

A STUDY OF STUDENT WRITING WEAKNESSES IN MARKETING: DOES ANYBODY KNOW IT, CARE, OR HAVE A SOLUTION?

**Jerry L. Thomas, College of Business, San Jose State University, One Washington Square,
San Jose, CA 95192; sgthomas1@aol.com**

ABSTRACT

Employers are lamenting that our marketing graduates have inadequate writing skills, but university education is no longer providing enough classroom opportunities for students to develop their writing proficiency before graduation. This article examines marketing students' fundamental writing problems, based on a study done of over 3,500 student marketing papers. The article then suggests a form-specific pedagogical approach that has been effective to shore up students' writing problems. With the addition of a few targeted writing assignments and some changes in class procedure, marketing students will be better prepared to handle the writing that will be required of them in marketing positions.

INTRODUCTION

Employers in the Silicon Valley have been giving feedback to our College of Business on a regular basis for many years, stating over and over that our marketing graduates cannot write adequately for today's corporate environment and have weak thinking skills.

Given the intense criticism from these business professionals over a lengthy period of time, I decided to evaluate in more detail the particular writing weaknesses of my marketing students, so that I might design class assignments to not only strengthen these weaknesses but to also better prepare them for on-the-job writing to achieve success in their marketing positions after graduation.

Methodology for this data collection was simple. The student writing tabulations included my evaluation of over 700 undergraduate marketing students, sampling some 3,500 marketing writing assignments accounting for 15 percent of their course grade. Each writing assignment was based on the students' ability to conceptualize, present, and explain a marketing principle previously presented in class lecture and discussion or prerequisite material or material from their current marketing text.

No specific algorithm or measurement scheme was used for grading these assignments, other than my own 33-year history of grading similar assignments.

I based results on a non-curved standard of "A" (excellent) through "F" (failure), "A" equaling a 4.0 grade point and "F" equaling a 0 grade point, with my standards being what Junior level university students should be capable of, as well as what the business environment will expect of them upon graduation. Therefore, I graded on each of the following elements that are required in any business deliverable: content, clear and logical presentation, following directions, and mechanics. The result was a mean grade of 1.8 or "D+" with a standard deviation of .52, or one-half letter grade.

WRITING WEAKNESSES

Below are described the four major weaknesses I found in student writing and suggestions for shoring up these problem areas.

Using Poor Mechanics

Students were very weak in the mechanics of writing (Flateby, 2005). I decided I can at least address the most basic writing weaknesses that can be readily and profoundly improved. (Identify the mechanics they will be responsible for in their writing assignments, and make these a significant part of their grade: grammar, punctuation, spelling, and syntax. If these mechanics are not graded, the students are left to believe that the mechanics really are not that important after all.)

Not Articulating Knowledge

Because my students have never been "marketing practitioners," they tend to state principles by rote definition or memory rather than articulate knowledge of skills associated with the principle or its actual practical marketing application and so had great difficulty in explaining these marketing principles from the textbook in their own words (Labat & Bilorusky, 2003). Their understanding may be there, but they have not had much experience explaining concepts in prose. So I decided a good exercise to develop this writing ability was to have students explain in writing some of the skills required to apply marketing principles discussed in the textbook and in class lecture. (For example, I have students explain in writing the "workings" of market mix allocations to positioning or why the normal

curve of the “Diffusion of Innovation” is skewed in reality, or the logic of the Market Concept, etc.)

Difficulty Explaining Mathematical Formulae in Prose

Students had great difficulty explaining mathematical outcomes in prose. In math classes, they have been used to providing a numeric answer only, but never being challenged to explain what the relationship is among the components of the formula, how they impact each other, and what the answer means in a real-world applied sense (Rosen, Weil, & Zastrow, 2001). I now teach students how to understand the formula-driven and numeric marketing applications (what each variable means and how each affects the outcome), then I have them explain their results in understandable prose, not just in numbers. (I assign sample size, forecasting, or break-even problems, etc., and then require the students to explain the algorithm and the meaning of their quantitative marketing answer in writing.)

