully), business writing instructors will increasingly find that their students have received some instruction in business writing in their composition courses. So it will be useful for the instructors to know what students were taught about business writing in composition courses.

Method

To illustrate the nascent coverage of business writing in first-year composition texts, this paper examines three texts widely used in colleges and universities in the United States: <u>The St. Martin's Guide to Writing</u>, <u>The Bedford Guide for College Writers</u>, and <u>The New McGraw-Hill Handbook</u>. Representative of most first-year composition texts designed as a combination rhetoric, reader, and handbook, they are comparable in price: $72.95 retail for <u>The St. Martin's Guide to Writing</u>; $68.95 retail for <u>The Bedford Guide for College Writers</u>; and $52 net (about $66 retail) for <u>The New McGraw-Hill Handbook</u>. Many other first-year composition texts are available, however, and in many composition programs the text for a section is chosen by its instructor, not by the Program Director or a committee; therefore, many different titles might be in use in a large composition program. The descriptions of these three texts in this paper are by necessity brief, designed to illustrate the type and amount of information found in these composition textbooks but not to examine them in depth. The descriptions are provided so that business writing instructors might have a sense of what their students might have been taught about business writing before they enter the business writing course. Also, with knowledge of these three composition texts, business writing instructors might be ready to engage in conversation with composition instructors about what they do to prepare composition students

for career writing, and ready to examine at greater depth the composition text(s) used in the first-year program at their school.

The composition textbooks examined in this paper all address essential topics in writing instruction: critical thinking, research methods, audience analysis, invention, argument, revising, grammar, documenting sources – topics that have traditionally been taught in composition courses and that underlie effective business writing as well as effective academic writing. This paper examines the textbooks' coverage of aspects of writing that have tended not to be examined in composition courses but instead in business writing courses, such as types of documents commonly created in business and government, the use of graphics in reports, and developing a good style for workplace writing.

Review of the literature

In 2006, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) issued a press release stating, "Employers say they consider communication skills to be important in job candidates, but find that many potential employees don't have them" (2006). A discussion of the literature on employers' assessments of graduates' writing skills is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is generally recognized that many employers are concerned about graduates' writing skills. NACE annual surveys asking service sector, manufacturing, and government/nonprofit employers to identify "soft" skills and qualities they seek in applicants have indicated for several years that employers value communication skills more highly than teamwork skills, a strong work ethic, analytical skills, interpersonal skills, motivation, computer skills, leadership skills, and other qualities. "'Communication skills have topped the list for eight years, and honesty and integrity have tied for the top spot for the last three years,'" said Marilyn Mackes, the NACE executive director, in a recent press release (2007). The press release stated that "the ideal candidate needs to be more than an articulate straight arrow, according to the survey results. Employers also cited strong interpersonal skills, motivation and initiative, the ability to work well with others and a strong work ethic as key attributes," all of which scored 4.5 out of 5 = extremely important (2007).

Most studies that address the connections between college writing and writing instruction, on the one hand, and writing in business and government are limited because many composition instructors and program directors are not familiar with workplace writing. Studies by composition researchers such as Dias et al. (1999) base their rhetorical analyses on sound understanding of situational writing in academia but incomplete understanding of situational writing in business and government. Most composition researchers are temporary observers of writing in non-academic settings rather than professionals engaged in business writing as part of their career.

Few scholars and teachers have discussed using first-year composition courses in colleges and universities to prepare students for career writing. Most articles focus on teaching composition in two-year colleges, as do Elizabeth Tebeaux's "The Trouble with Employees' Writing May Be Freshman Composition" and "Freshman Composition Can Prepare Students for Real Life,"

which appeared in <u>Teaching English in the Two-Year College</u> (1988). Some research has suggested the importance of preparing college-bound high school students as well as non-college-bound students for writing in their work (Samson 2006); however, textbooks for high schools have for years addressed "workplace" writing to prepare primarily non-college-bound students for work.

In the 1970's and 1980's, the emphasis in first-year composition pedagogy shifted from helping students learn to employ traditional rhetorical modes (analysis, comparison and contrast, definition, etc.) and to make their writing clear and correct, to asking students to construct personal narrative and engage in self-exploration, with less and less emphasis on expository writing. Recently, textbooks have reverted to emphasis on the "modes," as is apparent in the three texts discussed in this paper, and in other texts such as Dietsch's *Reasoning and Writing Well* (2006).

