

# **Disciplining Business Writing: Hard Decisions for “Soft Skills”**

**Dirk Remley  
Kent State University**

## **Introduction**

Business communication courses, which include courses that focus on just business writing and courses that include instruction and practice with business writing and oral presentations, are housed in a range of departments and schools within institutions. Generally, these include departments of English or Writing/Rhetoric likely housed within a college of arts and sciences or humanities, department or college of communication studies and schools or colleges of business. Where such courses are positioned in an institution can affect how they are presented to students relative to content and pedagogy such as the modes of communication that are emphasized and how much theory should be integrated into instruction. Because of political dynamics that affect content and pedagogy, Brandt’s (2001) notion of literacy sponsorship applies to pedagogies and content that are encouraged and those that are discouraged; political and economic entities that influence the department in which such courses are housed directly affect the particular content and pedagogies presented in a business writing course.

The content and pedagogies are influenced by trends in recent scholarship in each discipline as well as other factors. Differences across disciplinary theories and values can create tension in terms of what a community perceives is the best content and pedagogy. This is less a problem when such courses are housed in a college or school of business. However, discourse differences may become prominent and cause difficulty when those courses are housed in a different unit of the institution, because they can impact a school or college of business’ accreditation.

I recently experienced the effort to design a business writing course from a college of business perspective as well as a department of English perspective, observing a few differences that may affect other institutions’ efforts to develop such courses. This proceedings paper reports on that experience and how my institution addressed those discourse differences. I also provide suggestions relative to implementing professional development to prepare graduate students in rhetoric and composition and others to teach in a college or school of business, given trends to recruit rhetoric and composition PhDs and to house business communication courses there.

## **Institutional Positioning and Coverage**

Wardrobe and Bayless (1999) surveyed Association of Business Communication members and found that most colleges of business position business communication courses in the school of business rather than in a department of English or Communication studies. More recently, Sharp and Brumberger (2013) found that 75% of the top 50 business schools house business communication courses in their college or school of business. They also found that roughly 12.5% house them in a department of English or writing/rhetoric. Another 12.5% house such courses in a department of communication studies. Depending on institutional politics, there can be a discourse divide affecting the content of these courses based only on where they are positioned institutionally.

Courses titled as “business communication” tend to include both written communication and oral presentation skills. Russ (2009) surveyed business communication instructors and found that written communication and oral communication are the most-covered topics. Also, persuasive communication, ethical communication and use of email tend to be included. Russ also recommended more coverage in digital forms of business communication beyond e-mail.

In most studies, emphasis was placed on written communication skills more than oral communication; and many institutions have business writing courses, excluding oral communication from coverage. Wardorpe (2002) surveyed department chairs from 6 disciplines, and he found that written communication skills were rated highest in importance. Lingenfelter and Umansky (2010) acknowledge the importance of writing skills for accountants, pointing out that writing skills are tested on even the CPA exam. Jones (2011) found that employers demand skills with basic writing skills—mechanics. However, Jones also found that employers do not value digital forms of communication beyond use of e-mail.

Sharp and Brumberger (2013) found that approximately one-third of the top 50 business schools offer advanced coursework in business communication beyond an introductory course. Such offerings would allow for more diverse range of coverage, including instruction and practice with various digital forms of communication as well as collaborative writing.

While content in business communication or business writing courses is generally consistent, there can be differences in what is emphasized and how it is presented relative to where the course is housed. Faculty training affects course content, but institutional positioning may affect pedagogies and emphases.

### **Discourse Divide**

Faculty who teach business communication and business writing tend to be trained either in rhetoric and composition or in communication studies. These fields emphasize theory from rhetoric, especially that related to persuasion. Consequently, instruction typically involves considerable discussion of theory and related applications. In the past 15 years the field of rhetoric and composition, also, has espoused multimodal rhetoric. This study considers how various modes of representation such as visual, audio, spatial and any combination of them affect design and interpretation of a message (New London Group, 1996).

