

Models for Delivering Written Business Communication Skills: Improving the Process

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ABSTRACT

Employers, higher education faculty, and accrediting bodies value communication as an important entry-level job skill. Unfortunately, research indicates that college graduates have inadequate communication skills and, in particular, lack strong business writing acumen. The ways business communication is taught, integrated, and assessed varies by business education programs. Some programs offer standalone business communication classes; others use a more integrated approach such as a centralized model in which a Communication Center assists students with writing assignments across business courses. Whether taught as standalone classes or integrated across the curriculum, assessment of writing assists in determining whether the delivery method is effective. This paper reviews two methods of delivery within a business college and compares the assessment of students' business writing skills in standalone classes with the assessment of students' business writing skills where instruction is integrated into other coursework and supplemented with a Professional Writing Center located in the college. A new model is proposed to build student intentions for enhanced professional communication display through fostering expectations.

Keywords: business written communication, assessment of learning, assurance of learning, undergraduate curriculum

“Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many” (NCW, 2003).

Business graduates entering the workforce today are expected to have professional skills, which include effective writing, speaking, and listening. Employers, higher education faculty, and accrediting bodies value communication as an important entry-level job skill (AACSB, 2013; Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Everson, 2014; Hansen & Hansen, 2013; NACE, 2015). In fact, both faculty and employers view communication as the top skill needed in new business graduate hires (NACE, 2015).

Despite its importance, research indicates that college graduates have inadequate communication skills and, in particular, lack strong business writing acumen. In one study, 78 percent of employers surveyed ranked business writing skills as one of the top attributes desired in new business hires; yet employers see this as a skill lacking in today’s graduates (Ghannadian, 2013). Dillon (2004) estimated that approximately \$3.1 billion is spent annually to train employees in professional business writing; of that amount \$2.9 billion is dedicated to remedial training.

Paradoxically, while written communication skills of graduates entering the workforce are judged inadequate, these skills at the same time have become “the ‘gatekeeper’ for individuals desiring to achieve higher level salaried positions” (NCW, 2004, in Conrad & Newberry, 2011, p. 6). Weak editing skills have been identified as career roadblocks in popular press, such as *Forbes* (Conner, 2013), *Huffington Post* (2015), *The Wall Street Journal* (Shellenbarger, 2012), and *Time* (Simonds, 2013). These articles are based on a LinkedIn study by Grammarly (2013). This research focused on 100 LinkedIn profiles of native English-speakers who were employed in the consumer packaged goods industry. The professionals reviewed had worked for a minimum of three employers in their first 10 years of their career. Of the total, half were at the director level or above and the other half were not. Research findings indicate that:

- **Professionals with fewer grammar errors in their profiles achieved higher positions.** Those who failed to progress to a director-level position within the first 10 years of their careers made 2.5 times as many grammar mistakes as their director-level colleagues.
- **Fewer grammar errors correlate with more promotions.** Professionals with one to four promotions over their 10-year careers made 45 percent more grammar errors than those with six to nine promotions in the same time frame.
- **Fewer grammar errors associate with frequent job changes.** Those who remained at the same company for more than 10 years made 20 percent more grammar mistakes than those who held six jobs during the same period. (Van Nest, 2015, p 1)

Grammarly CEO Brad Hoover (2013) asserts that effective writing skills indicate credibility, professionalism, and accuracy in work, as well as indicate stronger analysis skills (www.grammarly.com). It is important for business communication faculty to implement a model for teaching communication fundamentals that will assure our students are meeting or exceeding communication expectations during their college years and throughout their careers.

DELIVERY METHODS

The way in which business communication is taught, integrated, and assessed vary by business program. Some offer standalone business communication classes (in-person, online, and hybrid); others use a more integrated approach such as a centralized model in which a Business/Professional Communication Center assists students with writing assignments across business courses. Whether taught as standalone classes or integrated across the curriculum, assessment of writing assists in determining whether the delivery method is effective. This paper reviews two methods of delivery (in-person standalone and in-person integrated module delivery) within a business college and compares the assessment of students' business writing skills in standalone classes with the assessment of students' business writing skills where instruction was integrated into other coursework and supplemented with a Professional Communication Center located in the college.

