Business Writing: Designing a Course for the Third Year Writing Program for the Center for Language Education and Development (CLED)

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Abstract

The writing program, for the Center for Language Education and Development (CLED), saw a significant change during the 2019 academic year. As part of the new curriculum, students moved away from a three year coordinated academic writing program into a two-year program, whereby third year students would transition into an elective style system. This new system would expose students to an alternate form of writing, thereby teaching students the skills that an education in traditional writing may not provide.

As a result of the change, instructors were asked to create their own unique writing course from which students would select. After much discussion with both colleagues and students, I decided to introduce a business writing course as one of the offered electives. This paper will discuss the development of the course; student feedback; as well as the possibilities for improvement.

1. Introduction

When the change to the writing curriculum was introduced in 2018, third-year

writing instructors were asked to create a course which would expose students to an alternate style of writing to that of the academic style required during their first two years at university. Although instructors had the freedom to design the course as they wished, a basic specification for the development of the course was that students write a combined total of 2,000 words (per semester), in order to ensure the workload was similar across all writing styles.

In order to select the type of course I was to develop, I approached both my colleagues, and my then third year writing students, to ascertain the writing styles already under consideration, as well as determine student preferences. At the time, the primary writing styles under consideration were Creative Writing, Journalism, Thesis Writing, as well as an Academic Writing course that would continue to build on what the students had learned throughout their first two years.

Having determined the styles under consideration, I approached my then third-year writing students to ask their preferences. From a total of 28 students, 23 students stated they wished to take a writing course that taught them skills that could be used once out of university. In addition, a few colleagues confirmed these same sentiments among their own students when asked.

Finally, recognizing that English is becoming the universal language for businesses around the world, making it necessary for individuals to become proficient with the written tasks common in the workplace, it was soon clear that a business writing course would be ideal for the new system.

2. Course Development

Throughout the development of the course, it was important to research the types of business writing courses offered to university students, both at other

institutions and online; as well as the types of textbooks available for teaching the subject. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that the design of these courses, as well as the textbooks available, did not meet the needs of our students.

2.1 Third-Year Writing Students

Students in the third-year writing program are comprised of English majors whose future employment goals are varied. Although they are likely to move on to any number of workplace environments, most wish to use their English skills in some capacity once out of university. As a result, it was necessary to design a course that would develop the writing abilities useful to a variety of fields. It was for this reason that the course focused on the most common forms of writing in the workplace, while developing the skills necessary for effective written communication.

2.2 Business Writing Textbooks and Courses

After examining a number of business writing textbooks and manuals, it became clear that most were designed for working adults in the business world, rather than university students being introduced to this style of writing. This resulted in lexis and content too difficult for first time learners to grasp. In other cases, textbooks followed the same structure of general English books which would be impractical for a course dedicated to writing. Finally, not only did many these textbooks place limits on the learner as a result of their design, but several of these textbooks were outdated and did not account for the importance of communication technology in business.

With regards to business courses, many followed the same structure of a client-based approach to teaching, whereby students "responded" to a "client" in an organizational context. However, the environment in which these scenarios took place were generally limited to the corporate world, once again making the

assumption that learners were familiar with this work culture. As a result of these issues, I created the materials used throughout the course of the year.

2.3 Course Goals

The overall goal of the course was to help students transition from the world of academic writing to professional writing. Throughout their journey, learners were introduced to conventions, genres, and strategies of written business communication. At the end of the course students were expected to have the ability to analyze and evaluate written communication typically encountered in the workplace; produce clear, concise, well organized, and effective texts for diverse audiences; incorporate process into all writing task; conduct research relevant to the topic and integrate appropriate sources; as well as have the ability to give and receive constructive criticism amongst peers.