The New London Group identifies five different, unique modes of representation: print-linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial. They also acknowledge that any two or more of these can be combined to form a multimodal representation. They acknowledge that,

literacy pedagogy now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies. This includes understanding and competent control of representational forms that are becoming increasingly significant in the overall communications environment, such as visual images and their relationship to the written word - for instance, visual design in desktop publishing or the interface of visual and linguistic meaning in multimedia. Indeed, ...; the proliferation of communications channels and media supports and extends cultural and subcultural diversity (p. 60).

With this observation, literacy researchers and rhetoric and composition scholars began considering various combinations of modes of representation that can contribute to communication. Further, scholarship encouraged pedagogy to integrate instruction in composing in these different modes of representation. Studies pertaining to this analysis seek to understand rhetorical attributes of mixed modes and when and under what conditions certain combinations are most productive.

Business writing courses, especially introductory-level courses, that are housed in a college of business may be more focused on print-linguistic forms of writing, limiting other modes of representation to graphics typically found in reports such as tables, diagrams or charts. Further, any instruction with electronic media may be limited to e-mail and social media. Indeed, most surveys of business professionals find that basic business writing skills associated with print-linguistic forms of representation and emerging forms of electronic communication are desired over the ability to design Websites or produce videos (e.g.: Jones, 2011; Lingenfelter & Umansky, 2010). Such basic skills include proper mechanics—spelling, grammar, and punctuation-- and appropriate style emphasizing conciseness and awareness of one's audience.

Further, business writing courses in a school of business are more likely to include pedagogies that emphasize applied practice of skills over instruction in theory. This also may be affected by the number of credit hours the course is—1 hour, 2 hours or 3 hours. While any writing course should include opportunities for students to apply skills to specific scenarios or cases, such opportunities are more plentiful in a business writing course in a school of business.

Scholarship in business and professional communication and workplace literacy examine forms of writing in different professional contexts. Early studies of workplace literacy practices focused on the nature of writing in the workplace, emphasizing formal documents (letters, memos, forms, and reports) and what skills are most important to create these documents.

For example, Anderson (1985) found that ninety-three percent (93%) of respondent to his survey reported that writing well is of at least some importance, and fifty-seven percent (57%) indicated it would be of "great" or "critical importance." In addition to this survey, Anderson also reports on a review of fifty (50) other surveys of workplace writing that asked similar questions to his survey. His review finds that: 1) there is a lot of writing at work; 2) readers are generally organizational insiders; and 3) much of the writing involves particular forms including memos, letters, instructions, and preprinted, template forms that writers fill out.

Also, Northey (1990) surveyed attitudes of accountants about writing skills that are needed in their work. All respondents indicated that writing skills are needed, but the emphasis is on correcting errors: mechanics, voice, lack of transitions. She found that most writing involved reporting information, with little emphasis on persuasion or rapport building. She also found a focus on writer-perspective, especially in audit reports; and she calls attention to potential problems associated with using this approach rather than using a reader-perspective approach (pp.486-87). Further, Northey finds that partners and upper managers do more specialized-writing such as memos, letters to clients, and reports or notes to financial statements than lower level accountants do.

Finally, Murray (1988) conducted one of the earliest studies of the use of e-mail systems at IBM in the early days of e-mail technology and how it affected a given message. She found that e-mail complicates the orality--literacy continuum debate in which oral approaches to communication seem to differ dramatically from purely written forms of communication. Rather, there are various styles ranging from

informal to formal that exist within each kind of medium (p. 368-369). More recent studies re-enforce the currency of these skills (see, for example, Riley & Simons, 2013).

