

FIXING THE WORST WRITERS: BRIDGING THE MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION DIVIDE

Dale Cyphert
University of Northern Iowa

Abstract

A business college's decision to focus resources on assistance for its "worst writers" highlighted a fundamental conflict between rhetoric and grammar as the proper goal of communication pedagogy. Those students with the lowest scores across two years of assessment exhibited greater problems with rhetorical responsiveness than with language mechanics. An analysis of the results suggests a workable bridge across the ancient gap between creative and normative instruction. Distinguishing between responsiveness to a rhetorical situation, attention to normative expectations of a discourse community, and concern for grammatical decorum, a pragmatic pedagogy of communication management addresses faculty distress over grammar without abandoning rhetorical education.

Introduction

There was no surprise when management professor Wayne Smith recently observed that at his AACSB accredited school, "[a]ny conversation with business school colleagues almost invariably turns to the deplorable state of student writing" (2011, p. 42). Over the past several years many high profile business schools have beefed up their writing programs in response to consistent corporate complaints about the poor quality of their graduates' writing (Middleton, 2011). There is no argument that college students, including graduates of business programs, are considered generally unprepared to perform the professional writing tasks that lie ahead of them. The puzzle is in the permanence of the complaint.

Business people complained that "more English" was required of university graduates at the turn of the last century (Adams, 1993), and business writing has been a feature of most business curricula since the mid twentieth century (Russell, 1991). Nevertheless, the complaints have continued. In 1980, Lee Odell wrote of the common complaints over the "wretched quality of writing done in business and government." Ten years later, Margot Northy (1990) fretted that "the call for better communication skills in business has become almost a chorus" (p. 474). At the turn of this century Melinda Knight (1999) had found that writing standards and required courses are part of most business college programs, but another decade later business schools seem to face the same problem anew.

Is it possible that business faculties have simply failed to meet this seemingly straightforward pedagogical goal? With more than a century of experience, led by any number of adequately-funded, professionally-staffed, and well-regarded business programs, shouldn't there be some pockets of excellence? Aren't there a few best practices that can be depended upon to yield acceptable—if not excellent—results? Is the problem of poor writing really so intractable that no progress has been made? The University of Northern Iowa's College of Business Administration recently determined (once again) that the time was right to address the problem, putting resources into (yet another) program to improve students' writing skills.

A call for better communication skills had been heard many times over the preceding 30 years, and one goal was to break that pattern. The College's Learning Assurance Review Committee requested a program to target its "worst writers" on the assumption that any improvements would at least represent improvement in overall learning outcomes. Perhaps it would not be possible to graduate every student with excellent skills, but baseline writing competence might be within reach. Rather than simply teach more writing classes to more students and hope for the best, the project aimed to uncover root causes by examining the writing of students experiencing the most difficulty.

Defining the Worst Writers: Grammar, Rhetoric, and Paying Attention

Identifying the College's worst writers appeared, on the surface, to be an easy first step. With a 13 year old program in business communication and a four-year old effort in systematic outcomes assessment, the College had already developed a writing rubric and had a variety of artifacts available for analysis. Not until results were obtained did assumptions inherent in both rubric and performance scoring become apparent. The desire to identify its "worst" writers required the prioritization of seemingly incommensurate aspects of writing.

A few obvious issues could be avoided. In content area classes, it can be difficult to make a distinction between a student's *knowledge* and his or her ability to *express* that knowledge in writing. The College had therefore created a writing rubric that judged content only insofar as any claims made were supported with evidence, examples, or explanation of some kind. Further, the project utilized writing prompts that addressed personal topics (e.g. the student's choice of a major) or did not require prior knowledge or research skills (i.e. content documents were provided).

The importance of writing as an exposition of sustained argument is immeasurable but equally problematic for writing assessment. The point of much professional writing is to make the argument, but argumentation, *per se*, was deemed outside the scope of the assessment process. Instead, prompts were selected such that sophisticated reasoning was not required, merely the use of coherent sentences and paragraphs to describe or critique the arguments made by others.

Similarly, students' immaturity and lack of sophistication can be a source of stylistic and formal errors. An earlier analysis of 40 responses to a version of the annual writing contest sponsored by the Association for Business Communication (2005) found that 40 percent of the writers created an impolite response to the customer or an impolitic message to an internal company audience. Although this issue could also be avoided with the selection of a writing prompt, it became increasingly clear that avoiding the more difficult aspects of business writing implied relatively low expectations of performance. Given the mandate to analyze the College's *worst* writers, this was not deemed damaging to the current project, but it does suggest that further investigations directed at writing excellence will need to address these issues.

A College-wide Writing Rubric

Even after setting aside the difficulties in separating writing from its subject, there was some initial concern over the definition of the "worst" writers. However, the College had already begun to use a writing assessment rubric, and it seemed wise to use that instrument to answer the most immediate question: how many students would be involved in an effort to remediate the College's worst writers?

