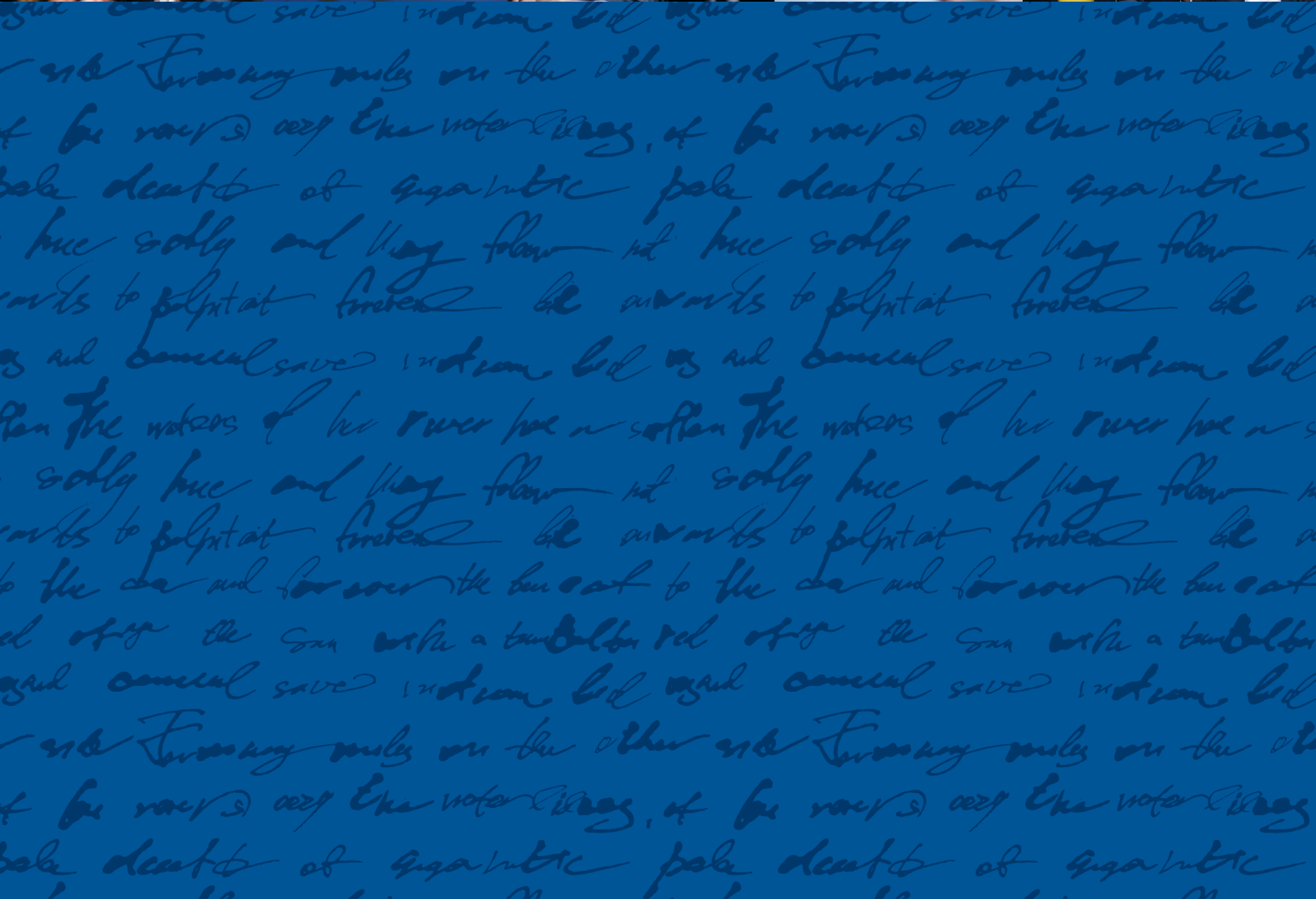




A Developmental Learning Framework for Business Report Writing

Guidance for Management Educators

by Austin Chia and Heather Round





FACULTY OF
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For over a decade, Austin Chia has straddled the domains of academia and industry practice. As a practitioner, Austin has previously worked for a number of global top-tier professional services firms and has worked with public and private sector clients across broad industry sectors which include defence, FMCG, financial services, mining and healthcare. He has been engaged on various local and international projects – predominantly in business transformation, performance improvement, lean six sigma and organisational development – and has also held senior positions in leadership and advisory capacities with multinational and local organisations. More recently, Austin has dedicated his time to pursuing his interests in management education but continues take on various training and consulting engagements as well as serving as a board director for a number of non-for-profit organisations.



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About this Resource

This resource has been developed for educators of business students. The purpose of this resource is to assist educators in creating the opportunity for students to practice and develop their business report writing skills. It aims to do this in a collegial atmosphere which promotes social learning and allows for developmental feedback. It is argued that this most emulates the business setting and is most conducive to skills development.

How to Use This Resource

This resource has been divided primarily into four separate sections which each have a specific purpose. Section 1 builds the argument for investing time in developing graduate report writing skills. This section is therefore useful for educators who need to justify an investment in modifying teaching curriculum in order to achieve better report writing outcomes from students. Section 2 provides educators with content which can be packaged and provided to students in order to supply them with insight into the mechanics of good business report writing. Section 3 gives educators clear guidelines for setting up a supportive, collegial environment which emulates a business environment and facilitates the social development of skills in report writing. Section 4 provides a high-level view of the various phases of the writing process and introduces specific techniques that may be useful in helping students to develop their skills.

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Section Overview

Section 1 situates this teaching resource in the broader context of graduate skills and the alignment of management courses to industry requirements. A review of past industry reports spanning over 10 years reveals that deficiencies in business writing skills of graduate recruits has been repeatedly reported as falling short of employer expectations. We outline some external trends in response to this by employers, accreditation agencies in higher education and international business schools, which all appear to reflect a common consensus that there is a need for change and for business educators to rethink and innovate the way in which we teach business writing.

As management educators, we know anecdotally and from empirical evidence that the ability to communicate effectively is instrumental to the career success of our students. Yet the task of imparting these skills proves challenging due to a range of factors and the absence of a clear framework for teaching effective business writing. We seek to bridge this important gap by presenting a support framework as a guide for teaching business report writing.



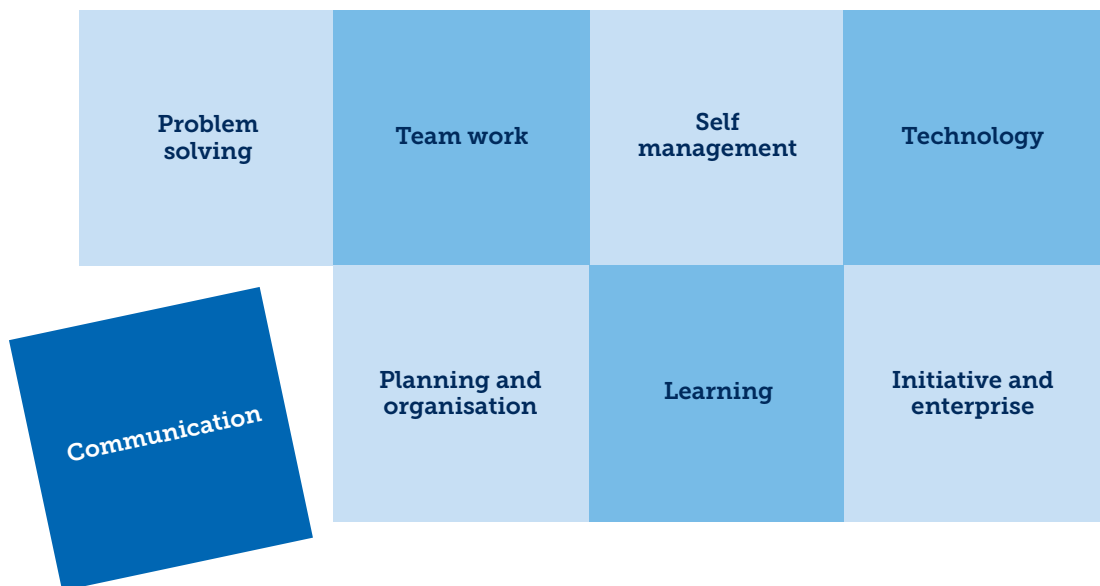
Section 1: Introduction

Business Writing Skills: A Case of Curricula Neglect?

