

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Learning, Volume 27, 2000
EXERCISES TO FACILITATE BETTER STUDENT WRITING IN THE UNDERGRADUATE
STRATEGY CLASS

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ABSTRACT

Many strategy professors have developed exercises and grading procedures that encourage better student writing. In order to facilitate better writing, faculty must be continuously focused on writing, must be consistent in requiring acceptable writing and must reward good writing. This paper presents several exercises and procedures that have been developed and successfully used in undergraduate strategy classes but the exercises could be adapted to any classes.

INTRODUCTION

Strategy classes typically require written case analyses, written term projects, as well as individual and group writing efforts. Strategy professors and recruiters complain about the poor quality of student writing, yet professors devote little or no time to helping students write well. Teachers also accept poor writing, sometimes with comments on the papers. It has been my experience that few students read our comments with a purpose of being a better writer (Howard & Jamison, 1995). I am not proposing that strategy teachers begin teaching writing. Our students have passed composition classes by the time they get to our senior-level classes. I propose that strategy professors let students know that writing is important by talking about it continuously, requiring students to write often, and requiring that casual or simple mistakes of grammar and spelling be corrected before the grade is recorded. Rewards and punishments need to accompany good and poor writing.

METHODOLOGY

Many competent professors have developed various techniques to help students to value writing and become more proficient in their

written work. This presentation describes techniques that the author has successfully utilized. Professors of many business subjects could add their favorite procedures.

Syllabus, Class Rules, Handouts

If I as a teacher am truly concerned about student writing, I must state that on the syllabus and on handouts in class. The teacher should also discuss the importance of writing in the introduction and initial orientation to the class. I have two different handouts that are distributed at different times. The first is my personal advice list for writing. An abridged version is Appendix I. The second handout on writing is from a panel discussion of several faculty members who described the components of good writing in their various disciplines (abridged version is Appendix II). I talk about the importance of good communication and explain that good writing and good oral expression are signs of educated, higher status people. I also discuss some horror stories of people who were not hired or promoted because of poor writing or poor oral expression.

Immediate Assignment

If writing really is important to the instructor, he or she should emphasize that and give a short writing assignment very early in the semester. I give a writing assignment in all classes on the first day of class. In the strategy class, students are told to write a short paper to demonstrate some of the rules of critical thinking, a major component of the learning in that class. For example, students might be asked to write out an argument for arranged marriages (or against arranged marriages if the student is from a culture that approves of arranged marriages). In an organizational behavior class, I would ask students to write out

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some of their values with a rationale for those values.

Free Writing in Class

Students can be frequently asked to do a few minutes of free writing in class. This writing is not graded for content or for grammar. This exercise helps students learn to put their thoughts in writing (Goldberg, 1986). The assignment might be to describe one of Porter's Competitive Forces or explain the difference in pure and monopolistic competition. This technique helps students review what was in the assigned reading or the lecture. Many times, I will ask students to share their free writing with another class member or a group of 3 or 4 students, depending on the size of the class. This gets students to interact and allows them to critique the writing of each other. It also forces the writer to write clearly or have other students say, "I don't know what this means." For example, I ask students to write short responses in class to questions such as "What are your expectations of this class?" or "What do you think the professor expects of you in this class?" from the first week of class. Such statements should probably be anonymous and each student who is in class should get class participation points for responses. I also use classroom assessment techniques (CAT) on a regular basis. See Angelo and Cross (1993) for examples. By having students write something in class, they learn that I expect them to write. One CAT that I use is the one minute questionnaire where students are asked, "What did you learn this week?" and "Did you get what you came for in class this week?"

Role Model, Examples

I put examples of good case analyses written by students on reserve in the library and urge students to examine them. Good examples could go on a web page and faculty should have examples of good and poor term projects for examination in our offices. I urge students to come to my office and look at past examples to determine for themselves what is good writing

and what detracts from a good grade. This activity gives me an opportunity to discuss various aspects of writing and help students learn on an individual basis.