The College's writing rubric had been derived from rubrics used by faculty in management, marketing, business communication, and the MBA program. It was not difficult to standardize the various working versions being used within the College, which were also compared against other university rubrics and business writing guides to develop a single instrument that appeared to cover all the necessary elements (see Appendix). There was little disagreement over the elements of the rubric, at least in conceptual terms. The faculty could agree that good writers a) were responsive to the situation/prompt, b) used correct, standard English, c) exhibited appropriately businesslike style, and d) organized their thoughts logically and supported them appropriately, a six part scheme that seemed to correspond reasonably well with the standards of conciseness, correctness, clarity, and organization that are consistently documented in the research on business' writing expectations (Anderson, 1985), along with categories for expectations regarding the use of support materials and appropriate document format.

Setting Assessment Standards

Questions remained, however, regarding the College's expectations for performance on each category. Most professors' versions of the rubric included suggested weights for each element, but no case could be made for relative values that would be valid across all contexts. In some cases, faculty had seemed to reward various elements of the writing to account for an ambiguously defined "difficulty factor" involving content knowledge, argumentation, or relational "tone" of the writing, but other uses appeared more arbitrary. Although the project aimed to identify the worst writers, we realized that the process might also foster discussion surrounding a more substantive prioritization of the characteristics of acceptable writing.

Further, the assessment team struggled with creating consistent categorizations of poor, fair, and excellent performance within each category. Some faculty members had defined clarity in terms of a plain style of prose, specifying poor writing in terms of too-formal or "bureaucratic" elements, a concern that has been a consistent theme in the academic discussions of business writing (Lanham, 2000; Mendelson, 1987). Others had used rubrics that operationalized clarity as the avoidance of vague, abstract terms and redundant phrases. Similarly, the concise, direct tone of business writing was clearly the goal of some faculty members, while others seemed to be equally concerned with the emotional tone, expecting to see explicit relationship-building language (i.e. overt politeness or respect markers) in an excellent writing performance. An attempt was made to simply incorporate all elements of the various rubrics, recognizing that the results might form the basis for a more systematic discussion of the specific characteristics of good or bad business writing.

Determining Causes

As with many first discussions of a perceived problem, faculty conversations tended to move quickly into possible causes. The problems with student writing were nearly always framed as a recent departure from previously high standards. Contemporary students are perceived as less hard-working, competent, attentive, or motivated than those of the past. A longitudinal study was not the goal of this project, but secondary research suggests that while error patterns change somewhat over time (Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008), there are fewer changes in skill level than there are in skill expectations (Tanyel, Mitchell, & McAlum, 1999). Still, it might be worth further investigation to determine how much instructional changes over the past century have affected writing proficiency.

Hallway conversation further suggested a controversy over the relative importance of previous writing education and the rigor of the College’s writing expectations. This also reflects a distinctive tone of conservative righteousness that threads its way through much of the research. Anderson, for example, in justifying his survey of specific business document usage sniffs that, “discussion of forms is unpopular at present because of the movement in composition pedagogy...away from an approach that focuses on the formal characteristics of good writing to one that focuses on the processes by which good writing is created” (Anderson, 1985, p. 12). Across the instructional materials available in business and professional writing, three causal themes are apparent. Some instruction presumes acceptable writing outcomes to be the consequence of attention to formal expectations of a writing context, with success coming from sufficient practice with its genre (Johnstone, Ashbaugh, & Warfield, 2002; Russell, 1995). A second theme focuses on the writing process, presuming that excellent processes, including systematic invention steps and adequate time spent on the editing task, will yield excellent outcomes (Flower & Hayes, 1981). A third group addresses the issues of rhetorical competence, suggesting that socialization into the discourse community will yield appropriate and effective results (Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye, 2005; Spilka, 1990, 1993).

Worst Writers Analysis

Given the obvious complexity of writing instruction, the College determined that the first question was really a simple one of resources. Given agreement on a common rubric and the resources available within the College, would it be possible to identify and offer assistance to the most deficient students in the College? Once we knew more about these students’ skills, preparation, and motivations toward effective writing in a business environment, we might be able to take steps toward better writing outcomes.

Identifying the Worst Writers

All freshmen submitted a writing sample during fall 2009 as part of the College’s mandatory Professional Readiness Program¹. Of 321 students, 52 (16.1%) did not produce an acceptable writing sample. An additional 14 did not turn in any sample at all, so the worst case estimate is that 19.3% of the incoming freshmen are not writing at an acceptable level (Table 1).

Table 1

	Freshman Seminar (F09)
Scored “high pass”	64 (19.9%)
Scored “pass”	195 (60.7%)
Scored “fail”	52 (16.1%)
No sample submitted	14
Potential Worst	66 (19.3%)

¹ In conjunction with their academic degrees, all business majors at the University of Northern Iowa are required to participate in activities designed to develop skills in career management, communication, critical thinking, and organizational protocol.