In recent years there has been increasing pressure placed on universities by government, employers and professional bodies to offer courses that not only enable students to gain technical mastery within their chosen fields but to ensure that students graduate with a range of generic work-based skills and attributes. The impetus for educators to be more responsive and adaptive to the realities of modern workplaces and changing needs of employers was prominently highlighted in an early report commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST, 2002) led by the Business Council of Australia (BCA) and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), which identified eight employability skills for the future:

Subsequent industry reviews have affirmed the ongoing relevance of these skills as critical graduate entry-level skills for gaining employment as well as being instrumental in an individual's ability to contribute to an organization's growth and success (Precision Consultancy, 2007). However, while employers are generally satisfied with the discipline-specific skills of graduates, various studies indicate that there are still questions being asked about the ability of universities to adequately prepare graduates to meet the demands of the business environment (Hills, Robertson, Walker, Adey & Nixon 2003, Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). There is much evidence to show that strong literacy skills are crucial to graduates' employability, their ability to thrive and their progress in the workplace (KPMG & National Literacy Trust, 2012) focal area of concern is the observed deficiencies in business writing skills of graduate recruits

Figure 1: Employability skills for the future





The over-arching thing we're looking for in graduates is their ability to think, to problem solve and to be able to look at complex problems and have a structured way of attacking them to reach solutions. So that includes the ability to think laterally, to be able to express their opinion and perspective, to be able to capture that in a written form, to be able to propose solutions and really have a rounded skill in applying their knowledge to complex problems.

– Duncan Brown, Director of Services,
Dimension Data



that have been repeatedly reported as falling short of employer expectations. Employer dissatisfaction stems from issues which include lack of attention to detail, poor grammar and punctuation and the inability to adapt academic writing to a more reader-friendly and succinct business style (Hodges & Burchell, 2003). Despite a broad agreement among educators and practitioners that business communication is linked to effective management and positive organisational outcome, solid communication skills remains a concerning skill deficiency in graduates (Whetten, 2011), in particular the ability to produce business reports.

In the face of growing demands for universities to be more accountable and a broader ideological shift in terms of how these institutions should be contributing to the economic needs of industry, it is imperative that learning institutions reassess the skills being taught to graduates. This context frames an opportunity for business educators to reappraise the way business report writing is taught to students, and what is taught. As such, the relevance and importance of developing a practitioner-oriented approach proposed in this report is supported by three emerging trends:

1. The Quality Agenda in Higher Education: Despite the absence of a unified approach to measuring and evaluating graduate skills and attributes, national and international accreditation agencies have moved swiftly to formally incorporate generic learning outcomes

and non-discipline-specific skills in their curriculum frameworks. The following key accrediting agencies in business education have highlighted that effective writing skills features as a common focal category:

- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)
- Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)
- Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)
- Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB)
- European Foundation for Management Development (EFMD)

2. Increasing Graduate Unemployment:

Graduate students today are facing one of the most challenging job markets that the country has seen for over two decades (Graduate Careers Australia, 2013a), a period that some have coined as the period of graduate unemployment depression. The tight graduate labour market alongside the evolving skill needs of employers underscores an imperative for educators to equip students with the most current industry-relevant skills to ensure graduates have the best chances of securing a degree-related role.

Although improved business writing skills doesn't in itself guarantee the employability of graduates, we do know from industry studies that written communication skills ranks as the most desired skill in graduates, and are taken into consideration in hiring decisions (Graduate Careers Australia, 2013b; The Conference Board, 2004). Further, studies have found that the career consequences (e.g. adaptive capabilities, promotion, etc.) of poor writing skills can extend for many years after a student graduates from university (Castleton, 2002).

3. Top Business Schools Are Heeding the Call:

In recent years a handful of top business schools such as Wharton, Kenan-Flagler, Columbia, Owen and Stanford have taken steps to improve the writing skills of their graduate and undergraduate students (Meglio, 2013; Middleton, 2011). Some of these



measures have included introducing core coursework subjects on business writing, mandatory participation in writing competitions and employing professional writing coaches to work with students. As effective writing skills become a central focus of business schools across North America, there is growing recognition of the need for Australian business schools and management curriculums to be more adaptive to keep pace with these trends.

Business Expectations: How Do We Raise the Bar?

Although there has been perennial concern and dissatisfaction expressed by employers regarding the writing skills of graduates, the task of management educators to teach business report writing is challenging and complex given that the process of writing business reports is inherently social in nature. In an ethnographic study on writing in the workplace, Beaufort (2000) provided an insightful account to show that an employee's interaction and relationship with the workplace environment affects their learning of

writing skills, which she conceptualised as the *social apprenticeship model*.

The social apprenticeship model is logically and intuitively credible and appears to reflect the observed practices in professional workplaces. For instance, at consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton, new business school graduate hires are monitored closely and required to demonstrate proficient business writing skills before they are trusted and permitted to write client proposals on their own (Meglio, 2013). The following excerpt from our interview with Colin Li, a senior analyst at A.T. Kearney Australia, provides some rich, interesting insights into the organisational processes that support and reinforce the development of business writing skills:

"As a graduate entering A.T. Kearney, it was always made clear from the outset that we were not hired for our specific educational or vocational experiences. Instead, hires are targeted for their potential to learn on the job in an apprenticeship model. Young consultants are expected to develop problem solving and business communication skills by working alongside more experienced



consultants, who provide feedback and counsel to junior consultants. When it comes to written business communication skills, junior consultants would typically be asked to write the initial draft of certain pieces of work, which would then be reviewed and iterated by a senior consultant. Once the junior consultant had developed the ability to write standalone slides, they would then progress to attempting to write and storyline entire reports from end to end, which would again be reviewed and iterated by a more senior consultant. By incrementally increasing the complexity of written activities with the close counsel from more experienced consultants, new consultants are able to rapidly develop their business writing skills.”

Colin Li

Senior Analyst, A.T. Kearney Australia

Thus, for management educators, the social and contextual nature of business report writing presents a significant challenge in terms of how these skills may be most effectively taught. There are three key challenges facing educators wishing to address the concerns raised by organisations with regard to the level of business report writing skills.

- 1) Writing Competencies:** The writing competencies of students are influenced by a range of social factors that may be beyond the control of the educator. These factors can broadly be described

as proficiency and confidence in English, and are influenced by the diversity of student backgrounds, as will be discussed next. Mass commercialisation of education has led to a culturally diverse and increasingly international student population. Data shows that Australia attracts large numbers of international students, leading to a high degree of internationalisation (20 per cent) in higher education (Rienties et al., 2012). While the percentage of international students at the different institutions may vary, the trend is that internationalisation of the student population is on the increase.

At the University of Melbourne, 25.4 per cent of all enrolled students were international students in 2012, with projections that the number of international students will rise by 30 per cent by 2020, IEAC, 2013. While students come from a large variety of countries around the world, the majority are from China (20 per cent), India (12 per cent) and South Korea (5 per cent) ABS, 2011. Thus many students are from non-English-speaking backgrounds; for example, one recent poll of postgraduate management students at Melbourne University showed that English was not the home language of 71 per cent of the class members.

Not only do international students from non-English-speaking backgrounds need to develop proficiency in English, local students may face a similar challenge. A diverse student population includes students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds, as well as students from rural areas and remote locations. It cannot be assumed that all local students have sufficient language skills to produce business reports. In fact, based on the most recent international literacy tests of schoolchildren, Australia performed the worst out of all of the English-speaking countries involved and the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that almost half of the adult population has low literacy. Thus, for a variety of reasons, students may end up with low levels of proficiency in English.

2) Quality Expectations: There are no universally accepted specifications of what constitutes a quality business report. In fact, different businesses have different standards for business report writing, which might be influenced by the industry sector or the nature of the work. So in a sense, each organisation, through norms and organisational culture, develops within the staff members an implicit understanding of what constitutes a good business report. Businesses are not able to provide clear guidelines of what a good business report looks like and because of this, it is hard to teach students how to approach these. In addition, the university system is far more focused on measuring the competency of students in understanding the content of a subject and as such there is very little focus, if any, on the way in which information is presented. If universities do currently have any guidelines with regard to what a business report should look like, there is very little chance that academics are consistently assessing students' work according to these guidelines.