Standalone Business Communication Courses

The typical standalone business communication course develops written and verbal communication skills, as well as interpersonal, cross-cultural, and employment communication skills (Moshiri & Cardon 2014). The written skills focus on establishing credibility, understanding your purpose, understanding your audience, and writing a clear, concise, compelling, complete, clean message (in the best format for your intended audience – written or verbal). Students receive instruction and complete assignments to gain understanding and to demonstrate the ability to effectively communicate their message.

According to Moshiri & Cardon (2014), business communication instructors' deliver standalone courses as traditional, in-person (60.7%), as traditional, in-person and hybrid (36.3%), and as online (3.0%). The number and timing of business communication courses vary by business college. According to a 2013 review of the Top 50 Undergraduate Business Schools, 42 of the top schools offered business communication courses. Of those courses, approximately 27 percent were targeted at the freshman/sophomore level and 73 percent were targeted at the junior/senior level (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013).

Communication Modules Integrated into the Curriculum

An alternate approach to a standalone course delivered at a fixed stage in the curriculum sequence is to allocate key communication elements into learning modules that are integrated into various core courses and taught by a faculty member from a Business/Professional Communication Center within the college. The modules are designed to address a specific communication outcome as well as one-on-one team meetings for guidance and coaching with a just-in-time delivery approach. The goal is to incorporate writing and presenting throughout the students' time in a College of Business. The combination of communication modules and individual student/student team meetings is thought to provide students with a clearer connection between the topic and its application.

ASSESSMENT & COMPARISON OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Regardless of delivery method, assessment of written communication skills must be conducted to assure student learning. To assess writing skills, a standardized writing rubric that evaluated the students' writing in five areas was used. The five areas were: focus & meaning, content & development, organization, language use, voice & style, and mechanics & conventions. The rubric describes expectations for each area necessary to determine whether each student exceeds expectations, meets expectations, or scores below expectations (full rubric is provided in Appendix A: Writing Rubric). The minimum each student needed to score in a criterion to be classified as meeting expectations was 80 percent. Combined, the desired outcome was that 85 percent of students would meet or exceed expectations in each category of the writing rubric to effectively demonstrate written communication competencies.

Freshman Samples

Assessment of learning for two samples of first year (freshmen) students were compared. Sample 1 included first-year students enrolled in a standalone Business Communication course. This course was a four-credit hour freshman level course that introduced basic business communication principles and practices and set the communication standards in preparation for real-world workplace experiences. The course used business related cases for research, writing, and speaking activities. Some attention was also given to internship preparation, specifically cover letter and resume writing. The sample included 77 students – 24 freshmen, 46 sophomores, 5 juniors, and 2 seniors. The artifact used to assess learning was a self-assessment memo written as a reflection and application of a class activity. Specifically, after a communication style training session, each student was asked to write three paragraphs that individually summarized what s/he learned about his/her communication style, critically evaluate the theory, and discussion hypothetical applications of the theory.

Sample 2 included first-year students enrolled in a three-credit hour introduction to business course, which included a general introduction to business, its environment, and the skills needed for success. The sample included 157 students – 92 freshmen, 47 sophomores, 21 juniors, and 9 seniors. Unlike students enrolled in the standalone course, these students participated in modules that were integrated into a functional knowledge course they took either prior to or at the same time as this course. However, like the standalone course, students were provided instruction in The Basic of Business Writing, The Basics of Business Presentations, and Writing Cover Letters and Resumes. The artifact used to assess learning from the module delivery was reflection memo. Both samples were taught by the same instructor and were assessed by the same assessor.

For both samples, the same assessment instrument was used to assess the writing of this group of students and is available for review in Appendix A. The minimum each student needed to score in a criterion to be classified as meeting expectations was 80 percent. The same desired outcome (i.e., 85% of students would meet or exceed expectations in each criterion) was used by the assessor. Table 1 provides the assurance of learning assessment results for each sample.