That same group of students could be expected to enroll in the second level of the program the following year, but because this was the phase-in year, some were still subject to a prior University catalog, and their participation was not required for graduation. As a consequence, 28 of these 66 students did not enroll in the second level. Several changed to non-business majors, but the remainder appear to have simply opted out of the program (Table 2).

Table 2

6	No longer in College (2 no longer at Univ)
6	Accounting
1	Economics
4	Finance
4	Management
5	Marketing
1	MIS
1	Pre-business
28	Total

The remaining 38 students were tracked on their performance on the second level assessment during their sophomore year. Of these, 14 (37%) did not submit a writing sample, either withdrawing from the program or failing to receive credit. Two additional students did submit a writing sample, but did not follow the submission instructions and a score was not recorded. This left a total of 22 (33%) students from the original 66 for whom we were able to track scores over two years. Ten (15%) raised their scores sufficiently that we conclude their initial problems had less to do with writing than with being freshmen. Another 12 students (18%) scored again at a less than adequate level, suggesting their initial scores were a reasonable gauge of their writing ability (Table 3).

Table 3

	Level II (F10-S11)
Proficient (2.5-3)	2 (3%)
Adequate (1.5-2.4)	8 (12%)
Developing (1-1.4)	7 (11%)
Unacceptable (0-.9)	5 (8%)
No score/dropped program	44 (67%)

We can probably assume that students who dropped the program or failed to complete the second level were not proficient writers, but we do not know at this point how many of them might have scored again in the unacceptable or developing category. With the 2011-2012 academic year, all students will be required to complete two levels of the program for graduation. We will repeat this process to achieve greater accuracy in our estimate of the numbers of students requiring remediation. In the meantime, we estimate the need for writing remediation to be no more than 20% of the underperforming freshman, the rest opting out of business majors.

One caveat involves the performance of transfer students. This identification of the College’s “worst writers” was designed such that only native students were included. Of the 311 scores recorded for the second year assessment, the overall average was adequate (1.8), with 91 (29%) scoring below 1.5. (Again, we should probably assume that the large number of students who failed to submit writing samples were likely to be poorer writers, but that will not be known until the more stringent policy has been implemented.) This means that besides the 12 students who had done poorly as freshmen, an additional 79 students scored poorly. We have no way to know, at this point, whether these were native students whose scores had declined after the freshman year or transfer students who had not participated in the freshman year of the program.

What Do They Do Wrong?

For the 12 students who scored less than adequate at both Level I and Level II, artifacts were reviewed from the Level II assessment. First, an overall comparison of the “worst” writers’ average scores against those of the entire set of writing assessments was made (Table 4). In response to faculty concerns, a subsequent analysis looked specifically at language mechanics (Table 6).

Table 4

	Worst Writers Average	Overall College Average	Fall sample of 12:
Focus of Work	0.7 (unacceptable)	1.9 (adequate)	The assignment was to draw some conclusion from three articles on the same topic, taken from the WSJ. Only one completed the assignment. Two used too few sources, and four offered summaries of each of three articles. Three of those formatted the document as three <i>separate</i> mini-memos on one page in response to the request for a single memo.
Organization	0.8 (unacceptable)	1.9 (adequate)	Given the expectation of an introductory summary and supporting paragraphs, these students had no way to redeem the organization of the document.
Content Development	1.3 (developing)	1.8 (adequate)	An appropriate amount of detail was provided in each sample, but in those where synthesis was attempted, no indication was given of the sources or validity of specific data points. All information was treated as equally reliable, although given the consistency of the source material, this could be reasonable.
Language Style, Tone	1.4 (developing)	1.8 (adequate)	Raters found some language to be vague, informal or wordy, but none of the sample showed inappropriate or un-businesslike tone.
Document Design	1.3 (developing)	2.1 (adequate)	The four of the five memos were deemed adequate, the fourth developing, but some apparent inconsistencies in expectations

			were noted. Three students submitted multiple emails instead of a memo.
Language Mechanics	0.9 (unacceptable)	1.4 (developing)	Language errors were noted in all artifacts. An analysis of the most frequent language errors was also conducted and reported separately.
Overall	1.0 (developing)	1.8 (adequate)	

The worst writers were worse in every category, but there was a distinctive pattern of deficiency. These writers fell two full categories below the overall average in the areas of focus and organization, but just one category below in all others, suggesting that the primary problem with their performance lay in these areas. A review of the documents reveals, furthermore, that major difficulties arose with the writers' initial failure to perform the requested task, which was scored as an element of focus. Once students had lost points at the stage of task responsiveness, it was virtually impossible for them to earn a high score on organization or content development.

Although we had anticipated the need for some further discussion regarding the relative weights of our rubric elements, these results suggested that a more complex issue involved their nested character. That is, every element except language mechanics was dependent, at some level, on the students' competence in recognizing and appropriately responding to the rhetorical situation presented by the prompt. Even with a controlled situation and a simple writing task, the rubric comprised of distinctly defined writing elements could not account for the interrelationships among formal knowledge, writing process, and rhetorical competence that appeared to affect these students' performance.