3) Contextual Constraints: Report-writing skills are taught through social interaction. Individuals read existing reports to understand what is expected, and they get to contribute to the development of a report. Working with an expert, in what might be described as the role of an apprentice, is a low-risk approach to learning how to write business reports. If the graduate makes a mistake, this can be corrected by the experienced report-writer and this constitutes a solid feedback loop for the apprentice. Just like in any other apprenticeship, after some time the junior will be given the opportunity to write a report, but then will do so under supervision. Again, there is a risk-reduction strategy in place and strong feedback loops. While this type of model works successfully in organisations, universities are not set up in this way. Mostly students work as individuals, even when working in a group; work is divided up and then each student will work independently on their own

contribution. With tight timeframes, reviews are not always possible and often the collation will be left to a student with more advanced skills who will make decisions about what to keep in and what to cut from the report. Students who are not part of the final editing process are not learning from this review as they do not understand the rationale for the decisions that have been made. Students are also not often given a model solution in its entirety because academics reuse assessments year on year. Thus, without seeing a complete model solution, students do not understand where they needed to improve. Adding complexity to this situation is the previously described cultural diversity within the classroom. As elaborated on by Subbiah (1992), different cultures have been found to think, learn and write differently, which means that students may find themselves at a loss as to how to read or edit culturally diverse students' work. Thus, even if the opportunity presents itself for students to provide feedback to others, many students will not be well equipped to provide effective developmental feedback. In addition, research shows that even students who themselves are struggling with report writing are unlikely to be able to indicate exactly what aspects they need assistance in (Reinders, Hacker and Lewis, 2004).

The nature of business reports outlined suggests that employers' expectations of graduates' writing skills are influenced by context-bound evaluations and interpretations. As such, it would be unreasonable for educators to guarantee employers that their graduate recruits will possess their expected level of writing skills. However, we concur with the assertions of Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick, and Cragolini (2004) that universities should guarantee that students will be provided the opportunity to develop their business writing skills, but the degree to which they do so depends on the teaching staff and the students themselves. This resource assists educators in creating such opportunities for their students.



A Step in the Right Direction: Designing Skill-Building Assessments

One place for educators to start is to consider the way in which students are being assessed and evaluate the extent to which this measures the skills required to produce a business report. Universities tend to emphasise declarative knowledge (also referred to as propositional or content knowledge) rather than functioning knowledge (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Assessments therefore test whether students are able to logically and consistently verify and replicate the theoretical propositions of a particular subject matter. This is important for developing an in-depth understanding of the body of knowledge; however, it is less useful when considering the type of knowledge that informs actions, namely functioning knowledge. Thus, with assessments being focused on the content of a subject rather than how it is presented, students are not incentivised to develop the skills required to write high-quality business reports. In areas where there is more intense feedback provided on the communication methods, for example in the supervision of a thesis, the emphasis is on academic writing, which differs significantly from business writing. Even if academics were to focus on assessing business writing skills it might be argued that they are unlikely to have a clear, unambiguous idea of what

constitutes a good business report. An academic's own experience is more likely to be in the area of academic writing and thus, while they can comment on grammar and spelling, they are unlikely to be focused on the other aspects such as the format, layout, etc. Therefore, in order to realign the student learning with the principles of quality business reporting, educators need to consider the way in which students are being assessed and the type of feedback that is being provided.

Seeking Alignment: A Proposed Practitioner- Oriented Framework

As discussed previously, the assessments in place at universities do not necessarily focus on the type of skills required in order to produce quality business reports. However, the problem needs to be addressed more systemically than just reviewing the assessments. Based on the concept of constructive alignment it is imperative to consider what needs to be learnt, how it will be learnt and ensure that the assessment reflects this (Biggs & Tang, 2011). Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of the process of report writing from the perspective of the support framework that needs to be in place to achieve a quality outcome. This may be used in order to provide educators with guidelines in terms of developing learning outcomes, learning activities and assessments which are aligned with producing quality business reports.

1) Development Phases: In the development phases, students need to be educated as to what a structured process of producing reports entails rather than approaching the activity in an ad-hoc way as is often the case. The process needs to incorporate aspects of reviewing in order to allow students to reflect on what they have produced and consider areas for improvement before the final stage of publishing and submitting. In order to encourage deep skills development, reflection is required as part of this process. In many ways a student can work independently on the development

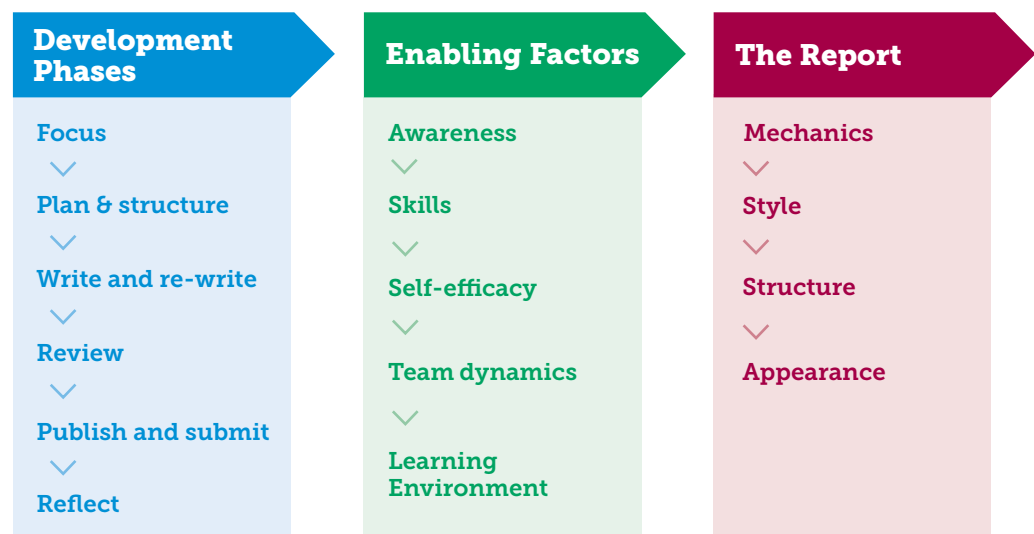
phase, apart from requiring feedback in the review stage. However, it is useful to consider how students might get feedback from others on the fundamentals, such as the plan and structure. This needs to be addressed by considering the enabling factors.

2) Enabling Factors: It is a challenge for educators to set up an environment that is conducive to learning good business writing skills due to the way in which the academic environment differs from the business environment. In particular, the social learning aspect of business writing is hard to replicate. In businesses, there is usually a structure and hierarchy which allows newly employed graduates to work under the guidance of a more senior practitioner prior to having to work independently. Individuals are provided with examples of past reports which show what is expected. They get to contribute collaboratively to developing new reports and are likely to receive feedback on their efforts. However, there is less opportunity for students to learn the discipline and art of business report writing based

on social interaction. Students cycle between academic writing (as required by academics) and business report writing (required by practitioners) and while doing this, their ability to learn is inherently linked to those they interact with (i.e. lecturers, tutors, etc.). This may in fact hamper their ability to learn new forms of writing. Thus, educators need to consider the social learning aspects of writing a business report and, in particular, pay attention to incorporating teamwork and multiple aspects of feedback into the process.

3) Producing the Report: Based on solid foundations laid in the development phase and supported by the enabling factors, the final level in terms of producing a quality business report focuses more on the explicit aspects of the report. Mechanics, style, structure and appearance are aspects which can be more easily quantified, demonstrated (with examples) and assessed using clear rubrics. This provides students with a set of rules for producing a quality business report and also clear feedback on their performance in this area.

Figure 2: The Business Report Writing Process



Section 2: The Report

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Section Objectives

The objective of section 2 is to provide resources for management educators to distribute to students who have been tasked with producing business reports. The resources subscribe to the principles of Plain English; specifically, the resources provide a general synopsis of the use and importance of language mechanics, style, structure and appearance of business reports. Most universities have dedicated academic support units that provide excellent support and resources for students seeking assistance in business writing. This section does not seek to substitute these resources but rather to supplement them by providing succinct summaries of key elements of business reports.



Section 2: The Report

Section Overview

Addressing literacy issues is far beyond the scope of this teaching and learning resource and it would be unreasonable to expect that management educators bear the full burden of enhancing language proficiency among business students. However, if we view graduate employability as a focal priority in higher education, as management educators we must begin to review and consider how syllabuses, assessments, and pedagogical practices can be better aligned with industry expectations. As section 1 outlined, there is growing expectation that higher education not only imparts students with technical skills and subject matter knowledge but also with business skills such as business writing and effective communication more generally.