So, there is considerable grounding in the emphasis on traditional writing skills as accepted business writing course content and pedagogy. However, a growing body of scholarship connected to workplace writing and multimodal rhetoric has emerged in the past ten years. This includes recent editions of publications such as *Technical Communication Quarterly* (2012) that featured articles on multimodality in professional contexts and business communication conferences using multimodality in their theme such as “Advertising for all your Senses – Multimodal Communication Strategies” for the European Cultures of Business and Corporate Communication conference of 2013. Campagna and Boggio (2009) authored a book titled *Multimodal Business and Economics*, in which they detail recent developments in the use of multiple modes of representation within business communication.

Because these theories are closely associated with rhetoric and composition or communication studies, business communication courses housed in English/writing or communication studies will, similarly, emphasize these types of pedagogy and content. That is, it is not uncommon to find assignments in a business writing course housed in a department of English, for example, that encourage students to develop a Website for a business or organization or a promotional video for a company or organization. Such assignments may be included in any business communication course, even an introductory course, because they include basic forms of business communication. Multimodal rhetoric may be included in freshman or sophomore level composition courses; so, including it in a business writing course is natural.

### **Narrative about Specific Experience**

In my own experience, the discourse divide was the biggest difference between the college of business’ perspective and the department of English’s perspective. Both units recognized the value of including problem-based learning activities and case approach to assignments.

The College of Business Administration at my institution is accredited by AACSB for both business and accounting. Around the year 2000, the College of Business Administration teamed with the Department of English to develop a business writing course that would be required of all business majors in a new business curriculum. The three credit hour course included the standard topics of style, formal elements, correspondence, reports and analytical research. The course also included at least one oral presentation. However, over the years and as digital communication was evolving, multimodal rhetoric was being encouraged. Also, tech-savvy faculty and teaching fellows taught more sections, and some instructors allowed students to develop multimodal projects as their final project. Further, final reports began exceeding 10 double spaced pages, and some instructors who were less familiar with business writing pedagogy were including writing-in-the-discipline essays as assignments. These posed a few concerns for the College of Business Administration. Different students were receiving different instruction and practice depending on their instructor, and those students whose teachers were including essays were not receiving what is generally considered appropriate instruction and practice for a business writing course. The College of Business Administration also felt that multimodal projects detracted from development of traditional business writing skills.

Over the course of about 5 years, the College of Business Administration approached the Department of English to make the content and pedagogy more consistent across sections and eliminate multimodal projects. They wanted to emphasize traditional forms of business writing—focusing on print-linguistic

forms of composing. However, this did not occur to their satisfaction. They became more aggressive in their effort to change the course. They wanted to emphasize basic writing skills, short reports, and use practical situations as scenarios, citing a survey of their business advisory council within a recent AACSB review. Eventually, in the summer and fall of 2013, a two-credit hour course, still housed in the Department of English, was developed that focused on traditional forms of business writing. A second, one credit hour course that focused on presentation skills was also developed, but it is housed in the College of Business Administration.

The two courses are co-requisites, because they develop communication skills. To re-enforce their connection and co-requisite status two assignments are linked between them. One is job application materials including a resume, elevator pitch (presentation course) and an application letter/message (writing course). The other is a team report that involves addressing a scenario through research and developing recommendations. A 5-6 page report is required in the writing course, and student groups present their findings and recommendations as a group in the presentation course.

This course, designed with considerable input from the College of Business Administration, emphasizes traditional forms of business writing and limits coverage of multimodal rhetoric to tables, charts and diagrams commonly found in business reports. It also excludes oral presentations, since that is the focus of the co-required course. Further, a course coordinator position was developed for the writing course, and this person also acts as a liaison between the Department of English and the College of Business Administration.

### **Divided Pedagogies**

As suggested in the preceding section, the product of such differences in discourses tends to be experienced by students in terms of the pedagogy more than in content. A pedagogy that includes instruction in theory will include more lecture than one that emphasizes practice and application. While there is discussion in writing courses housed in a department of English or Writing, there will be more lecture regarding theory than found in a course housed in a college of business.