2.4 Course Outline

Although writing courses consists of one 90-minute class per week, over a 15 week period, the first lesson is generally reserved for introducing students to the course, while the final lesson serves as a time to return all documents and as a farewell. All in all, this results in a total of 13 in-class sessions. Taking into account the total hours of in-class time available, as well as seeking to make the course as accessible as possible to students, I grouped tasks into a series of projects based on workplace writing genres. (see Table 1 and 2)

2.5 Method of Instruction and Assessment

Direct, indirect, and interactive modes of instruction were used throughout the course. Examples of the applications used to incorporate these methods included lectures, demonstrations, group discussions, workshops, and peer review.

With regards to assessment, students were evaluated on two factors: in-class

Table 1

First Semester	Writing Format	Additional Information

Project 1 – Correspondence Project	• Follow-up Introduction Message
	• Internal Message
	  - Project Update
	  - Memorandum
	• External Message
	  - general enquiry
		Students tasked with writing email messages commonly encountered in the workplace.

Project 2 – Letter Writing Project	• "Negative" Letter
	  - Letter of Complaint
	• "Positive" Letter
	  - Positive response (to complaint)
	• "Neutral" Letter
	  - Informational Letter
		Students learn to differentiate between general email correspondence and the formalities of some forms of business writing.
		
		Students advised on how to modify a letter should it need to be sent via email.

Project 3 – Employment Project	• Resume • Cover Letter • Post-Interview Thank You	Students learn how to effectively present their background, skills and accomplishments. **Most students begin job-hunting during the 2nd semester

Table 2

Second Semester	Writing Format	Additional Information
Project 1 – Formal Report (Part 1)	• Proposal	Students tasked with writing a proposal which addresses a problem or opportunity.
Project 2 – Formal Report (Part 2)	• Analytic Report	Students evaluate a proposal and give a recommendation based on analysis.

effort (participation) and quality of work (projects). Their participation score, which accounts for 20 percent of their final grade, is determined by the effort student make throughout each step of the writing process as well as the effort made in the course itself. The other 80 percent of their score is based on project performance. In order to grade their projects, a grading rubric was created. (see Table 3)

As can be seen in the table provided, each of the projects could receive a maximum score of 20 points. During the first semester, project 1 was worth 20 percent of a student's total grade, while project 2 and 3 were worth 30 percent.