Undergraduate business students, for the most part of their degrees, learn to master the art of academic writing; believing that the language style, referencing conventions and writing approach that they learn are fully transferable skills in the workplace. However, we suggest that academic writing is a style of writing that is specific to the academic profession and thus students (as budding business practitioners) need to learn how to write in a style and tone that is desired in industry. It is not something that will come naturally to students within a university environment. The key essences of an effective business report is one that is written succinctly and clearly using understandable language and is presented in a visually appealing and engaging way.

Writing Business Reports That Are Fit-for-Purpose

"University publishing has suited both scholars who need to publish and presses whose mission is to publish them. It has not rewarded clarity or beauty or timeliness, and it has not made a priority of satisfying readers... This set of arrangements has produced a great, heaping mountain of exquisite knowledge surrounded by a vast moat of dreadful prose."

Jill Lepore,
Professor of American History
Harvard University
(as quoted in *The Chronicles of Higher Education*, 2014)

Over the years, there have been many lively and animated debates about the utility of academic writing; particularly within the business context. However, technical and incomprehensible writing is not unique to the academic profession. It stands to reason that just like the language styles used by doctors, lawyers and investment bankers, academic writing is simply another style that exists for a specific purpose. Academics value rigour while business practitioners value efficiency. Academics write to convey knowledge whereas business practitioners write to support or guide decision-making. Hence, in contrast to academia, in business writing the notion of validity is largely based on believability and reasonableness whereby any contention can be commercially meaningful so long as underlying reasoning is logical.

It is counter-productive to compare the respective merits of academic and business writing because answers to such questions are specific to the purposes for which a document is being produced. Instead students need to learn how to be more adaptable and requirements-oriented in the way they approach writing with fit-for-purpose being the overarching aim. As business educators, how we approach the challenges of effective business writing largely depends on our individual beliefs about and how much value we place on graduate employability versus the trade skills of the academic profession. If there is a collective agreement that management education is primarily about equipping students with career skills, it is clear that fundamental shifts are required in the way business writing is taught.

Just like members of any other institutional system, students exhibit behaviours, develop habits and formed the worldviews are on the experiences of positive and negative consequences. Within a system that values rigour and thoroughness, students have been conditioned to believe that the use of jargon, repetition and citations equate to quality writing. Instead these misguided notions often result in an end product that makes for very hard reading. As suggested in the following quote, somewhere between leaving high school in completing university degree, students have forgotten the merits of simplicity and concision.

"You may be smart, you may be right but if you can't convince your audience through the written word, you are assigning yourself to irrelevancy. In my recent experience, the writing ability of graduates do not progress past that of year 12. As they tackle new and master new content domains they seem to forget many of the fundamentals that provide the foundation for excellence in writing. Good business writing is clear, compelling, and concise. With this in mind all graduates, regardless of discipline, should hone their writing skills."

Andrew Trnacek

Partner, Operational Advisory
Grant Thornton Australia

Using Plain English

"Business writing isn't a different language with a separate set of words and phrases... Business writing also isn't dull and stereotyped. Bad writing is dull; good writing is interesting. These statements are true for all writing, business or any other kind... Business writing is just likely any other writing."

Carter A. Daniel

Former Director of Business
Communication
Rutgers Business School
(as quoted in Reader-Friendly Reports, 2012)

Business writing involves more than just following a set of predefined rules. It is a process that requires careful and considered planning and execution; specifically, it involves identifying what the reader wants/needs to know, what you need to tell them (rather than what you want to tell the reader) and deciding how you will do it in the most efficient and effective way. A common approach that embodies the principles of effective business report writing is the 'KISS' acronym, which stands for Keep It Simple and Succinct.

Over the past decade, there has been resurging interest the principles of Plain English and it is an approach to writing that is now widely embraced by commercial organisations, government agencies and not-for-profit organisations. As the results of the 2014 clarity survey suggests, consumers today are demanding simpler processes, policies and disclosures and companies that recognise the importance of communicating in Plain English will stand out from their competitors.

Plain English is defined as the process of presenting information so that in a single reading, the intended audience can read, understand and act upon it. Plain English means writing with the audience in mind and presenting information clearly and accurately. For the purposes of management education, we view Plain English as comprising of four elements, which includes language mechanics, style, structure and appearance.

The following activity could be used to help acquaint students with the style and structure of business reports written in Plain English. This activity involves getting students to review industry reports and to record their observations of are the four elements of Plain English. This activity could be adapted as a group-based tutorial activity or even assigned as a small individual assignment.

ACTIVITY: Assign students to review industry reports to observe and record the differences between business writing and academic writing. Students should record their observations inline with the four elements of Plain English writing. Students should be asked to address: (1) What did they notice about the language mechanics, language style, report structure, and overall appearance? (2) Critically evaluate the differences and similarities between academic writing and business writing.

A list of industry reports can be found in the following links below:

McKinsey & Co

<http://www.mckinsey.com/insights>

Bain & Co

<http://www.bain.com/publications/>

Boston Consulting

http://www.bcg.com/expertise_impact/publications/

AT Kearney

<http://www.atkearney.com/issue-papers-perspectives>

Deloitte

http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_AU/au/news-research/index.htm

PricewaterhouseCoopers

<http://www.pwc.com.au/publications/>

KPMG

<http://www.kpmg.com.au/aci/pubs.htm>

Accenture

<http://www.accenture.com/au-en/research/Pages/index.aspx>



Student Help Sheets: Avoiding Common Mistakes in Language Mechanics

"If you think an apostrophe was one of the 12 disciples of Jesus, you will never work for me. If you think a semicolon is a regular colon with an identity crisis, I will not hire you. If you scatter commas into a sentence with all the discrimination of a shotgun, you might make it to the foyer before we politely escort you from the building.

I have a 'zero tolerance approach' to grammar mistakes that make people look stupid... Grammar signifies more than just a person's ability to remember high school English. I've found that people who make fewer mistakes on a grammar test also make fewer mistakes when they are doing something completely unrelated to writing."

Kyle Wiens,

CEO of iFixit and Founder of Dozuki
(as quoted in the Harvard Business Review
Blog NetworkWiens, 2012)

"Language Mechanics refers to the technical conventions of writing, which include spelling, punctuation and grammar."

Language mechanics conveys a lot more than just your writing skills; poor grammar and punctuation may result in the reader making negative attributions about other non-writing related abilities and attributes. Research shows that strong literacy skills are a crucial factor in securing your first graduate job and career progression in the long-term¹. Stand in the shoes of a manager or client reviewing a CV or business report; how might they judge a fresh grad's learning curve, credibility and/or attention to detail if after 15+ years of schooling they didn't know how to properly use "it's" or couldn't tell the difference between there, they're and their?².

The sooner you learn how to apply proper language mechanics, the sooner it will become second nature and provide you the necessary foundation to develop more advanced skills (e.g. language style). Here are some guidelines to address some common basic grammatical and punctuation errors and misuse of words found in business writing.

1. Misused Words

| | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| affect, effect | who, whom |
| counsel, council | biannual, biennial |
| accept, except | inquire, enquire |
| already, all ready | practice, practise |
| precede, proceed | between, among |
| dependent, dependant | lie, lay |
| who's, whose | complement, compliment |
| awhile, a while | advice, advise |
| illicit, elicit | principle, principal |
| ensure, insure | can, may, might |



1. KPMG, & National Literacy Trust. (2012). *Youth Literacy and Employability Commission*. London: National Literacy Trust.

2. Wiens, K. (2012). I Won't Hire People Who Use Poor Grammar. Here's Why. Retrieved from <http://blogs.hbr.org/2012/07/i-wont-hire-people-who-use-poor/>

2. Apostrophes (')

Apostrophes are used to show possession or that something has been omitted.

| Purpose | Add | Example |
|--|------------------------|--|
| To show possession | 's | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our team's report (i.e. the report of our team) • Each business's assets (i.e. the assets of each company) |
| To show possession (plural) | ' | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other teams' report (i.e. the report of other teams) • Other businesses' problems (i.e. the problem of other businesses) |
| To show possession where English names end in 's' | 's | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Jones's office (i.e. the office belonging to Mr Jones) • The Joneses' office (i.e. if the office belongs to more than one Jones) |
| To show joint possession | 's after last noun | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mary and Roxy's office (i.e. the office belonging to Mary and Roxy) |
| His, hers, yours, its (meaning 'belonging to it') and theirs | None | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The company and its products • The responsibility was theirs |
| Company names ending with or without a 's' | 's (normal possessive) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optus's financial statements (i.e. the financial statements belonging to Optus) • Rip Curl's financial statements (i.e. the financial statements belonging to Rip Curl) |
| Time periods | Various | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 1980s • One week's holiday, one day's work, a hard day's work • Two weeks' time, nine months' leave, four years' experience |

3. Commas (,)

There are two obvious uses for commas:

i. To separate the items from a list.

e.g. I will ensure that our services have the appropriate focus, integrity and professionalism.