Because language mechanics were perceived as the largest problem by a significant number of faculty members, the committee requested further information regarding performance on this element. An assumption that errors would follow the Pareto Principle² led to a call to know which errors might warrant attention in a remediation program.

The sample size was very small, so a second group of "worst" writing was derived from a mid-program writing assessment conducted during the same semester. One professor had submitted the ten worst papers from a set of approximately 60 artifacts. Three appeared to have been written by non-native speakers of English and were not included. These papers had also been subjected to scoring with the College's rubric. The results showed a somewhat different pattern, shown in Table 5, probably attributable to the nature of the artifact as a graded class assignment, and the scores on the language mechanics was comparable to those in the original "worst writers" sample (as shown in Table 4).

² The Pareto Principle (sometimes referred to as the 80-20 rule) was named by Total Quality Management proponent Joseph M. Juran for economist Vilfredo Pareto who first discussed the phenomenon.

Table 5

	Worst Ten Average	Overall College Average
Focus of Work	1.6 (adequate)	1.9 (adequate)
Organization	1.2 (developing)	1.9 (adequate)
Content Development	0.9 (unacceptable)	1.8 (adequate)
Language Style, Tone	1.9 (adequate)	1.8 (adequate)
Document Design	2.1 (adequate)	2.1 (adequate)
Language Mechanics	0.7 (unacceptable)	1.4 (developing)
Overall	1.4 (developing)	1.8 (adequate)

A simple count of errors performed on the 19 papers yielded something closer to an 80/40 than the 80/20 relationship predicted by the Pareto Principle, although the Principle could easily be made to hold by adding 26 error categories from the myriad possible errors that these students did not make at all. Perhaps more useful, the ranking was compared to published data on language errors in professional writing contexts (Table 6).

Table 6

Language Errors	“worst” sample N=12	additional “worst” sample N=7	Total		Lunsford & Lunsford	Stine & Skarzenksy
comma errors	56	71	127	79%	2,7,11,13,16	6
wrong word meaning	25	34	59		1	
missing/unclear antecedent	27	22	49		4	
incorrect preposition	12	33	45			
incorrect punctuation (all other)	15	22	37		6,14, 19	
spelling errors	15	17	32		5	
noun/pronoun disagreement	23	8	31		17	5
words missing, out of order	12	16	28		9	
verb form errors	12	11	23		12	3
switch/wrong person	2	14	16			
possessive		16	16		9	
capitalization	7	9	16	8	11	
run-on sentence	9	6	15	15	1	
improper use of articles	5	8	13			
redundant words	5	7	12			
subject/verb agreement	4	5	9		4	
adverb/adjective form errors	2	5	7			
misplaced modifiers	2	4	6		7,8	
lacking parallel structure	6		6		10	
plural form		6	6			
fragments	1	4	5	20	2	
subject/object agreement	2		2			
colon abuse		2	2			
dangling preposition		1	1			

A large study of student papers done by Lunsford and Lunsford (2008) showed a similar pattern to this sample. With some adjustments for coding differences, punctuation errors (especially comma use), word choice, and unclear antecedents account for the bulk of the mechanical errors. This level of similarity suggests that the College’s “worst writers” do not differ in a qualitative way from the normal population of university students. On the other hand, the student papers did not exhibit the same pattern of “most frequent errors” that were reported by business professionals to Stine and Skarzenksy (1979). Some differences can be attributed to coding discrepancies or to changes due to the adoption of word processing software, but it could also be that professionals will have resolved some of the more contextual problems (vocabulary issues, clarity of antecedents) in order to retain a business position.

Who Are They, and How Did They Get to This Point?

The final analysis of the College's "worst writers" involved an investigation into their preparation for the task. For the twelve students who had scored poorly in both the Level I and Level II writing assessments, a current degree audit was examined.

Table 7

Level I Score	Level II Score	Major	Focus	Org	Content Dev	Language Style	Document Form	Mechanics	GPA	English ACT	Reading ACT	Composite ACT	Prerequisite Course, Grade	
26	0.7	Finance/Real Estate	0	0	0	2	0	2	2.65	17	21	19	College Writing & Research	B+
24	0.8	Graphic Technologies	0	0	2	1	1	1	2.53	18	20	18	Transfer--English Comp II	A
24	0.8	Comm/Pub Relations	0	0	1	1	2	1	2.93	17	19	19	College Writing & Research	B+
22	0.8	Marketing	1	1	1	1	1	0	2.98	19	19	19	Transfer--Composition II	A
24	0.8	Management	1	1	2	1	0	0	2.35	19	19	20	College Writing & Research	C+
26	1.0	Accounting	1	1	1	0	2	1	2.79	21	19	22	College Writing & Research	C+
22	1.0	Economics/HR	0	0	2	3	0	1	2.94	17	21	22	College Writing & Research	A
28	1.2	Marketing	0	1	2	1	2	1	3.25	22	27	22	College Writing & Research	A
24	1.3	Marketing	0	1	1	2	3	1	2.59	20	25	21	College Writing & Research	A
28	1.3	Business Teaching	2	1	1	1	2	1	2.72	18	23	21	College Writing & Research	B+
26	1.3	Accounting	2	1	1	2	1	1	3.13	24	22	24	College Writing & Research	A
26	1.3	Accounting	1	2	1	2	1	1	2.33	19	23	20	College Writing & Research	A-

Without sufficient numbers to conduct statistical analysis, it is possible to make only some general observations about these "worst writers" overall academic aptitude.