Discussion

Although writing skills are in demand in business, first-year composition programs at most schools tend to focus on preparing the students for academic writing rather than on preparing students for the kinds of writing they will do in their careers. At many schools, first-year composition programs are still literature-based; students develop writing skills by writing about literature. At many colleges and universities, students do not take a writing course after their first year, so they have limited opportunity to learn about writing in business or government and may leave college without a solid base for success in writing in their work. In essence, most college students are taught how to write for success in academic settings (where they are to show how much they know to an audience who knows more than they do) rather than prepared for success in writing in business or government, where they often are challenged to inform readers who know less than they do about their subject, and sometimes persuade readers. These basic differences in purpose and audience, which writers in business and government must recognize to be successful, warrant greater emphasis in first-year composition textbooks.

In composition courses, students are still taught how to write traditional research papers even though fewer and fewer college courses (outside of second-semester composition) require them, and few students will go on to write research papers in their work. Of course, students do need to be able to conduct research effectively and to incorporate the results of their research in reports, but writing a first-year composition "research" or "thesis" paper may have little transferable benefit unless the project is in the student's major.

As employers increasingly express concern about the communication skills of college graduates, colleges and universities will have to respond to help their graduates be competitive in the job market. Schools will have to change how they help students develop writing skills. They could offer more business or technical writing courses at the junior or senior level (which many schools would find cost-prohibitive), or they could change the emphasis of their first-year composition courses to help students develop writing skills for their careers as well as their studies (which would cost nothing). Pressure from employers to improve graduates' writing

skills might translate into directives from state agencies, trustees, or accrediting agencies to do so, and colleges and universities across the United States might have to shift their focus in composition instruction away from academic writing to a blend of academic and career writing.

One reason that few first-year composition programs address writing for students' careers may be that first-year composition teachers at most universities sometimes are the least experienced teachers in the English Department; some may be graduate students only three months removed from being undergraduate English majors themselves. Most will not have had an opportunity to discover what students need to learn (or practice) in a writing course to be successful in their writing in their careers.

Increased call for assessment of college courses, including writing courses, may drive composition programs to greater uniformity in texts and assignments, but in the near term (and perhaps forever, if the storm over accountability blows over) the students in a section of business communication may have used one of several different textbooks, each with its own degree of emphasis on topics related to business writing. So it might be useful to see what three widely used composition textbooks do to support instruction in business writing.

Business writing coverage in The St. Martin's Guide to Writing

The St. Martin's Guide to Writing is touted by the authors, Rise Axelrod and Charles Cooper, as "the most widely adopted text of its kind in the nation" (v). It illustrates many of the changes taking place in first-year composition textbooks: it is large (over 1000 pages in hardcover, including the handbook), and it serves as rhetoric, reader, research paper manual, and handbook. The rhetoric/reader section (851 pages) has six parts, on "Writing Activities" (553 pages), "Critical Thinking Strategies" (39 pages), "Writing Strategies" (86 pages), "Research Strategies" (92 pages), "Writing for Assessment" (25 pages), and "Writing and Speaking to Wider Audiences" (44 pages).

Axelrod and Cooper organize the "Writing Activities" section into ten chapters focusing on writing tasks such as "Remembering an Event," "Explaining a Concept," and "Arguing a Position." At the beginning of each of the first nine chapters, three half-page anecdotes describe an example of the task "In College Courses," "In the Community," and "In the Workplace." Although in these nine chapters (which occupy nearly 500 pages of the book) some prominence is given to writing in the workplace, and the anecdotes do focus on business writing situations rather than "workplace writing" (which term seems to have developed as a way to refer to the writing that administrative assistants and technicians do), there is little focus on business communication until Part Six, "Writing and Speaking to Wider Audiences," which occupies 43 pages of the 851 pages (versus 92 on "Research Strategies" and 55 on "Interpreting Stories"). As the authors indicate, the focus is on academic writing: "We have focused our efforts on better preparing students for writing in today's academy, including enhanced coverage of working with sources, working online, and considering document design and other visual aspects of writing" (v).