Writing assignments may differ, too, in terms of length. In departments of English, for example, faculty are used to assigning long research reports, 8-12 pages double-spaced, as well as short reflective pieces to encourage students to think about points of rhetoric. This is what is expected in academic forms of writing. However, a college of business may encourage shorter reports, not longer than roughly 3 or 4 pages in a business format, more common in workplace settings. Such assignments may occur in a course housed in a department of English, but a course project is likely expected to be longer. There is also less writing related to reflection on aspects of application of rhetoric. Most writing assignments will revolve around persuasive communication or analytical reports.

### **Differences and Literacy Sponsorship**

As I have noted in the previous sections, there may be several differences in content and pedagogy relative to where a business writing course is positioned institutionally, and these differences may be attributed to discourse differences across the particular disciplines involved. It is important to note why these differences exist beyond discourse issues. That is, why do the discourse differences exist in the first place? Deb Brandt (2001) observes that such issues are impacted by what she calls "sponsors of literacy." Brandt defines sponsors of literacy as, "[a]ny agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who

enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress or withhold literacy-- and gain advantage by it in some way” (p. 19).

Brandt explains that “sponsors are delivery systems for the economies of literacy” because of their relationship to business and industry, and by extension, general economics (p.19). Literacy, in this respect, is a form of capital that sponsors use to compete and gain economic and/or political advantage. As one develops particular literacy skills associated with a given communication practices and related literacy, he or she becomes useful to the agent that facilitated that learning. Both the agent and the individual receive a benefit (p. 19).

In her study, whether through church functions, home practices, school or the workplace, people tended to engage in certain literacy practices as part of their participation in these institutions. Brandt notes that these institutions benefitted from certain practices and, consequently, encouraged and facilitated learning of those practices while discouraging or restricting other practices. Multiple sponsors of literacy can affect a single institution. Just as a company must respond to the economic pressures around it, these responses may affect what literacies it values and how it sponsors them. Brandt finds that technology changes affect literacy dynamics as well. With new communication technologies comes the need for new literacy skills, but literacy instruction does not change as quickly as technology changes.

One needs to look only to agencies or entities to which the different departments or schools report and related disciplinary scholarly values to ascertain the different sponsorship dynamics. Figure 1 shows a comparison of the entities to which each reports and the values of those entities.

<b>English</b>	<b>Business</b>
Students/stakeholders	AACSB accrediting agency
Department/College administration	Advisory Councils; many comprised of practitioners
<b>Values:</b> Embrace multimodality/ scholarship in writing studies/ new literacy	<b>Values:</b> Practical applications: emphasis on “traditional writing” skills

Figure 1. Sponsors of Business Writing Literacy Relative to Unit in which Course is Housed

A department of English is concerned with how students taking its courses perceive the courses, and it reports to a dean of the college in which it is housed—generally Arts and Sciences or Humanities. As mentioned above, these encourage a more liberal definition of “writing,” and multimodal rhetoric can be easily included. Some students enjoy being able to develop Websites or video products in a business writing course, because they see those as activities they may perform professionally. At least one of my students, for example, developed her own digital resume development business based on her project for the existing business writing course.

A college of business is concerned mostly with AACSB accreditation, which includes feedback from business practitioners. A school or college of business may have several advisory councils that include practitioners. Because both of these entities emphasize practical applications and proficiency with basic writing skills, defined in a traditional sense and limited to print-linguistic/print forms of writing, they

favor a more limited content and pedagogy. AACSB and advisory councils act as sponsors of literacy within a college of business setting. This sponsorship forces pedagogy to emphasize what those bodies perceive to be valuable skills. When members of an advisory council, for example, convey concern about basic spelling and grammar and use of tact in a message, they are encouraging instruction and learning to focus on basic writing skills.

Between social media, Web-based business operations and mobile technologies more communication is occurring digitally. However, only recently are colleges of business moving to accept that within business writing courses.

### **Implications for Inter-departmental Administration**

These discourse differences can result in tensions between departments if the business writing course is housed in a department of English. Consequently, it is advisable to create a liaison position to act as a mediator and to negotiate pedagogies that each values as business writing courses are being developed or revised. Such a position should include one with a Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition or professional writing and who has experience teaching business writing. It could also be helpful if this person also has business experience.