Put a comma before the 'and' if each item in the list consists of several words or if it is necessary to make the meaning clear.

e.g. Our services include marketing strategy advice, product development, market research, and analysis services.

ii. To separate the phrases or clauses in a sentence to make it easier to read and make the meaning clearer.

e.g. **Without Commas:** The initial client meeting identified the scope of work and implementation phases generated procurement options for the project scope and established the selection criteria to assist in the evaluation of viable options.

e.g. **With Commas:** The initial client meeting identified the scope of work and implementation phases, generated procurement options for the project scope, and established the selection criteria to be used in the evaluation of viable options.

Student Help Sheets: Choosing your Language Style

"Have something to say, and say it as clearly as you can. That is the only secret of style."

– Matthew Arnold

"Language style refers to the composition, clarity and readability of sentences and paragraphs."

English has borrowed many root words from a vast range of different cultures, resulting in a language that is broad in scope and rich in depth. Within business and commercial contexts, this presents many problems when it comes to conveying content in a clear and succinct manner. When preparing a business report, it is important that the author/s understand who the audiences are, the type of information that they require and how that information will be used. Accordingly, the author/s should modify their language to ensure that the desired message is clearly conveyed and understood.

As you conduct your research, collect and analyse your data and discover ideas, make sure that you keep your wandering thoughts in check and that you continue to focus on the overarching purpose of your report and requirements of the intended reader/s.



Key questions that you should be able to address prior to commencing the writing your business report are:

What is my purpose?

Who are my readers?

How much do they already know?

How can I/we convey information that will make it easy for them to understand?

Once these questions have been addressed, it is critical that you convey your ideas economically and to give them no more words than they deserve or require. This will ensure that your message is clear and concise, and is free of complicated phrasal verbs and unnecessary use of technical business jargon. Only keep content that is directly relevant to the focal topic or business problem that has been assigned to you. To do this you should strive to condense paragraphs to sentences, sentences to words, words to diagrams/graphs, and eliminate non-value adding ideas entirely.

6 Ways to Clarity

Many students fall into the trap of overindulging themselves in overcomplicated phrases which slow down the readers understanding of what is really being said. There is a common misconception that technical jargon and overcomplicated phrasing is required to establish credibility when in fact it only compromises the clarity of the ideas that the author is trying to convey. As a rule of thumb you should write in the same way that you talk. The following are six things that should be avoided when writing a business report.

- 1. 'Big' and Overtechnical Words:** You should write in the same way that you talk; free of confusing business idioms and complicated phrasal verbs. Although a reader may understand that magnitude means the same as size, they shouldn't have to translate and/or interpret words in order to understand what you're trying to say. The number of letters in a word is far less important than being able to skilfully compose sentences that cogently capture the essence of your idea.



- 2. Complicated Sentences:** You should try and use a variety of long and short sentences with each sentence comprising of an average of 20 words or less. Although short sentences do not necessarily guarantee clarity, short sentences less confusing than very lengthy ones. A simple test is to read your writing aloud and to break up the sentences that do not end in one breath.
- 3. Lengthy or Ineffective Paragraphs:** Students typically approach business writing and structure their reports in a chronological manner. That is, they section and write the business reports in the same order as the activities they undertook in producing the report. Instead, reports should be written so that answers come before explanations and conclusions come before details.
- 4. Complicated Phrases:** Rather than adding bulk to your writing, excessively wordy expressions obscures the readability of your writing and can be very frustrating to read. Phrases such as “in the near future” can be expressed as “soon” and “for the purpose of” replaced with “for”.
- 5. Repetition:** The repetition of points with different phraseology is unnecessary and not appreciated by the reader. Rather than repeating key points in different ways, your writing should be guided by robust logic with each point adding value to your overarching contention.
- 6. Passive Voice:** A sentence written in the passive voice is when focus is on the action and it is not known who or what is performing the action until the end of the sentence. An example of this is: ‘the business report was written by Rebecca’. Although passive voice is appropriate for some sentences, it should be used sparingly when writing business reports. Instead, an active voice should be used whereby the person acting is identified at the start of the sentence which is more direct and concise than passive voice. An example of this is: ‘Rebecca wrote the business report’.

Student Help Sheets: Structuring Your Business Report

“Report structure refers to the flow and linkages of the various sections in your report.”

Business reports typically adopt a direct approach whereby conclusions and recommendations are presented at the start of the report which are subsequently substantiated (sometimes referred to as the Minto approach). There may be instances where an indirect approach – where analysis and findings are discussed prior to presenting conclusions and recommendations – may be more appropriate such as when the conclusion or recommendations are likely to be contentious or controversial.

Within industry, practitioners are typically given training on how to apply the Minto approach in writing business reports. This falls outside the scope of this resource, however students should consult Barbara Minto’s book³ should they wish to acquaint themselves with this approach. The following checklist provides sequential checkpoints for the indirect approach given that students are most familiar with this type of business report structure.

Cover Page: This should contain the title of the report along with other identifiers such as author names, the name/logo of the organisation producing the report, the name/logo of the client or focal organisation, date of report submission, and ‘Commercial in Confidence’ label.

Disclaimer Page: A declarative statement that limits the liability of the organisation that is producing the business report. This is a standard inclusion in most consulting reports and reflects the seriousness of writing at a professional level.

Table of Contents (TOC): The TOC provides an overview of the report’s scope and contents by outlining the section titles and headings in the report. This provides readers with an overview of the report as well as helping them identify points the sections that they are most interested in.

Executive Summary: This is a critical section of any business report and should not be confused with an abstract. Its purpose is to provide readers who, at least initially, do not intend to read the report in its entirety. It usually includes the main points of each section, the results conclusions and recommendations. The executive summary is usually 2-3 pages long or 10% of the total word count of the report.

Introduction Section: This section provides readers with an understanding of the purpose and scope of your report and the approach/methodology that was used. The key questions should be addressed in the introduction of the report are: What is the problem or opportunity? What is the context of the problem or opportunity (e.g. historical, performance, environmental, regulatory, etc)? What is the purpose and scope of your business report? What methodology/approach was used to address the scope? How has the report being organised?

Key Findings & Conclusions: The main body of the report typically comprises of several sections related to the key findings of the project. For instance, there may be three separate sections in the main body of the report related to market demand, the competitive environment, and industry benchmarks. Each key finding should be discussed and culminate in conclusions that clearly demonstrate the relevance of findings to the agreed scope of the project (i.e. the implications).

Recommendations: The development of recommendations should be informed by the findings derived from the analysis and the conclusions drawn in the main body of your report. The recommendations should follow the SMART principles (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound)

3. Minto, B. (2010). *The Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing and Thinking* (3rd ed.). Essex, United Kingdom: Pearson Education.

Summary Conclusion: the summary conclusion should call all sections of the report together; from the introduction through to the recommendations.

List of References: The list of references provides a list of all the resources that were used in producing the final deliverable. Therefore, it is important to be organised right from the outset and to keep track of all the secondary sources that have informed the development of your report.

Appendix: The final section of the business report is the appendix which contains all the non-critical material that supplements or clarifies content in the report. Examples of the top material that would be included in the appendix include a copy of the survey/ questionnaires used in the project, summaries of primary data, calculations of figures used in scratch that Collations figures that were used in the report, etc. Please note that that appendix serves a specific purpose and should not be used to add bulk to the report and authors should refrain from simply using it as a repository for information that they haven't been able to integrate into the report.

Student Help Sheets: Ensuring a Professional Appearance

"Professional appearance refers to the aesthetic and overall visual appeal of the report."

In the business world, a business report is typically a deliverable submitted to particular stakeholders; these stakeholders may include your direct manager, clients, and external third parties. It may be used, directly or indirectly, as the basis for evaluating your performance and competence and may even be an end product that a client is paying for. The overall appearance of the report forms part of the perceived quality of the deliverable.