Part Six has chapters on "Designing Documents" (27 pages), "Oral Presentations" (5 pages), "Writing with Others" (6 pages), and "Writing in Your Community" (5 pages). The first, which has the greatest focus on writing in business, invites students to ask about the readers' expectations and use of the document, and it discusses very briefly such elements of design as fonts, heading formats, displayed lists, the use of white space, and chunking. The discussion of visuals describes the common types of graphics in only two to four sentences each, and it presents guidelines on labeling, calling out, and placing visuals. It does advise students to determine the appropriate type of visual for certain information, and it admonishes them to "avoid 'chart junk'" and to "use clip art sparingly."

Memo and letter format are discussed and illustrated, each discussion shorter than the discussion of the use of "e-mail"; resumes are discussed in slightly less than one page, and job application letters and lab reports in less than half a page each. Web page design is covered in slightly more than a page. The information in the chapter is accurate (representing what is commonly found in business writing textbooks); however, there is not enough discussion to inform students sufficiently on any of the topics.

The sample graphics and documents in the chapter on "Designing Documents" occupy 14 of the chapter's 27 pages, leaving little room for fully developed discussion, but the chapter does serve as a good introduction to some document types and design issues, and students might take from their use of the book some basic principles and familiarity with types of graphics and documents. The discussion in the chapter is so cursory, however, that it would not really prepare students for creating documents in their work.

The chapter on "Oral Presentations" (5 pages) summarizes briefly four basic types of presentations (impromptu, extemporaneous, scripted, and memorized), discusses assessing audience and purpose in nine sentences, and spends half a page on "cues to orient listeners," one page on effective visuals, and a page on delivering the presentation. The information is all sound but sparse. The one sample visual (an "overhead transparency") is an idiot chart with faulty parallelism in its two-item bulleted list.

In an example of a writing team at a pharmaceutical company charged with developing a proposal to a state legislature and a local school board, the chapter on "Working with Others" (6 pages) offers useful advice on managing the collaboration process. Good information is presented about managing the process (one page), but the discussion of how the hypothetical team overcame challenges (such as anticipating objections) does not contain enough specifics to help students see how to go about meeting such challenges.

"Writing in Your Community" (5 pages) focuses almost exclusively on writing related to service-learning project but has value in its identifying some differences in audience (and consequently document design) in writing in/for organizations.

Business writing coverage in <u>The Bedford Guide for College Writers</u>

The Bedford Guide for College Writers has 944 pages, including a rhetoric section (383 pages), a readings section (156 pages), a research paper manual (124 pages), and a handbook (145 pages). X. J. Kennedy and the three co-authors have divided the Rhetoric section into four parts: "A College Writer's Processes" (37 pages), "A Writer's Situations" (144 pages, including essays by professional writers and by students), "Special Writing Situations" (62 pages), and "A Writer's Strategies" (140 pages). The Readings section is arranged by topics: "Families," "Men and Women," "Popular Culture," "The Workplace," and "Education." The seven essays in the Workplace section critique the American work ethic, offer a tribute to blue-collar workers, make a case against chores for children, and (in four essays) discuss problems with benefits and/or wages. The selections are from such publications as Utne Reader, Newsweek, The New York Times Magazine, and Working Mother.

Chapter 13, "Writing in the Workplace," has only 15 pages, over five of which are illustrations. The chapter presents guidelines about purpose, audience, tone, and presentation (conciseness, clarity, and organization), with short "Discovery Checklists" for writers to use to review a completed document. The authors present guidelines and formatting instructions for letters, memos, email, résumés, and letters of application; for each type of document, the limited discussion presents the usual suggestions. Surprisingly, only two sentences examine the subject of purpose in business writing, but ten address tone. Two sentences in the presentation section address chunking of information.

The ten-sentence discussion of business letters (versus application letters, discussed later) contains good advice, encouraging brevity, specificity, courtesy, and correctness. Nearly two pages, however, are devoted to discussing the different parts of the letter. Modified block format is recommended for most letters, with block style recommended for use with letterhead. Two annotated sample letters, each about a page, illustrate the discussion.