Table 3

Criteria	4	3	2	1
Presentation	**Exemplary** job of the following: • All required elements present and completed to a high standard. • Writing is produced on clean (white) paper, stapled, and presented in portfolio. • When appropriate, use of in-text citation, and/or reference list to document sources. Follows accepted reference format accurately. • Timely completion of work, allowing for drafts, feedback, and editing. All deadlines have met.	**Average** job of the following: • All required elements present and completed to a high standard. • Writing is produced on clean (white) paper, stapled, and presented in portfolio. • When appropriate, use of in-text citation, and/or reference list to document sources. Follows accepted reference format accurately. • Timely completion of work, allowing for drafts, feedback, and editing. All deadlines have met.	**Below Average** job of the following: • All required elements present and completed to a high standard. • Writing is produced on clean (white) paper, stapled, and presented in portfolio. • When appropriate, use of in-text citation, and/or reference list to document sources. Follows accepted reference format accurately. • Timely completion of work, allowing for drafts, feedback, and editing. All deadlines have met.	**Unsatisfactory** job of the following: • All required elements present and completed to a high standard. • Writing is produced on clean (white) paper, stapled, and presented in portfolio. • When appropriate, use of in-text citation, and/or reference list to document sources. Follows accepted reference format accurately. • Timely completion of work, allowing for drafts, feedback, and editing. All deadlines have met.
Format	Has **all** of the following: A) Follows all writing format guidelines. B) Follows all document format guidelines. C) Work is required length.	Has **two** of the following: A) Follows all writing format guidelines. B) Follows all document format guidelines. C) Work is required length.	Has **one** of the following: A) Follows all writing format guidelines. B) Follows all document format guidelines. C) Work is required length.	Has **none** of the following: A) Follows all writing format guidelines. B) Follows all document format guidelines. C) Work is required length.
Organization	Writing **completely** coherent and logically structured. Paragraphing is appropriate, and cohesion is maintained throughout. Unity clearly leads the reader to the conclusion and stirs thought regarding the topic.	Writing is **mostly** coherent and logically organized with transitions used between ideas and paragraphs to create coherence. Overall unity of ideas is present.	Writing is **somewhat** coherent and logically organized. Some points remain misplaced and stray from the topic. Transitions are evident but not used throughout.	Writing lacks logical organization. Shows lack of coherence and unity. Serious errors.
Content	**Completely** aligned with writing objective. Content indicates synthesis of ideas, and in-depth analysis when required. Evidences original thought and support for the topic. Audience knowledge, needs, attitudes, concerns, and motivations fully addressed.	**Mostly** aligned with writing objective. Content indicates mostly original thinking and develops ideas with sufficient and firm evidence. Audience knowledge, needs, attitudes, concerns, and motivations are mostly addressed.	**Somewhat** aligned with writing objective. Content indicates some original thinking and reasoning applied with original thought on a few ideas. Audience knowledge, needs, attitudes, concerns, and motivations are somewhat addressed.	**Does not** meet writing objective. Shows lack of thinking and reasoning, most ideas are underdeveloped and unoriginal. Audience knowledge, needs, attitudes, concerns, and motivations are **not** addressed.
Language, Grammar, & Mechanics	All sentences are well constructed and have varied structure and length. Writer uses vocabulary that is precise, with awareness of audience. Makes (almost) no errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and/or spelling.	Most sentences are well constructed and have varied structure and length. Writer uses adequate vocabulary, but lacks precision. Displays some awareness of audience. Makes a few errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and/or spelling, but they do not interfere with understanding.	Some sentences are well constructed, but they have a similar structure and/or length. Writer uses adequate vocabulary, but lacks precision. Displays minimal awareness of audience. Makes several errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and/or spelling that interfere with understanding.	Sentences sound awkward, are distractingly repetitive, or difficult to understand. Writer fails to use appropriate vocabulary or terminology. Word choice is inappropriate for intended audience. Makes numerous errors in grammar, mechanics, punctuation, and/or spelling that interfere with understanding.

During the second semester each project was worth 40 percent of a student's overall grade in the course.

3. Student Feedback

At the completion of the course, students were given a questionnaire asking about their overall impressions of the course. When asked about their overall impressions of having a business English course as an option, students responded positively. Some stated that they found it to be more useful than academic writing, or that they believed this course would allow them to work with foreigners/ in a foreign country in the future. When asked about their overall experience in the course, students shared both positive and negative opinions. On the positive side, students found it helpful to learn skills for the workplace, and believed it would be useful in "real" life. Some also stated that they appreciated having 1-on-1 feedback (from both their instructor and peers). However, students also mentioned that they found the course to be more difficult than academic writing. The overall consensus was that it proved to be more challenging as a result of it being a new writing style. Finally, a few students requested the addition of

meeting minutes to the course.

4. Possibilities for Improvement

Although this business course is still in its infancy, and will continue to evolve over time, one part of the writing process will likely see significant change in the 2020 academic year. Although students were reminded of the importance of self-editing at the start of each semester, most students would only change or modify their work based on peer or instructor feedback, thereby disregarding one of the most important aspects in the writing process. When it became clear students were neglecting this key part of the writing process, I made adjustments to my lesson plans in order to include time for self-editing while in the classroom. However, it soon became clear that many were unaware as to how to accomplish this task. As a result, I will likely make the necessary adjustments in order to allow for the addition of activities or a workshop on self-editing, at the start of the semester.

5. Conclusion

Despite the challenges encountered when designing the business writing course, this course was optimal for giving students a broader range of writing style choices. And though this writing style may have proven challenging for students, especially given that this was their first experience with professional writing, their overall performance was admirable, and they found the experience be positive.

Although the course will evolve over time, one immediate change will be the integration of activities or a workshop that will improve the self-editing skills of students. In the end, I am confident this course would allow students to transition from the academic world into the "real world" which would not only increase their chance of employment, but increase their chance for success.