Separate Early Content and Writing

Because students are struggling with new ideas and theory in the strategy content area, I provide written handouts giving structure for written case analyses, financial analysis, required information for situation audit, format for term projects, etc. Composition instructors believe that students who are confused about content will produce poor writing. Meyer and Meyer (1986) argue that writing is a process. In order to improve a process, the student must practice the process. Meyer and Meyer believe that organization is key to good writing. That means that students should list the content areas they intend to address in the paper before starting to write. Some of us would consider this an outline.

My group term project in strategy is the analysis of a firm. By midterm, each group must turn in a paper for grading with a list of topics they intend to cover in the analysis. This would cover items such as mission, current corporate and business unit strategies, geographical coverage, primary marketing focus, etc. Students also create a separate paper for grading that has a raw financial analysis of the firm. Each of these papers includes raw data but no analysis (other than financial ratio analysis). Neither of these papers is graded for writing, grammar, spelling, syntax. The groups are graded solely on content. I give feedback on the acceptability of the content of the papers and students then begin the process of actually writing the analysis. By requiring the complete data base first, the students get the strategic facts straight, get feedback from me and then can begin to write a term paper based on data.

Guest Speakers

Before the first written case is due, I invite the Director of the University Writing Center to come to class and talk to my students about writing. The

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director says many things that I say, e.g., pagination, complete sentences, topic sentences, coherent sentences, etc. but it seems to have more meaning coming from someone other than the strategy teacher. If I did not have a university writing center, I would probably invite the coordinator of the freshman composition classes or someone else who would stress the importance of writing.

Correct And Resubmit (CAR)

One of the most efficient techniques I have developed is the CAR procedure. When students have too many grammatical errors, i.e., more than five in a two page document, they do not receive a grade but get a CAR (correct and resubmit). I continue reading the poor paper, writing code along the side as to the grade and the errors but the student does not receive a grade for the paper. The student has to rework the paper, correcting the grammatical or spelling errors but CAN NOT change the content. Within four working days, the student must return the original paper and the new corrected paper. A grader can quickly compare the two to see if the errors have been corrected. This way, the grader does not have to regrade the paper but can then assign the appropriate grade when the errors have been corrected. A grade goes into the grade book only when all errors have been corrected.

This method requires one grading by the teacher but forces the student to correct errors from an earlier paper when he or she wants to be working on the next paper. Most students learn to proofread and eliminate careless errors after going through one paper with a Correct And Resubmit. I urge students to go to the University Writing Center and to use peer mentors to edit their papers (Howard & Jamieson, 1995). Students are rewarded with a grade when they turn in an acceptable paper. Students who will not proofread and continue to make casual errors will be punished in that they have to redo the paper before the grade for content is valid. I do not act as an editor and I do not explain grammar or spelling or syntax rules for students. I merely

require that the manuscript be acceptable before I assign a grade to it. Of course, smart students can determine what their grade will be by reading my notes and coding but that is a future grade. As long as the grade is not recorded in my grade file, it is not a grade.

Because the student has to turn in all versions of the paper each time it is corrected, the teacher can be assured that the student is not improving the content (and thereby the grade) with each additional version of the paper. It also discourages plagiarism. I refuse to act as editor and tell the student how to correct the mistakes. I point out that the student has already passed a college composition class so I should not have to reteach material that the student has already mastered.

Rough Drafts

We know that most writing is improved when we revise and edit the first draft (Meyer & Meyer, 1986; Strunk & White, 1959). In conjunction with the University Writing Center, I have developed a schedule where each term project group must take a rough draft of their term paper to the Writing Center ten days before the paper is due to me. The University Writing Center provides me with written notification that the group has met with a writing consultant. This has substantially improved the written quality of the student term papers. Forcing the writing consultation ten days before the paper is due means that the group can not leave the writing of the term project until the day or night before. It also means that an objective writing consultant can help the students with writing.