Rather than producing the entire report using text, visual communication can be an effective way of conveying complex ideas, particularly when effectively used in conjunction with each other. Visual aids, such as diagrams and graphs, can be used to illustrate relationships as well as simplifying complex concepts. However, visuals should not be used to substitute proper discussion and should always be accompanied with supporting explanations. If a figure or table is too large and/or disrupts the flow of the report, consider adding it to the appendix.

When including visuals in your report, use the following checkpoints as a general guide:

Labeling & Headings: Tables should be labeled as table x (e.g. Table 1 – Profit Summary of Competitors) above the table. Charts, graphs and diagrams referred to as figures (e.g. Figure 1 – Revenue from 2000 to 2014).

In-text / Footnote Reference: All tables and figures should be referred to in text (i.e. in the body of your report) or as a footnote.

Use Simple Colors: Keep the number of colors to a minimum (i.e. 2-3 colors per figure/table) and maintain a consistent color scheme across all the figures and tables.

Section 3: Enabling factors for delivery/execution

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Section Objectives

The objective of this section is to provide guidelines to both students and educators. These guidelines cover the key enabling factors of the social learning process, thereby allowing the education environment to be modelled to more closely resemble the interactions which take place within the organisational environment. This facilitates the development of business report-writing skills.



Section 3: Enabling factors for delivery/execution

Section Overview

Section 3 starts from the premise that business report writing is a socially learnt skill and, while within organisations there are particular structures which facilitate the transfer of skills, these are not naturally part of the environment within education institutions. Thus, educators need to consider how to structure an environment to replicate some of the social processes inherent in organisations in order to assist students to develop their report-writing skills.

The approach undertaken to discussing the enabling factors is to start with the individual, encouraging students to reflect on and critically evaluate their own skills and the contribution they can make in a collaborative report-writing environment. This will be discussed in the Awareness, Skills and Self-efficacy sections. Importantly, once students understand their own strengths, areas for development and unique contributions, it is important to consider how these integrate into a team environment. Thus, the Team Dynamics section will consider the roles within the teams and how individuals interact with each other to ensure the best outcomes. Finally, the Learning Environment section will discuss how educators need to enable and support the individual as well as the team-based processes to facilitate positive learning outcomes.

Self-Awareness

*"To thine own self be true,
and it must follow as the night the day,
thou canst not then be false to any man."*

Hamlet

William Shakespeare

Self-awareness is considered to be the knowledge that an individual possesses about themselves. This knowledge is gained through self-examination, which provides insight into oneself, thereby allowing the individual to develop a self-concept. Research shows that in order to develop new capabilities and to contribute positively within an organisational environment it is necessary to be self-aware (Chervone, 1997; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). It has been found that due to limited experience and opportunity to gain the insight required, many students do not have a strong degree of self-awareness (Brooman & Darwent, 2012). Thus, one of the first aspects of the enabling layer is providing students with the tools to assist them in developing their own self-awareness. While there is a plethora of self-awareness literature available, little of this is focused on students and lacks

practical application (Brooman & Darwent, 2012); thus, educators need to consider what resources are made available and how these are positioned with students.

As the process of business report writing includes both gathering and processing information, a good starting point is the Cognitive Style Indicator (Cools & Van den Broeck, 2007), which is included for reference in Section Resources. This diagnostic survey asks a series of questions to assess cognitive style preferences. It divides cognitive styles into three categories: Knowing, Planning and Creating. By undertaking a survey of this nature, students may assess their preferences in terms of gathering and processing information. Not only does this type of assessment provide students with insight into their own preferences, it also gives them an understanding of how others might act during the process of business report writing.

In addition, research (Brooman & Darwent, 2012) has shown how the integration of self-awareness literature, together with a reflective type assessment, can assist

students in developing greater levels of self-awareness. Based on this research it is recommended that the type of article selected is relatively short, uses straightforward language, has clearly explained concepts and includes minimal statistical information (Brooman & Darwent, 2012). A selection of indicative articles which may be used for this purpose are included in Section Resources.

Skills

*"Music resembles poetry, in each
Are nameless graces which no methods
teach,
And which a master hand alone can reach."*

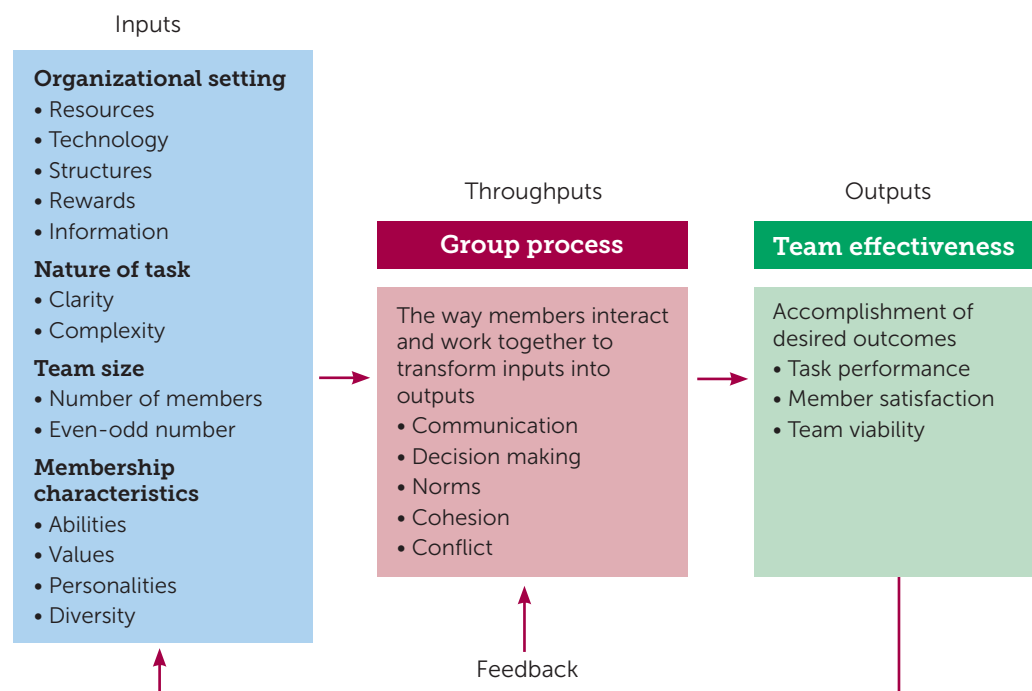
An Essay on Criticism

Alexander Pope

In terms of skills, many students assume that when working in a team environment, their contribution is measured by the number of words they write. This mentality tends

to lead to reports which are overly wordy and can hamper the coherence of the report and reduce readability. A better way for students to approach report writing, which is more consistent in ensuring that there is a solid contribution from all team members and that the resultant product is as good as possible, is based on the open-systems model of team effectiveness, which comes from the work of Schermerhorn et al. (2011) (see figure 3 below). Using this model give students a process-based view of the team process and an appreciation of how different membership characteristics (including skills) are integral to a successful team. Students are encouraged to focus on the *membership characteristics* of their individual group. For example, students may list the things they are really good at individually (abilities and skills), such as being good at graphical representation, analysing numbers, editing text, writing documents, researching, etc.

Figure 3: Open Systems Model of Team Effectiveness



(Schermerhorn et al., 2011)



Self-Efficacy

“People who believe they have the power to exercise some measure of control over their lives are healthier, more effective and more successful than those who lack faith in their ability to effect changes in their lives.”

Bandura

Self-efficacy is described as an individual’s level of confidence in their ability to either undertake a task or achieve specific outcomes (Bandura, 1997). Individuals who have high-levels of self-efficacy believe they can learn, grow and meet any challenges that may arise in the attainment of a particular outcome (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). The importance of high levels of efficacy in terms of business report writing are that students who possess this are more likely to persist even when they are faced with hurdles. Based on research by Bandura (1997) there are three conditions necessary in order for individuals to develop high levels of self-efficacy. First, there is a belief in their own ability to perform the task. Second, there is the belief that they are capable of the effort required to achieve the desired outcome. Third is the belief that no outside obstacles will stand in their way and prevent them from achieving the desired outcome.

Based on an understanding of the importance of students’ self-efficacy, educators need to consider what role they play in terms of influencing the level of self-efficacy experienced by students. There are primarily three dimensions of the environment which have a significant impact on self-efficacy: personal mastery experiences, modelling of the required behaviour and the provision of information (Whetten & Cameron, 2011). Each of these is expanded on below as a guideline for educators wishing to empower students and increase their sense of self-efficacy.