Table 1: Assessment Results at the Freshman Level

	Meets or Exceeds Expectations	
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Criteria	<i>Sample 1: Standalone Course</i>	<i>Sample 2: Integrated Delivery</i>	1 vs 2: Difference
Focus & Meaning	89%	94%	-5%
Content & Development	83%	87%	-4%
Organization	89%	76%	+13%
Language Use, Voice & Style	83%	83%	0%
Mechanics & Conventions	72%	76%	-4%

For the freshman-level standalone course, the results achieved the desired outcome for two of the five criteria: Focus & Meaning and Organization. For the integrated delivery, the results achieved the desired outcome for two of the five criteria: Focus & Meaning and Content & Development. Comparing the two samples, students enrolled in the standalone course did significantly better than students taught using modules as part of the integrated delivery for Organization ($z = 2.50, p < 0.05$). Differences between the samples for the other four criteria were not significantly different, $p > 0.05$. It is important to note that students did not meet expectations for language use, voice, style, mechanics, and conventions in either delivery mode.

Senior Samples

Assurance of learning results for two samples of fourth years (seniors) were also compared. For both samples, students did not receive any Business Communication instruction as part of the course in which the assessment took place. The students in Sample 1 had taken the business standalone course during their first (freshmen) year. Comparatively, students in Sample 2 were students exposed to Business Communication as learning modules integrated into discipline-based courses during their first and second years.

Sample 1 included 106 students – all senior business majors. Sample 2 included 108 students – all senior business majors. For both samples, the artifact used for the analysis was an industry analysis formal report. Each student analyzed 3-4 companies in a specified industry using various performance ratios and produced a written analysis with a 10-page maximum page limit. Both samples were taught by the same instructor and were assessed by the same assessor.

For both samples, the same assessment instrument was used to assess the writing of this group of students and is available for review in Appendix A. The minimum each student needed to score in a criterion to be classified as meeting expectations was 80 percent. The same desired outcome (i.e., 85% of students would meet or exceed expectations in each criterion) was used by the assessor. Table 2 provides the assurance of learning assessment results for each sample.

Table 2: Assessment Results at the Senior Level

Criteria	Meets or Exceeds Expectations		1 vs 2: Difference
	Sample 1	Sample 2	
Focus & Meaning	92%	81%	+11%
Content & Development	92%	86%	+6%
Organization	83%	67%	+16%
Language Use, Voice & Style	99%	85%	+14%
Mechanics & Conventions	50%	41%	+9%

For Sample 1, the results indicate that the desired outcome was reached for three of the five criteria: Focus & Meaning, Content & Development, and Organization. For Sample 2, the results achieved the desired outcome for two of the five criteria: Content & Development and Language Use, Voice, & Style. Comparing the two samples, students in Sample 1 did significantly better than students in Sample 2 for Focus & Meaning ($z = 2.54, p < 0.05$), Organization ($z = 2.75, p < 0.05$), and Language Use, Voice, & Style ($z = 3.75, p < 0.05$). There were no significant differences in Content & Development or Mechanics & Conventions, $p > 0.05$. Unfortunately, students did not meet expectations for Organization, or Mechanics & Conventions in either sample.

DISCUSSION

Examined in the aggregate, the results suggest three preliminary insights about teaching and learning business communication skills. First, at the beginning of a business program (first year), neither standalone business communication courses or learning modules integrated in discipline-based business courses successfully achieved desired learning outcomes. Although students exposed to business communications through a standalone demonstrated better organization skills than students exposed to business communication as part of a discipline-based course, first year students in both samples did not meet expectations for two of the five criteria: Language Use, Voice, & Style and Mechanics & Conventions.

Second, students did not consistently improve between the first and fourth year of the curriculum in either delivery method. Comparing assessments results between the first and fourth year for the sample who took the standalone course, there were no significant differences for three of the five criteria: Focus & Meaning (+3%), Content & Development (+9%), and Organization (-6%), $p > 0.05$. By contrast, Language Use, Voice, & Style improved 16% ($z = 4.01, p < 0.05$) while Mechanics & Conventions decreased 22% ($z = -2.91, p < 0.05$). Comparing assessments results between the first and fourth year for students who did not take the standalone course, there were no significant differences for three of the five criteria: Content & Development (-1%), Organization (-9%), and Language Use, Voice, & Style (+2%), $p > 0.05$. By contrast, Focus & Meaning decreased 13% ($z = -3.46, p < 0.05$) mechanics & conventions decreased 35% ($z = -5.76, p < 0.05$).