- First, these were students with relatively low ACT scores. The average of this group, 20.6, is well below the 23.1 average for students admitted to the University³. While 75.7% of students admitted to the university score above 21, only 4 (33%) of these students did so.
- These students had all passed the prerequisite writing course, most with excellent grades. Since these were all native students, the transfer courses were presumably taken while the students were still in high school, with the remainder taken during their first year at the University.

³ Both verbal and quantitative scores were available for majors in the College, and are provided for informational purposes. Comparisons to University averages are only available in terms of composite scores.

- Through the sophomore year, these students' average GPA of 2.77 is lower than the University's average sophomore GPA of 2.92. This average is slightly higher than the overall College GPA of 2.73 but presumably includes a large number of general education courses relative to the College's more difficult upper-division courses.
- Two students were not maintaining the 2.5 GPA required for admission to the College, and one had not yet been admitted. All were exceeding the 2.2 GPA required for University graduation.
- Two more students had opted out of the College in their sophomore year (one opting for a writing intensive major), leaving just ten students in the group that would warrant remediation.

Conclusions

This analysis answered some initial questions regarding the number of "worst writers" the College might have. It further offered some insights into the complexities of defining and assessing that group. The largest factor in poor scores was a failure to complete the task as directed. Scores on language mechanics, on the other hand, were not substantially lower than those of students in general. Between the generally adequate level of performance in the writing prerequisite, the large number of students who failed to complete the task at all, and the dominant writing problem of failing to follow directions, it appears that the College's "worst writers," at least as we initially defined the question, are those who were simply non-responsive to the writing task.

Rhetoric or Grammar?

The tensions between formal and rhetorical perspectives on writing instruction are long standing (Grant, 2010), and it comes as no real surprise that one faculty's innate sense of how to deal with its "worst writers" reflects the same inherent contradictions. As a master art in the ancient *trivium*, rhetoric concerned itself with the artful response to a particular audience in a particular situation, with its application governed by the grammar of a given discourse community. Seeing themselves as gatekeepers for a community of business professionals, the faculty favored a rigorous enforcement of correct grammar as the first step toward remediation. The underlying instructional goal could be to solidify prerequisite knowledge of the community's formal writing expectations or to motivate students to engage in the careful proofreading that meeting those expectations would require. Either way, the faculty's general assumption was that students with baseline skills could then proceed to more complex rhetorical issues of argumentation and style. This is a commonly reported position of both professors and business executives: "Why worry about teaching such material as letter formats, you-attitude, and communication theory to students who cannot spell or write a coherent sentence" (Stine & Skarzenski, 1979, p. 28). Meanwhile, the results of a simple assessment demonstrated a more immediate problem with rhetorical competence.

Ethos versus Meaning: The Role of Grammar as Status Marker

Although the worst students did make formal errors, their scores against the College's rubric did not demonstrate a huge discrepancy from the typical student's lack of proofreading. From a learning assurance perspective, three responses to an outcomes assessment are possible: adjust the assessment process so that it more accurately captures information about student learning, revise the assessment

instrument to more accurately gauge student performance, or modify instructional practices. Here, the first inclination of some faculty members was to fix the rubric. Since they had meant “poor grammar” when they said “worst writers,” the assessment had simply failed to weight grammar correctly.

Given the consistent business prioritization of clarity, conciseness, and organization over grammar (Anderson, 1985), an overemphasis on grammar seemed to be an unproductive step for students’ professional success. Still, the visceral reaction to language errors is real, and it is indicative of larger social concerns (Cameron, 1995). If the purpose of writing is simply to communicate, then errors are only important to the extent that they impede communication (Halsted, 1975; Schaughnessy, 1977), but, outside the academic context, this is not the case. Professionals regularly judge social class, educational background, and work ethic on the basis of language use, particularly the exhibition of correct grammar, syntax, and vocabulary (Beason, 2001, p. 36). Regardless of the communication task at hand, “a writer’s ability to use conventional forms in the customary way shows that he or she is a bona fide member of the culture of the workplace: a person who cannot use these forms may appear to readers to be generally unqualified” (Anderson, 1985, p. 12). In short, grammar functions as a status marker. Regardless of their impact on the clarity, conciseness, or organization of a document, formal errors send an independent message that damages the writer’s ethos as a professional.