Not Writing Succinctly

Students have a difficult time writing succinctly (O'Regan & Mackenzie, 2005), so I purposely put a limitation on the length of their answers to 50 words or less. They need to understand that in business marketing, less is more and time is money, so they need to learn how to write clearly, quickly, and to the point. In most college courses, students have not been taught to write with brevity, but instead, have usually found themselves working hard to extend what they have written to meet a document length requirement by adding fluff and extraneous material resulting in wordiness.

ADDITIONAL PROBLEMS

I also found in my recent work that poor student performance on writing assignments, aside from weak content, can be divided more broadly into four procedural areas: not following instructions accurately, “delegating upward,” substituting guesswork for knowledge, and offering personal opinion when not asked for.

Not Following Instructions Accurately

Students were, number one, very poor at following the directions for assignments. It would appear that in past courses, they have been held to few, if any, specific formatting instructions or other specific requirements, so, predictably, there was much variability in the finished output. In business, most correspondence and reporting is rather standardized

by comparison. Departments and companies have certain ways they want things done or protocols, so few things are left up to entry level employee discretion to change.

Sometimes, I found, their not following instructions accurately was due to lazy listening. Thus, students picked up only a fraction of the significant elements involved in an assignment or misunderstood the directions in other significant ways (McHugh, 2007). Lazy listening, surprisingly, can occur among students with the most capability as well as those with less.

Unfortunately, faculty do not often penalize students for lazy listening and actually give them at least partial credit or sometimes full credit, despite their not following directions. As a result, students often have no incentive to improve their listening skills, since basically they are never made to suffer any significant consequence and learn from this bad habit. In a classroom is the best (and cheapest) place to learn how to improve listening skills, so when faculty do not make students pay a price for lazy listening, students leave the university still incredibly weak in this skill. They arrive, then, in their first job after graduation still thinking that they will never be made to account much at all for not following directions accurately and that therefore they can continue to pay little attention to assignment specifics.

In a business classroom, students are also often offered the opportunity to re-write an assignment to improve their grade, whether the poorly written product was due to misunderstanding the directions or simply from giving an overall poor initial effort. Such well-meaning rewards on the part of faculty, unfortunately, simply encourage students to continue in lazy listening and other poor writing habits, because they believe they will always have time to do it over and, most importantly, get rewarded for it.

Sadly, once they obtain their first job after graduation, they will soon learn, and will probably be quite confused about the fact, that in a business setting they will be given no “points” for a mediocre first effort as they were often given in the classroom. Business simply cannot give any points for effort alone. Effort is automatically expected; after all, that's what the employee is getting paid for. The employee is also getting paid for doing the job right the first time. Since time is truly money in a business setting, students in their first job after graduation will quickly find that the classroom practice of “rewriting your way to an ‘A’” tragically did not train them in

how to produce their best effort the first time nor in how to listen carefully at the beginning. The sense of rushing in a business environment is nowhere to be found on a college campus; students have ample time to complete assignments. In a business environment there is often a sense of rushing and little time in which to complete the task, so understanding the instructions accurately and knowing how to work accurately and quickly is a must. Any work that has to be re-done wastes precious time because it reduces employer profit and reduces personal success. Thus, employees who cannot do things right the first time may, sadly, become too costly to keep!

Delegating Upward

This situation occurs in business when an employee is assigned a task to accomplish, but lacking understanding of what exactly to do or where to get the needed information, returns to the manager or supervisor and asks for help with the assignment from this person, such that the supervisor is actually doing the work assigned to the employee (Oncken & Wass, 1974). A supervisor expects the employee to look elsewhere for answers and ideas, not to return empty-handed (Setty, 2005). Where do these recent graduates now on their first job get the idea of returning to their boss constantly for personal help? Delegating upward occurs frequently in university classroom settings. Students are taught, in fact, to go to the professor as a resource, if need be. They will often go to the faculty member's office to request help, even to get explanations concerning fundamental prerequisite course knowledge they lack that is needed for the assignment.