Third, and most importantly, neither of the models achieved the desired outcome of 85 percent of students meeting or exceeding expectations in mechanics & conventions across any of the samples. The results lead to the question of why students do not seem to demonstrate the ability

to use mechanics & conventions effectively. What is the missing element to connect the teaching of the skills to the demonstration of the skills on an ongoing basis?

Arguably, one plausible explanation for the consistently low assessment results is that business communications require students to be continuously exposed to and held accountable to a level of expectations. Unlike the other criteria for writing, one could argue that Mechanics & Conventions – as the “rules of writing” – are generally discipline-free and require both training and practice. Perhaps considered the boring parts of learning to write effectively, Mechanics & Conventions are the basic foundations of effective communications. As such, faculty must set and adhere to expectations for student writing assignments. These expectations are based on student accountability and exposure to the principles of effective writing as depicted in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Proposed Model

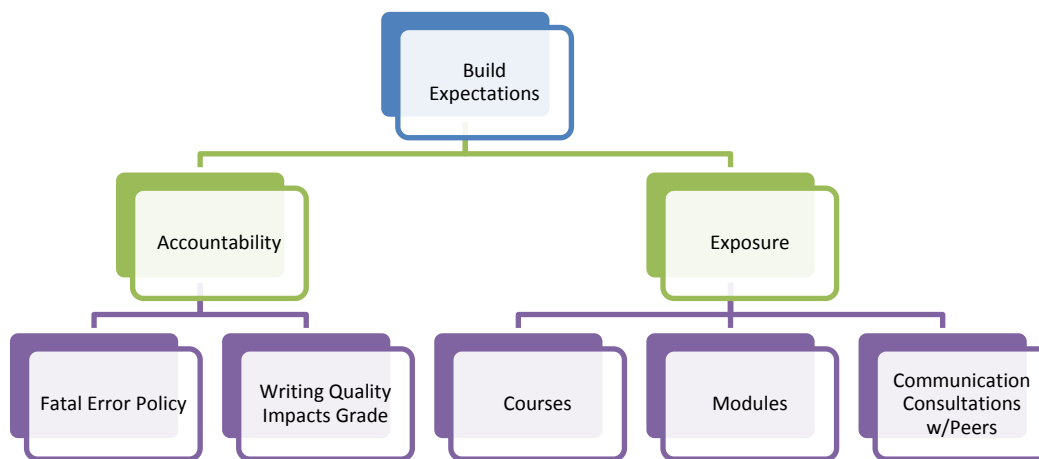


Figure 2 provides a proposed model for building expectations based upon two distinct teaching activities: exposure and accountability. In terms of exposure, students should be systematically and deliberately exposed to writing standards as part of the learning process. Examples include standalone courses, modules integrated into other types of courses, and writing reviews with peers. Exposure is important to both provide opportunities for learning and to remind students about writing standards. In terms of accountability, students should be held accountable for their ability to adhere to writing standards as a component of the grading process.

One example is implementing a fatal error policy, which may include identifying a maximum threshold for certain writing errors (e.g., misspellings, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, use of paragraphs, capitalizations, etc.) and either failing student work or returning student work for revision if the maximum threshold is exceeded. Another example is accounting for writing quality as a substantial percentage of the evaluation of the assignment. Arguably, the percentage should be high enough to motivate students to adhere to writing standards. For both examples, accountability involves evaluations of student work framed as either a punishment or a reward. Combined, exposure and accountability may function concurrently to improve writing quality. Future research should explore this model in more detail and conduct assessments to determine if its implementation changes the assessment outcomes.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any study, there are some limitations that should be carefully considered. First, samples were limited to a single business program at the same university. Future research should compare students across university settings and programs. Second, although the sample elements in the first and fourth year samples overlapped significantly, the first and fourth year samples were not matched pairwise. Future research should track students longitudinally to assess learning across an entire program. Third, only direct assessments of writing were evaluated. Future research should explore students' self-reports of learning including confidence in abilities, perceived skill development, and attitudes toward writing.