Given the clear distinction between professional ethos and writing skill, the more appropriate adjustment would be to assess the “professionalism” of a writing sample independently of its communication function. The fix is not to simply weight grammar more heavily, such that those with the worst grammar scores are flagged as the College’s worst writers. Nor is it particularly helpful to name correct language use as a prerequisite skill, disallowing assessment to continue until a student has submitted a technically correct writing sample. While these might reinforce the social pressure toward formal compliance, neither addresses the interrelated nature of credibility and content that is a reality of business writing.

Process Motivation: Socialization versus Rule Enforcement

A second faculty position offered a psychological interpretation of the analysis. Since it was reasonable to assume that many of the worst writers did have basic writing skills, the results suggested that they lacked motivation to perform well on the assessment. Motivation here is the key, whether students are being motivated to learn writing skills or to engage in better writing practices. Most business faculties tend to be outcome-oriented, placing an emphasis on objective, behavioral outcomes. Those who support a process view of writing instruction, which seems to comprise the bulk of business communication textbook authors (Guffy, 2008), would claim the more important predictor of professional writing is adherence to the planning, drafting, and editing steps that are a normal part of professional writing.

From this perspective, success on every element of writing depends on time spent in a specific task. A planning and research stage is needed to insure the document has a clearly focused message, organized appropriately for the intended audience, topic, and genre, and includes content that is supportive of the intended message. The writer must then draft a message in a style that exhibits vocabulary, emotional tone, and relational markers appropriate to the specific context, packaging it in a format that meets both generic expectations and contemporary design sensibilities. Finally, an editing and proofreading process will insure that the details of language are correct.

Additional rigor in the assessment process was the proposed solution, increasing student motivation by mandating the successful completion of a writing assessment as a requirement for admission to the College of Business Administration. This would presumably motivate students to apply their knowledge and thereby yield a more accurate assessment of their actual writing ability. The implications of such a move are still under discussion among the faculty. At issue is a concern that students who are not also motivated to perform at their best in the business classroom will exhibit no change from the current level of work, which was deemed so poor that a remediation program was required. That is, a more rigorous assessment process might yield better outcome measures, but would offer no motivation for students admitted to the College to exhibit excellent writing on an ongoing basis. Further, an entrance requirement would necessarily target prerequisite skills rather than business-specific writing, offering no value toward the College's overall goal of developing students' business-specific professional writing skills prior to graduation.

Many faculty members report success when students are required to meet clearly stated expectations of language use. With consistent attention to grammar, Wayne Smith, for example, a lecturer in organizational behavior at the California State University at Northridge, "reduced surface errors by as much as 95%" (2011, p. 44), citing both instruction and feedback as important. What is not clear is whether the students are (re)learning basic grammar rules or spending more time on the proofreading process. Further, it is not known whether similar techniques would yield better responsiveness to the writing prompt. This initial assessment could offer no insight into whether students had insufficient knowledge to follow the instructions (i.e. did not know the difference between *synthesis* and *description*), or failed to spend sufficient time in the planning process to read the source documents carefully.

Rhetorical Competence: Professionalizing the Faculty-Student Relationship

The heart of the ongoing difficulty in graduating competent writers might have less to do with writing instruction than with the way in which individuals develop rhetorical competence within a specific discourse community. When workplace writing is examined, the worst writing is done by recent college grads who consistently fail to see their writing to be as poor as their supervisors judge it to be. However, even though supervisors generally report that they have neither the time nor expertise to provide writing instruction, many respondents do report that their writing has improved over time and that "on the job experience" has been the most useful training tool. Although "deficiencies in college writing courses" cannot be ruled out, it is also possible that competent workplace writing is simply not learned in the classroom (Anderson, 1985, p. 68).

The College faculty has not seen writing instruction as part of its responsibility, a position that has been reported at other institutions as well, where professors are more concerned "that their students learn the basics from writing courses than they are that students get experience with the sorts of writing they will do on the job" (Stine & Skarzenski, 1979, p. 29). Further, ethnographic work that explores the rhetorical communities of the workplace demonstrate the degree to which each environment involves complex, interrelated norms of social behavior, epistemology, and propriety (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 1999; Beaufort, 1999; Henry, 2000; Matalene, 1989; Spilka, 1993). Even if the rhetorical expectations of a professional context were addressed as part of undergraduate coursework, it would necessarily be done in a generic, relatively superficial way. New employees would still be required to relearn rules of professional writing as they internalize the norms of a specific industry, organization, and work team.

Next Steps

Faced with the mandate to *fix* the problem of poor writing, the College's learning outcomes committee is now charged with building a workable bridge across the ancient gap between grammar and rhetoric. As members of a well-defined discourse community, business professors rightly see grammar as a marker of incompetence—a sign that the writer has not grasped the basics of rhetorical performance. The student scores, however, suggest that the college's worst writers have more problems in responding appropriately to the rhetorical situation. Without a sense of the appropriate response in a given situation, they are not yet ready to concern themselves with the mechanics of creating an effective response within its genre and normative discourse rules. Further, competence in academic grammar upon graduation will not guarantee students any rhetorical competence within the writing environment of a given business organization. To the extent that the College has resources to assist its worst writers, the proper design of a remedial program is not yet clear.