The discussion of résumés presents the usual suggestions: to provide headings, to rely on clauses rather than complete sentences, to use action verbs and active voice, and to use bold type for emphasis. The sample resume (paired with the sample letter of application) follows conventional practice, unfortunately using bold type to identify the employer at the beginning of each item in the Experience section rather than achieving greater emphasis on the writer's experience by stating the job title (perhaps in bold) at the beginning of each item.

Regarding the Objective, the authors offer only two statements: "This optional section allows personnel officers to see at a glance your priorities and goals. Try to sound confident and eager but not pompous or presumptuous." (230) A good suggestion, but most students will be left wondering, "How?"

The discussion of résumés does, however, argue that a writer should prepare different forms of his or her résumé – a text file for emailing, a scannable version, and a Web version for posting – as business writing texts recommend, so students who have used this book should be aware of different ways to submit a resume and the need for appropriate format.

The chapter's discussion of memos provides general information, including the possible range of formality and guidelines for format (including the suggestion to use *Subject:* rather than *Re:*), and a sample memo of nearly one page is annotated.

Email guidelines emphasize brevity and remind readers that email isn't private. Email is still "e-mail," as it is in the other two composition texts and in Guffey's Essentials of Business Communication and Ober's Contemporary Business Communication. Other business communication texts such as Lehman and DuFrene's Business Communication and composition texts such as Faigley's Writing: A Guide for College and Beyond use "email." One might wonder why "e-mail' has not become "email" as "on-line" (as an adjective) became "online" and as "book-keeper" became "bookkeeper."

The discussion of the letter of application recommends the three-paragraph format: identifying the position and summarizing qualifications in the first paragraph, expanding on qualifications in the second paragraph, and requesting an interview and providing contact information in the third – which invites one to wonder when textbooks will emphasize that content should drive organization, rather than vice-versa.

The chapter on "Writing in the Workplace" has 15 pages versus 28 for the preceding chapter, "Responding to Literature," and 124 pages for the section "A Writer's Research Manual." The text is clearly designed to support the research-paper component of a composition course, but as with the other texts it exhibits a tendency to begin to address business writing.

Business writing coverage in The New McGraw-Hill Handbook

The New McGraw-Hill Handbook, by Elaine Maimon, Janice Peritz, and Kathleen Yancey, has over 1000 pages in 13 Parts, including "Writing and Designing Papers" (139 pages on the writing process), "Researching" (96 pages), "Documenting across the Curriculum" (123 pages), "Editing for Clarity" (79 pages),"Editing for Word Choice" (45 pages), and "Sentence Punctuation" (86 pages). Part 5, "Writing beyond College," is the most relevant to business communication. It contains, however, only 26 pages, with 8 pages of sample documents: a brochure, a newsletter, two letters on community issues, a resume, a letter of application, an email message, and a letter of adjustment.

Part 1 on "Writing and Designing Papers" includes discussion of the use of visuals in a section on developing ideas. It identifies types of visuals that are useful with particular rhetorical strategies such as description of classification. A separate section on revising visuals presents additional guidelines for effective graphics. In Part 2, "Common Assignments," Chapter 13 on "Oral Presentations" (six pages) has precious space taken up by two pages of PowerPoint slides but does encourage audience analysis and offers some suggestions for presenting. The longer Chapter 14 on "Multimedia Writing" (22 pages) discusses linking in hypertext essays, using presentation software, creating a website, and blogging. In Part 3, "Researching," Chapter 17 on "Finding and Creating Visuals" has five pages of illustrations and one page of sidebars; it focuses more on finding good illustrations (especially on the internet) than creating them to

illustrate discussion. Integrating visuals into the text of a document is discussed in Chapter 22, "Writing the Paper."

The New McGraw-Hill Handbook is different from many texts in incorporating discussion of visuals at appropriate points in the discussion of the writing process, rather than having a separate chapter (which might reduce the sense that graphics should support discussion in the text). Uniting discussion of graphics with the discussion of text might help students see that both graphics as well as text should be considered when planning and drafting a document. This text has greater coverage of graphics than the others, but it appears in several places, as the Index reveals, making general discussion of graphics less convenient. Also, in an attempt to appeal to the students, valuable space is taken up by a nearly full-page photograph of Kurt Cobain.