Such a liaison should have knowledge of AACSB guidelines so as to help members of a department of English understand a college of business' sponsor and why certain content is emphasized over other possible content. Such knowledge will enable the liaison to explain to those in a department of English why a college of business wants to emphasize particular content. The liaison position becomes very important when concerns arise from discourse differences and sponsorship issues. Because the liaison has expertise with both rhetoric and composition and a strong familiarity with business practices, he or she can mediate and encourage compromise or help each side recognize how to implement something it perceives to be a best practice or valid content.

Another role could be to facilitate assessment of learning to help with the college of business's AACSB assessment effort. Within assessment of the course itself, data can be shared across academic units to facilitate accreditation review. Further, a writing program administrator needs to listen to the liaison; because what happens with the business writing course can affect other writing courses, especially professional writing courses. For example, it may encourage discipline-specific WIP programming (e.g.: journalism, hospitality management).

Depending on the nature of faculty who teach the course(s), a course coordinator/liaison may develop a mentoring program to facilitate training of those new to business writing pedagogy and to assure consistency across sections. Mentorship can include a workshop session and regular meetings to discuss issues instructors face. Such a program can also include discussion of readings about trends in business writing pedagogy. I developed such a program and implemented it in fall of 2014.

### **Implications for Graduate Programming**

Because colleges of business are recruiting applicants with a PhD in rhetoric and composition for teaching positions, graduate programs need to help students prepare for this work. Consequently, programs should include review of AACSB materials in job search workshops. Too often, graduate programs in rhetoric and composition or professional writing that are part of a departments of English or Writing focus job search workshops on the department of English or Writing job market. Workshops

should also encourage students who are about to enter the job market to become familiar with AACSB guidelines so students know how to position themselves within AACSB faculty qualification terminology. Applicants can use that terminology in application letters and interviews to explain how they may fit with a prospective employer.

Graduate programs also need to prepare applicants for a traditional-writing emphasis and how to negotiate discourses. One who is hired may be expected to act as expert/administrator. The more one knows about the environment, the better prepared he or she can be to excel in it. Writing programs that have rhetoric and composition or writing graduate programs may already include a teaching fellow as an assistant coordinator. Such programs may also ascertain whether a graduate student can act as an assistant liaison if their institution houses a business writing course outside of the college of business.

Finally, courses pertaining to workplace literacy or workplace writing and business writing should include readings from journals valued in the business disciplines, not just those valued in rhetoric and composition. An awareness of what various disciplines report about writing skills will assist in developing informed graduates who are able to negotiate discourse differences.

### **Conclusion**

While colleges of business attempt to influence content and pedagogies related to business writing and business communication, if the courses are housed in a department of English or Writing, it is important not to disregard why a college of business wants certain content instead of others. An informed liaison, who may also act as a course coordinator, can facilitate discussions to minimize tensions arising because of discourse differences related to literacy sponsors and disciplinary scholarship. Such a person can also help to develop multiple courses to facilitate advanced coursework in business communication. Alternatively, he or she can help faculty who teach upper division courses in business integrate writing assignments more effectively to encourage further development of writing skills.

Understanding why a college of business wants certain content instead of arguing content with it is more productive for all involved. Mediation by a liaison can help foster healthy connections between academic units, contributing to more productive experiences for students and enhancing accreditation. Informed discussions and compromise can help the college of business maintain AACSB accreditation while also using what business disciplines and rhetoric and composition scholarship recognizes as best practices.

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**Dirk Remley** teaches business writing and technical writing courses in the Department of English at Kent State University, where he earned his PhD in Rhetoric and Composition. Dr. Remley coordinates the Writing in Business course. Dr. Remley has authored articles that have appeared in various journals and chapters that have appeared in various edited collections. He also has presented at several national conferences.