Fostering Personal Mastery

For many students, university may be the first time they have seen a business report, let alone been asked to produce one. Therefore, it is important to provide a framework to assist students to develop their self-efficacy. This can be done through a number of activities designed to increase the students’ personal mastery. The key activities for an educator to consider are:

Break apart large tasks and assign one at a time. For example, students may be asked to produce a reduced report that only focuses on providing an overview of the context. This is often the initial part of a business report, and an area where students can utilize their analytical skills and master the key aspects of business report writing.



Assign simple tasks before difficult ones.

For example, ask students to produce an outline of what their business report might contain and then validate this with other students. This provides them with insight into what the complete report may look like while building their confidence in their skills in this area.

Highlight and celebrate small wins. An important aspect of personal mastery is highlighting small wins. For example, once students have completed an aspect of the report or have practiced writing a section of the report (as suggested above), the educator needs to show how this ties back to the overall skill of business report writing and celebrate students' progress.

Modelling of the Required Behaviour

Another key aspect of the framework of developing self-efficacy is to provide students with insight into what successful business report writing looks like. This may be done through the following actions:

Demonstrate successful task accomplishment. This includes showing students examples of good business reports.

Point out other people who have succeeded. Linked to the previous point, it is incumbent on educators to not only provide examples from the business context but to show how other students have achieved successful outcomes. The importance of using other students as examples is that often individuals discount positive role models who are seen as being more experienced than themselves.

Facilitate interaction with role models.
As part of developing confidence in their

own ability, students need to connect with others who might act as motivators or role models. This may be done through facilitating teamwork where students may have the opportunity of observing how other students tackle the task of business report writing.

Provision of Information

Finally, in terms of developing students' confidence in their ability to produce business reports, it is important to ensure that they have access to sufficient information. This involves making sure that students have access to the tools that support their writing, and information about what a business report entails. Having an understanding of what is required has a direct impact on the level of confidence that students display in undertaking this activity.

Team Dynamics

“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.”

Henry Ford

Students may be unfamiliar with team-based environments, especially those who come from a more individualistic educational background. As the team process is key to successful development of business writing skills through facilitating social learning, this is an important aspect of the enabling factors. Educators need to both provide students with information on the team processes but also facilitate their transition from a group of individuals towards a high-performance team.

In terms of the team processes, the stages of team development may be used to provide students with insight into the team dynamics over time. The model, based on research into small groups (Heinen & Jacobson, 1976; Tuckman, 1965) suggests that teams progress through five distinct stages:

- 1. Forming** – a stage of initial orientation and interpersonal testing
- 2. Storming** – when conflict over tasks and teamwork activities exists
- 3. Norming** – involving consolidation around tasks and operational practices

4. Performing – when teamwork is focused on the goals and team members are working together well

5. Adjourning – once the teamwork has been completed and the team disbands

To ensure the most positive outcomes from a team dynamics perspective, students need to be made aware of the stages of team progress and given support to assist them in order to successfully progress through the stages. Well-executed team-building activities near the beginning of a course may offer students the opportunity to progress through the forming stage successfully. A key part of this is developing team contracts and being clear about roles and responsibilities, which can help student teams to develop some cohesion and unity as part of norming. A template for developing a team contract has been included in the Resources Section of this paper.

Importantly, students also need to be equipped with the skills to progress through the storming stage of team development and this means focusing on areas such as conflict resolution, critical reasoning and creative problem-solving skills. A simple set of questions (such as those provided in the Resources Section) can provide students with the opportunity to reflect on their own preferences in terms of conflict resolution. In addition, sharing conflict-resolution strategies with other team members provides greater insight into how other team members operate and can be useful when conflict does arise.

Finally, in terms of the team dynamics, students should be encouraged to take regular check-points of the team dynamics. A list of questions which may be used for this purpose has been included in the Section Resources. Students should complete this separately and then disclose their ratings to the rest of the students. Discrepancies between ratings, or areas which get particularly low scores, can become areas for discussion and focus.

Learning Environment

For many students, this may be the first opportunity they have had to work with others in a collaborative situation. Other students may have worked in

teams previously but have not had good experiences. Thus, educators need to consider what type of structure is being put in place for students to engage in more active social learning.

This means that educators need to provide students with the theory with regard to teamwork and collaboration, such as guidelines on team membership roles as well as how to set a team up for success. To be effective, this needs to happen before students are expected to get into teams and to collaborate successfully with other students.

Ensuring Sufficient Support

Students have the right to expect a duty of care to be shown by educators. In the case where students are pushed beyond their comfort zone (such as doing something that they are unfamiliar with), working in a way that is not their preference (for example team-based work) and being provided with the opportunity for deep reflection (such as in the self-reflection activity), there is a chance that students' stress levels may be elevated. There are a number of ways of responding to this situation, two of which are discussed here as the basis for educators to consider the extent to which they are providing the needed support.

First, educators need to consider how to equip students with the necessary skills to deal with stressful situations. Similar to communication, collaboration and teamwork, stress management may be viewed as a social interaction skill. Because of this, it is essential to provide students with sufficient information about different aspects of stress management, such as eliminating stressors, time management, developing resilience and short-term coping.

Second, educators need to ensure that students are aware of the support structures surrounding them. Providing clear information on the support services offered by the university as well as by local not-for-profit organisations may provide a lifeline to a student undergoing high levels of anxiety and stress. A list of websites that may be useful to students undergoing high levels of stress is included in the Section Resources.

Section Resources

Cognitive Style Indicator

Rating scale:

- 1 Totally disagree
- 2 Disagree
- 3 Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 Agree
- 5 Totally agree

Questions:

1. Developing a clear plan is very important to me
2. I like to contribute to innovative solutions
3. I always want to know what should be done when
4. I prefer to look at creative solutions
5. I want to have a full understanding of the problem
6. I like detailed action plans
7. I am motivated by ongoing innovation
8. I like to analyse problems
9. I prefer a clear structure to do my job
10. I like a lot of variety in my life
11. I engage in detailed analysis
12. I prefer well planned meetings with a clear agenda
13. New ideas attract me more than existing solutions
14. I study each problem until I understand the underlying logic
15. I make definite appointments and follow up meticulously
16. I like to extend the boundaries
17. A good task is a well prepared task
18. I try to avoid routine

Scoring Key:

Knowing style: Items 5, 8, 11, 14 = add scores and divide total by 4

Planning style: Items 1, 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 17 = add scores and divide total by 7

Creating style: Items 2, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 18 = add scores and divide total by 7

(Source: Cools & Van den Broeck, 2007)

Self-Awareness Articles

Bandura, A. 1994. Self-efficacy. In *Encyclopaedia of human behaviour*, vol. 4, ed. V.S. Ramachaudran, 71–81. New York: Academic Press.

Lane, J., A. Lane, and A. Kyprianou. 2004. Self-efficacy, self-esteem and their impact on academic performance. *Social Behaviour and Personality* 32, no. 3: 247–56

Hall, S. 2007. Think it, write it, do it. *Health* 21, no. 2: 166.

Team Contract Template

Team goals:

List the 3 – 5 most important goals for your team. These need to be stated as

SMART goals: **S**pecific

Measurable

Aligned with team member aspirations

Realistic

Time-Bound

Team ground rules:

How will you operate as a team and what behaviour is acceptable?

How will you make decisions?

When will you meet?

How will you communicate?

How will you resolve issues?

When will you stop and assess how you are doing as a team?

Conflict Resolution Style

Which of the following most closely resembles the way you deal with conflict?

1. I like to speak my mind, and what I say usually goes.
2. I usually don't express opinions which will create controversy.
3. If I can't get things my way, I seek an outcome which will have losses and gains for everyone. The outcome is partially my ideas and partially the other party's ideas.
4. If it makes others happy, I am all for it.
5. I tell others my ideas, seek out their ideas and search for mutual solutions which are different from either of our initial ideas.

1 = dominating 2 = avoiding 3 = bargaining 4 = accommodating 5 = collaborating

Modified from a list of questions produced by Daft and Marcic (2014)

Team Check Point

Indicate on a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good) how well you think the team is doing on the following dimensions:

1. Trust between team members
2. Feedback mechanisms
3. Open communication
4. Decision-making
5. Leadership sharing
6. Working towards goals
7. Valuing diversity
8. Member cohesiveness
9. Support for each other
10. Adhering to the team contract

Based on a modified version of the work presented by Lloyd, Panipucci & Haartel, at the ANZAM Conference in Freemantle in December 2003.