Additional data collection will be the next step, of course, given the limitations of this small first assessment. With that, two changes will be made in the assessment process to better reflect the complicated relationships among the elements of professional writing. First, the faculty undertook this project thinking that generic organization and grammar skills ought to be learned and perhaps consistently displayed before students could or should be asked to learn more about the rhetorical expectations of a business environment. The insight from the examination of these students' work is that nothing except mechanics can be accurately assessed unless the student has provided a contextually appropriate response. A threshold system will be instituted on assessments with the 2011/12 academic year such that students will be required to submit a writing sample that meets the basic parameters of the task before it will be scored. This is likely to yield different results with respect to writing characteristics, yielding better data on the rest of the elements in the College's writing rubric.

Second, we can conclude that any remediation of the College's worst writers must address the complex way in which grammar functions as a credibility marker within a larger rhetorical environment. Treating grammar as an independent, prerequisite skill does not provide the student with sufficient understanding of language use as a component of professional behavior. In fact, treating grammar as a low-level skill that is unsuitable for a discussion within the College suggests that only the fussiest narrow-minded bosses would be concerned with such low-level details. The matrix of writing skills is thus being revised to focus on elements of rhetorical competence, while grammar is being targeted as an element of protocol, along with such topics as business attire, dinner etiquette, and networking manners. In this way, the subtle components of professional image can be more fruitfully discussed across the full range of signals, signs and symbols. Results will be reported in terms of formal credibility markers (document design and language mechanics) and rhetorical elements (focus, organization, content development, and style).

Going forward, we can anticipate that future instructional improvements will not absolve the faculty from some role in providing feedback on student writing, but it might significantly change its scope and content. Many faculty members are uncomfortable with providing feedback on language mechanics, feeling they are insufficiently trained (or insufficiently paid) to offer the usefully specific information that a writing instructor might. Even those with an interest in "grading on writing" face obstacles in an environment where inconsistent expectations and evolving language use make it impossible for faculty to develop a workably consistent standard for performance (Smith, 2011). When grammar is understood as a credibility marker, however, it is possible to discuss both the variability in audience reactions and the strategic

choices that can be made. The aim is not to get students to conform to an objective standard of language mechanics, but to be mindful of the impact of various kinds of errors and of the effort that must be put forth when the risks of projecting a negative image are high. Just as we expect students to wear corporate attire on interview days but not to class, we might expect students to proofread carefully on a memo assignment but not on a homework problem. The key is that expectations are explained in context of image management rather than as an arbitrary and inconsistently enforced rule.

Additionally, faculty could reasonably be asked to offer subjective and contextualized feedback on the rhetorical effects of their students' writing. Rather than guessing at the intended meaning in a student's poorly organized essay and assigning a grade to the presumed content, a rhetorically honest response would be to ask for clarification (or, perhaps, ignore the message). When a student's stylistic choices create an insulting or embarrassing message, the rhetorically honest responses might be anger or laughter. When faculty members respond as though the error had not been made, their students never learn how to gauge the rhetorical impact of their own writing. It might be true that decontextualized instruction of the college classroom cannot capture the subtle complexities of the business environment, but authentic reactions to student writing can develop their skill of anticipating and responding to a rhetorical situation.

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DALE CYPHERT, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in Management and Director of the Professional Readiness Program at the University of Northern Iowa. With a practitioner background in corporate and management communication, Cyphert's research involves contrasting rhetorical norms across cultures, especially the conflict of oral and literate norms in the contemporary workplace.

Appendix : Assessment Rubric for Professional Written Communication Skills

Dimension	Does Not Meet Requirements	Developing	Adequate	Proficient
Focus of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The central idea is not stated - The information provided is generally not relevant to the stated or implied thesis - The information provided does not respond to the specific rhetorical situation outlined in the assignment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The central idea is implied but not explicitly stated - The writer does not provide an overview of the paper - The information should be selected with more care and the relevance more explicitly demonstrated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The thesis statement identifies a central idea but does not provide an overview of the paper - Selection of information advances the thesis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The paper proposes a clear, arguable and supportable thesis - The selection of information is consistently relevant and persuasive of the thesis
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The content has been presented in a disconnected manner without regard to the reader's needs or the task - The paper lacks a meaningful introduction and conclusion - Topic sequencing is random, redundant, or irrelevant to the structure previewed in the introduction - Transitions or internal previews and summaries are not provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The organizational structure is inappropriate for the context and does not adequately meet the readers' needs or develop the thesis appropriately - The introduction and conclusion inadequately or inaccurately preview and summarize the paper - Transitions are absent or incorrect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The organization is generally logical and meets the readers' needs - The introduction is accurate and useful and the conclusion provides the requested results (appropriate summary) - Supporting material is discussed in the order it was previewed - Transitions are generally effective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The writing is a cohesive piece in which the ideas developed support the thesis - Includes an appropriate and creative introduction that captures the readers' attention and guides them through the paper accurately and meaningfully - The paper leads naturally to a strong conclusion that ties in all portions of the paper effectively in a creative and focused manner - The organization enhances and showcases the central idea without appearing to do so overtly. The sequence of ideas and the structure of the entire paper are compelling and move the reader through the text
Content Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Key ideas are easily overlooked and important aspects of the thesis are not addressed - The relevance of evidence and the logic of arguments are often unclear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is lack of clarity regarding the purpose of the paper and only a few of the key ideas have been addressed - The content is inappropriate for the task and the writing tends to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The paper begins with a clearly identifiable central idea and a sense of purpose -The key points of the argument have been addressed but some of them have not been 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The paper has a clear focus and sense of purpose. Its main ideas stand out and hold the reader's attention - The topic is developed comprehensively, all key points