The authors' discussion of brochures, newsletters, and posters (with samples) occupies most of the short chapter on "Service Learning and Community-Service Writing." It invites the student to consider their purpose and audience but does not discuss those tasks. The chapter on "Letters to Raise Awareness and Share Concern" offers the usual advice regarding format, conciseness, and a strong opening, in two pages of text followed by two sample letters.

The final chapter, "Writing to Get and Keep a Job," is the longest of the three in Part 5, "Writing beyond College." It encourages students to explore internship opportunities (offering suggestions of what to do during the interview) and provides half a page of advice about résumés, one page of guidelines for writing one, and a sample résumé in a sans-serif font, with references listed and no elaboration on the writer's studies or work experience.

One page of guidelines for letters of application precedes a sans-serif letter coordinated with the sample resume; here, the authors recommend limiting the letter to three or four paragraphs and "informing the reader that you are anticipating a follow-up to your letter" (513). Half a page of discussion of how to prepare for an interview precedes discussion of writing at work, with two sentences on business letters, two sentences on reports and proposals, three sentences on evaluations and recommendations, and two sentences on presentations. A one-page discussion of writing "a letter of protest" (an adjustment letter) is illustrated by a 1.5 page sample, and less than a page of discussion offers suggestions for writing "a letter of praise."

Scattered throughout The New McGraw-Hill Handbook are "Writing beyond College" boxes intended to link the discussion in the text to writing in non-academic settings. Many of the situations/examples, however, are more closely related to academic writing than to business communication. Also, in some chapters where one might expect to find such a box – such as "Finding and Creating Effective Visuals," "Evaluating Sources," and even "Plagiarism, Copyright, and Intellectual Property" – there is not one.

Conclusion

These three popular first-year composition textbooks vary slightly in what they say about writing in business, but generally they offer similar advice (and similar amounts of it). Often, subjects to

which entire chapters are devoted in business communication texts are given a few sentences in these texts. Perhaps the authors of composition texts are beginning to recognize a need for materials to support instruction in career writing – or perhaps publishers have encouraged authors to include some discussion of writing in business so that the publisher's campus representatives can try to sell the book for adoption by claiming that it "has coverage of business writing." Any instructor with experience teaching business writing or experience writing in business would see quickly that the coverage of important topics (especially persuasive writing and common types of business documents) should be expanded, but because most first-year composition instructors lack such experience they might not see how limited the coverage of business writing is.

The coverage of business writing in composition textbooks might create a pedagogical concern for business writing instructors: some students might enter a course in business writing thinking that they already know how to create effective business documents. But their experience with the research paper, which is usually the culminating assignment in composition, sometimes suggests that the specifics of proper documentation are more important than learning about writing situations, style, and documents. To find out what students have done in composition courses and have been taught about business writing, business writing instructors might ask their school's Director of Composition or individual composition instructors which text(s) they use and then examine the text(s) to see what is said about business writing generally, and more specifically about topics that are central to business writing, such as types of documents and messages, writing in an organization, oral communication, and other subjects.

Nearly all studies of the job market and of business in general acknowledge that success in business and government requires the ability to communicate well. As DiSanza and Legge (2003) point out, effective communication in business and government is crucial to motivating employees, managing change, ensuring creativity, and enabling each worker to be successful in his or her career. In many businesses, it is essential also to attracting clients, maintaining good client relationships, developing and maintaining good relations with the community, preventing claims or lawsuits, and achieving other goals. To address growing concern that college graduates are not prepared adequately for writing in their careers, first-year composition instructors need to rethink what they teach and consider carefully the texts they use to teach it, to help the students develop the skills they will need to meet employers' insistence on good writing skills.

Authors of first-year composition textbooks have *begun* to provide those instructors with information they need to help students develop career writing skills. In the near future, textbooks with increased focus on business writing will be an important resource for composition instructors. However, if colleges and universities require more emphasis on career writing in composition courses, composition instructors will need additional information and guidance about business writing situations and strategies, and about types of documents common in business. Business writing instructors may be called in to consult with staff of first-year composition programs to offer information and advice about developing students' skills for

success in their writing in business and government. So it is useful for business writing instructors to have a sense of the coverage of business writing in composition textbooks.

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