Section 4: Tactical phases for writing and publishing

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Section Objectives

The objective of section 4 is to provide an overview of collaborative tactical activities that should be undertaken by students when they are planning and producing a business report.



Section 4: Tactical Phases of Business Writing

Section Overview

For business students, the ability to write coherently and articulately is a fundamental skill that creates opportunities to share and influence ideas, thoughts and opinions of others which is not only relevant in the higher-education context but also in the business world. Anecdotally we know that when students are tasked with writing a business report, their learned behaviours dictate a *'divide and conquer'* approach whereby the topic is decomposed into allocable components. These components are assigned, team members part ways to work on their allocated tasks and several weeks (or days) later disparate parts are cobbled together into business report and submitted. This approach often culminates in a final product that demonstrates some degree of content mastery but lacks coherency in structure and flow.

Such scenarios raise questions about the *ecological validity* of the structure and form of the work produced by students. That is, regardless of whether the substantive content in a business report is correct or not, a business report that lacks cogency would be unacceptable by industry standards. Yet students are rarely given detailed guidance on the process of collaborative business report writing despite the practical imperative of developing this skill.

Based on a review of the relevant literature on business writing and consultative input from industry practitioners, a generic framework has been developed to reflect the tactical phases of business report writing. The writing process, in its various forms and genres, is a highly iterative and recursive. Hence, this process framework should not be seen as a linear sequence of steps to be followed but instead it seeks to convey the general tactical phases that are typically involved in producing a business report as illustrated in figure 4.

Figure 4: Phases of the business writing process



This framework is premised on the assumption a business report is the most appropriate medium for the assessment task that has been assigned to students. For instance, if the focal aim of an assessment task is to evaluate students' theoretical understanding, it could be argued that such a task is better suited to an essay form. Business reports are inherently applied and practical in nature, thus is best suited to assessment tasks such as industry/market or company case analysis or tasks that involve fieldwork. As such, business reports are produced for a specific purpose (e.g. analysis to identify causal factors or trends related to a business opportunity or issue) and audience (e.g. for a client or to be used internally to support management decision making).

Focus

There are two elements that determine the focus of a business report: (1) knowing who the audience is, and (2) knowing the purpose for writing. Assessments involving business reports are typically situated within hypothetical cases, for instance:

“The board of Company XYZ has commissioned a cultural audit following their recent merger with another company. Your team has been engaged as consultants to produce a business report that identifies causes of the cultural issues in the company and to present some recommendations back to the board of directors.”

Using the above example, before students even begin to write their report, they should be encouraged to consider who their intended audience is (i.e. senior executives and board directors) and to think about how that would shape the structure, subject matter, style and tone of their writing. The entire writing process should be focussed on producing a report that appeals to the target audience and aligns with their needs and wants. Key questions that students need to consider are:

- How much background information will the audience need?
- Is the level of technical complexity in language appropriate and will key terms need to be defined?

- What kind of visual aids should be used to help the audience understand the content??

Aside from being able to identify the target audience, students also need to consider the purpose of the business report as it will also influence the both the structure and content of the business report. For instance, if the task involves identifying root causes and recommendations, students should refrain from writing voluminously on the corporate history/profile or writing an extensive literature review on the related theories or concepts.

To help students focus on the purpose of the business report, the SCQ model (refer to figure 5) can be used to help students to identify a key question that the business report seeks to address.

Plan and Structure

For many students, the planning phase typically encompasses a narrow set of activities related to the decomposition of the assignment into allocable tasks. Planning efforts are motivated by the pursuit of efficiency in completing the assignment rather than planning the craft of business writing. A common mistake found in many student business reports is that they make the purpose (or scope) of the report too broad or vague.

Figure 5: SCQ Model

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Situation (S) | What are the facts and context of the case? |
| | What are the things that cannot be changed? |
| | What are the known or inferred goals? |
| Complication (C) | What factors are impeding the organisation or people involved from achieving their goals or what they want to do? |
| Question (Q) | The key question should logically and naturally arise from the complication. |
| | What question needs to be asked best asked to produce an answer that addresses the complications identified and helps the organisation or people involved in attaining their goals? |

As most business reports are commissioned to support managerial decision-making and organisational objectives, it is imperative that the report is structured to that there is a chain of continuity in argument and research that ultimately culminate in the findings and recommendations.

The scoping process can be facilitated by the application of the SCQ model and the students should end up having a clearer understanding of the key question/s. With an awareness of the target audience and the scope of the business report, the students should be ready to gather and organise the research and plan their collection of primary data.

'Don't boil the ocean' is a mantra that many professional consultants live by when collecting data (Raisel, 1999). The phrase means that it is unnecessary and inefficient to collect and analyse everything related to a topic. Instead, data collection should be highly selective and should only be focussed on priority issues related to the scope of the business report.

Writing and Editing

Students should be reminded that the writing process is recursive in nature, which allows them to revise their work continually. The process of writing and re-writing not only enables them to revise what they are writing about but also helps to ensure that the content remains aligned with the objectives and planned structure of the report. When done properly, the iterative drafting and editing enables the writer to take into account new ideas and thoughts that can be incorporated into their reports.

Students should be encouraged to aim for a final draft at least a couple of days before the submission date so that they can review their deliverables with a fresh pair of eyes. By setting the report aside for a couple of days, they can return to the report with a sharper eye for details and be able to objectively review the report with an more attuned awareness of the desirable quality that the report should have. The review and editing process should be a slow a process whereby each word, sentence

and paragraph is carefully evaluated with a view to making constructive changes which may include:

- Correct spelling, grammar and punctuation;
- Correct and consistent use of tenses;
- Removal of fillers (ie. unnecessary words)
- Using an active voice;
- Enhance the clarity of the content by adding necessary detail;
- Tightening and more polished written expression.
- Rearrangement of sentences or paragraphs to improve the flow

Publish and Submit

When it comes time to publishing the report (ie. conversion to PDF or printing), students should be reminded of the importance of presentation and the aesthetics of the report. In the real business world, clients and managers do *'judge books by their covers'* and aesthetic factors will influence the perceived quality of submitted reports. Readers of business reports – typically with short attention spans – are looking to extract relevant key points as efficiently as possible and a poorly formatted and presented report could lead to facts in arguments being lost. To do justice to the effort and time invested in planning and writing, students should also spend some time review aesthetic elements of the published report before submission such as:

- Adequate use of white space;
- Appropriate page margins;
- Page numbering and reconciliation with the table of contents;
- Appropriate use of tables and diagrams;
- Clean, simple and consistent use of colour;
- Consistent typography (ie. font style, font size, heading levels)
- Appropriate and consistent line and paragraph spacing;
- Appropriate and consistent text alignment (ie. left, right, centre)

Section 5: Conclusion

In recent years there has been increasing pressure placed on universities to ensure that students not only gain technical mastery within their chosen fields but that they also graduate with a range of generic work-based skills and attributes. A review of industry reports and discussion with employers shows that graduates business report writing skills continue to fall short of expectations. In the face of growing demand for universities to be more accountable and within the context of a broader ideological shift in terms of how these institutions should be contributing to the economy, educators are being called upon to reassess the skills taught to students.

The task of meeting employer expectations with regard to the writing skills of graduates is a multifaceted and challenging one due to the social and contextual nature of business report writing. In particular there are three omnipresent challenges facing educators. First, the baseline writing competencies of students are influenced by a range of social factors which may be beyond the control of the educator. Second, there is no universally accepted standard of what constitutes a quality business report with organisations themselves having varied standards. Third, organisations are structured in a way which emulates an apprenticeship model that facilitates the development of report writing skills through social learning and universities are not structured similarly to support this model of skills development.

In response to the gap between the expectations of employees and graduates skills, and considering the complex challenges involved in teaching these type of skills, this resource provides a way forward for educators. This is done by presenting a practitioner-oriented framework which breaks business report writing into three distinct aspects and by showing what is needed in each of these in order to achieve a successful outcome. While the framework is useful for conceptually orienting the educator with regard to the process of business report writing, section two, three and four provide tangible resources to back this framework up and to enable the educator to implement in a systemic way a process which facilitates the development of graduate writing skills.

Thus in summary, this paper highlights the urgent need for educators to rethink the skills which are being taught to students and in particular to consider the relevance to these from an industry perspective. More specifically though, this paper acts as a teaching resource to enable those wishing to address the gap between employer expectations and the report writing skills of graduates.

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