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are factual errors and misconceptions, as well as inappropriate material - Lack of internal structure. The paper may read like a collection of random thoughts - Paragraphs do not have clear subject-matter identities, instead seeming to be almost random collections of content - Lack of topic sentences - Sentence-to-sentence transitions are often abrupt and unmotivated 	<p>ramble</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The arguments are inadequate or flawed - Paragraphs do not clearly mark units of thought. Ideas need to be pulled out from different parts of the paper to be re-formed to make unified, well-developed paragraphs - Paragraph topics are unclear and sentences move from one point to the other without logical sequencing - A number of quotations that do not meaningfully advance the argument have been included in the paper 	<p>developed sufficiently</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paragraphs have been developed coherently and are used effectively to mark related units of thought 	<p>are addressed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Claims are well argued and supported by evidence - The paper is concise, with no digressions or unneeded content - Paragraphs have clear topics, often indicated by topic sentences - There is a smooth flow of thought and effective transitions within paragraphs
Language Style and Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Communication of ideas is impeded by poor word choice - The communication style is inappropriate for the audience or situation - The paper uses an overly simple vocabulary - There are many questionable word choices, including clichés, trendy jargon, and instances where words are misused - The writing may be overly wordy and may over-reach in its word choices - Unnecessary and inappropriate use of quotations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Word choice is inappropriate for the audience and the context - Language is vague, ambiguous or extravagant - Unnecessary use of jargon impedes the clarity of communication - Unnecessary use of prepositions, indirect sentence structure, passive voice - Inappropriate use of third person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vocabulary and writing style used are appropriate for the specific requirements of the assignment - Use of idiomatic language is minimal - The writing uses active voice - Direct sentence structure. - Direct voice (1st/2nd person) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Word choice is mature, correct, and apt, and the terminology used is appropriate for the audience or situation - The words used are specific, precise, economical, and effective in conveying intended meanings - Some of the language is inventive, even creative - The use of jargon and clichés is minimized and to the point - Quotations are used appropriately to achieve the desired stylistic effect
Document Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inappropriate business format is used - The paper's layout and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The paper has combined different types of business format 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The paper uses business format effectively; the requested format is clearly identifiable upon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The paper shows effective use of business format - The paper is neat and is

	<p>presentation is distracting and dysfunctional</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No headings, subheadings or bullets as dictated by the format - Lack of design elements that would be expected based on the format - Unnecessary exhibits are provided - Quotations and works cited are not referenced in a manner dictated by the format 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The layout of the paper does not convey a professional image - Headings and sub-headings are not worded effectively and do not adhere to standard guidelines regarding fonts, placement, and creation of subdivisions - A number of exhibits are either irrelevant or have not been integrated with the argument - The appropriate documentation format for quotations and other references has not been followed 	<p>viewing the paper</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Headings and subheadings are displayed appropriately (placement, font, etc.) 	<p>effectively formatted, with appropriate fonts, margins, and use of white space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Headings and subheadings are used effectively and guide the reader - All exhibits merit inclusion and support the purpose of the paper - Quotations and works cited are appropriately referenced
Written Language Mechanics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frequent incidences mistakes in spelling, punctuation, and capitalization threaten the paper's readability - The paper is poorly written from a grammatical standpoint, it is often hard to read and understand - Sentences tend to have simple and relatively uniform structures - Sentences are often garbles and confusing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Includes spelling errors, incorrect punctuation, or grammatical errors - The presence of dangling and squinting modifiers and incomplete sentences obscure the intended meaning in many instances 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are no spelling or capitalization mistakes - Punctuation is correct and meaningful - There are no grammatical errors - If present, idioms, second language errors, and vernacular do not negatively affect the clarity of communication - Sentence structure is functional and meaningful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Word choices are consistently accurate and reflect standard English use - Individual sentences are structured in ways that effectively convey their meaning; sentences read easily and are efficient - The paper employs sentences of varying lengths and diverse structural forms - If used, non-sentence fragments are appropriate and effective