CONCLUSION

Using student samples, this study compared assessments of students' business writing skills from two distinct instructional methods: using a standalone business communications course and using modules integrated into other coursework. The results of the comparisons are mixed; neither methods of delivery produced the desired levels of achievement during the beginning of the program (i.e., first year) or at the end of the program (i.e., fourth year). In addition, students did not consistently improve between the first and fourth year of the curriculum in either delivery method. As such, future research should explore other mechanisms – such as accountability – in conjunction with methods of knowledge delivery. At a time when our graduates' careers are so dependent on professional communication abilities, implementing a winning model of business communication instruction is most critical. Finding that model is imperative.

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Appendix A: Assessment Instrument

Writing Rubric

	Focus & Meaning	Content & Development	Organization	Language Use, Voice & Style	Mechanics & Conventions
Exceeds Expectations	Very Effective Establishes and maintains an insightful controlling idea or bottom line; demonstrates a thorough understanding of the purpose; clearly adapts the message to the audience; completes all parts of the task.	Very Effective Develops ideas fully and memorably, using appropriate concepts and terms from the course.	Very Effective Demonstrates a cohesive and unified structure with effective use of paragraphing or grouping of information, logical connections and transitional devices throughout.	Very Effective Demonstrates precise, professional language and word choice; a defined voice; and a clear sense of audience; uses well-structured and varied sentences.	Very Effective Few or no errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation and spelling.
Meets Expectations	Good Establishes and maintains a clear controlling idea or bottom line and demonstrates a general understanding of the purpose; adapts the message to the audience; completes most parts of the task.	Good Develops ideas clearly, using concepts and terms from the course.	Good Demonstrates a mostly unified structure; consistent use of paragraphing, logical connections and transitional devices.	Good Demonstrates appropriate professional language and word choice, with some evidence of voice and a clear sense of audience; uses well-structured and varied sentences.	Good Few errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation and spelling that do not interfere with the message.
	Adequate Establishes a controlling idea or bottom line and demonstrates a basic understanding of the purpose; usually adapts the message to the audience; completes many parts of the task.	Adequate Develops ideas adequately, using some concepts and terms from the course.	Adequate Demonstrates a generally unified structure; inconsistent use of paragraphing or grouping of information, logical connections and transitional devices.	Adequate Demonstrates appropriate professional language and word choice, with an awareness of audience and control of voice; generally uses correct sentence structure with some variety.	Adequate Some errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation and spelling that do not significantly interfere with the communication of the message.
	Limited Establishes a controlling idea or bottom line but demonstrates little understanding of the purpose; demonstrates self-absorption with little adaptation to audience; completes some parts of the task.	Limited Develops ideas briefly and inconsistently, using limited concepts and terms from the course.	Limited Demonstrates evidence of structure; lacks paragraphing or grouping of information, logical connections and transitional devices.	Limited Demonstrates less professional language and word choice, some awareness of audience and control of voice; relies on simple sentences with insufficient sentence variety and word choice.	Limited Several noticeable errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation and spelling that may interfere with the communication of the message and undermine the authority of the writer.
Below Expectations	Minimal Suggests a controlling idea or bottom line but demonstrates minimal understanding of the purpose; demonstrates more self-absorption than adaptation to audience; completes few parts of the task.	Minimal Develops ideas incompletely and inadequately, using few concepts and terms from the course.	Minimal Demonstrates little evidence of structure; little evidence of paragraphing or grouping of information, logical connections and transitional devices.	Minimal Demonstrates unprofessional language and word choice, with little awareness of audience; makes basic errors in sentence structure and usage.	Minimal Patterns of errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation and spelling that substantially interfere with the communication of the message and undermine the authority of the writer.
	Inadequate Fails to establish a controlling idea or bottom line and demonstrates no understanding of purpose; demonstrates no adaptation to audience; completes no parts of the task.	Inadequate Fails to develop ideas, using no concepts or terms from the course.	Inadequate Demonstrates no evidence of structure; no evidence of paragraphing or grouping of information, logical connections and transitional devices.	Inadequate Demonstrates impersonal or unclear and incoherent language and word choice; no awareness of audience, and major errors in sentence structure and usage.	Inadequate Errors so severe in grammar, mechanics, punctuation and spelling that they significantly interfere with the communication of the message and undermine the authority of the writer.