Some writing theorists argue that we produce cluttered and poor writing when our thoughts are cluttered or unclear. Therefore, students should think critically about the content of the paper before they attempt to write it. Students have a better chance of writing a clear paper if they are not mixed up about the content of the paper. They also have a better chance of turning in an edited revised term paper if they have taken the rough draft to the Writing Center or some editor for

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critique. Some professors require that the rough draft be turned in to the professor who critiques it. I prefer for a more neutral objective person to critique the writing style and grammar.

Peer Review and Advice

Many professors utilize peer review for writing assignments (Howard & Jamieson, 1995). I have never been able to develop a successful peer review procedure for undergraduate students. The student who spends time reviewing another student's paper should be rewarded, yet I have not been able to devise a grading procedure for students who review the papers of others. Students are often too anxious for friendship and do not give honest or accurate feedback to other students. Furthermore, careful review takes substantial time and many students are reluctant to invest the time with no payback. Consider the student who is a good writer, who gets a student reviewer who is poor and is unable to provide helpful feedback. The good student will feel abused at having to spend time reviewing a poor paper after spending time writing a good paper on his or her own.

CONCLUSIONS

These methods are time consuming but rewarding. Students perform better and are able to put their cases and term papers in a course portfolio to use for interviews and employment (Howard & Jamison, 1995). Students can also see improvement in their papers and often tell me that they have learned certain grammatical or spelling rules by having to correct their mistakes.

Our students will only write better when we emphasize writing in our classes and when we refuse to accept inadequate writing. Students will complain about not having a grade and having to redo the paper. I point out that the student made the decision to turn in a paper that was not proofread or grammatically correct. At all times, I encourage students to get peer advice, get writing consultant help, and use any aid to help them be better writers.

APPENDIX I

The Jan Zahrly Advice List for Writing (Abridged)

1. Write clearly. Edit. Revise. Have a friend or the folks at the writing center check your manuscript. Put the manuscript away and think of other things. Come back to the manuscript later and read it to see if it makes sense. Edit it again. It is a rare person who can create a first draft that is worth reading.
2. Don't try to be cute or clever. Try to be clear and exact.
3. Spell everything correctly.
4. You are writing business English, not literary English. Make your sentences short. Do not try to use fancy words. Use short paragraphs with all sentences in the paragraph related to a common topic.
5. Use active voice. Avoid passive voice. If you do not know what this means, buy *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White (1959), *The Elements of Grammar* by Shertzer (1986) or some other text on the rules of writing. Read and refer to the writing text.
6. A company is a single organization. It is an "it," not a "they." Management can be singular or plural and can be termed "it" or "they." If you mean management as a total entity, use "it." If you refer to management as a group of several people, use "they."
7. Try not to use pronouns. Use the noun instead.
8. Subjects and verbs must agree as to whether they are singular or plural.

APPENDIX II

What Makes Good Writing in Business Courses by Jan Zahrly (Abridged)

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* Good writing communicates information. It gives meaning to the reader. It may present new information, it may integrate and synthesize information, it may apply information from one area to another, it may question information but IT GIVES MEANING.

* Good writing does not have a goal of amusement or entertaining.

* Good writing is precise and exact. Good writing is not ambiguous with multiple interpretations.

* Good writing is concrete, not abstract.

* Good writing has content. It provides information to support the problem, thesis or situation that is the focus of the manuscript. It is not words without meaning.

* Good writing demonstrates critical thinking. It challenges assumptions, it integrates disparate theories or data, it presents patterns or models, it shows synergy.

* Good writing may state the obvious or may go beyond the obvious.

* Good writing sets up a thesis, a problem, a situation or hypothesis near the beginning of the manuscript. Good writing gives the reader the focus of the paper at the beginning so the reader knows where the writer is going.

* Good writing is focused and limited. It presents information in a logical progression. It does not ramble or wander off the subject. It does not leave the reader questioning the point or focus of the essay.

References Available Upon Request