Many university faculty welcome the opportunity to help students far more extensively than they should. Faculty should give general guidelines for students as to where to find information but also tell students at the outset of an assignment that they will not be providing extensive help and answers to the students. Weaning students from the upward delegation habit takes time and compassion (a "tough love" of sorts) but creates strong, capable and viable students who will, by graduation, have developed independent work habits.

Substituting Guesswork for Knowledge

This strategy occurs to many students as an acceptable effort. Again, there are several dangers to this approach when used in the workplace. (1) Guesses are rarely correct, contribute nothing to the work product, and can be outright dangerous, creating at the very least company embarrassment

and, worse, possible charges of misfeasance or malfeasance, which sometimes results in costs to the company to pay court judgments if lack of specific performance can be proved. (2) For reasons mentioned above, guesses are not rewarded.

Unfortunately, guesswork is often rewarded in classrooms, particularly on short answer and essay exams. Students have often been rewarded for "writing something," even if it was quite off the mark. They get some points, in other words, for making an attempt, even if it is entirely guesswork. Sadly, this kind of "reward" has encouraged students to guess, a habit they will likely carry into the business world until they face a different, more unpleasant outcome for guessing. The employee is far better off admitting he does not know the answer; the manager will then put someone on the task with the employee, someone who does know the answer or at least who knows how to proceed intelligently. This "bailout" will not, however, happen without cost to the employee, because the manager will believe this is information and skills the employee should have had.

Offering Personal Opinion

This is what students usually do when asked to analyze something and provide conclusions. In entry-level marketing management, of course, personal opinion is almost never asked for, and, in any event, personal opinion is not the basis for a conclusion (Blackford, 2004). Employees will, however, be asked to provide a careful analysis of data and facts plus, possibly, conclusions. Unfortunately, in many of their academic assignments, students' personal opinion or "creative thinking" is what was solicited. They are simply asked how they "feel" about a topic, or to write about a personal experience. Rarely are students taught to look at data and rigorously analyze a topic. So instead of being trained in the rigors of analysis and logical thinking, their assignments are watered down to be a matter of simply forming their own opinion of something, which, conveniently means there is no longer any "right" or "wrong." They have thus grown up completely unprepared for the business world in this regard, believing that their opinion will be solicited and does matter.

I am not sure why educators have found this type of assignment worthwhile, since it does not prepare students for the real world, and it teaches students that their opinion is hugely important to others, which it usually is not, at least in an entry level work environment. So once students begin university life and later job settings, it is difficult for most of them to understand what it means to simply be a "data

gatherer,” analyst, and presenter, contributing to a capable management decision. In particular, undergraduates must be helped to understand that not only does their opinion not have much place in business writing, but also the idea of drawing conclusions is usually not called for at an entry level either. The only useful conclusions they will be allowed to draw will be very elementary ones, and only after they have presented the appropriate history and data from credible secondary sources. They do not yet have enough personal experience to offer meaningful “gut-level” intuitive opinions. Their job is to objectively and thoroughly present secondary findings and let management take it from there. As a result of this early education that focused more on opinion than research, students often give short shrift to the importance of doing secondary research, thinking their own view is more important than documenting real experts and do not really know how to approach, let alone organize, a research assignment.

These four problems (not following instructions, delegating upward, substituting guesswork for knowledge, and offering personal opinion) seem unimportant and fairly trivial to a generation of self-indulged young people. So perhaps one of the greatest practical gifts faculty can pass on to serious students is to spend some time teaching students about the gravity of these weaknesses in the workplace and how to correct them. A few initial faculty prompts can go a long way to stimulate and build stronger student solutions to these fundamental writing problems.

A portion of the grade of each assignment is allocated to fulfilling the specific directions and fulfilling management’s directive. Require students to write real-time, in class, short but frequent assignments so that they realize and demonstrate proficiency and knowledge without the aid of spell- and grammar-check software, dictionaries, notes, textbooks, or editorial help.

Provide ample initial dialogue when students receive the assignment to answer their questions. Then hold them accountable for lazy listening and the assigned deliverable without further “delegating upward.”

Hold students’ grades accountable for guesswork. A wrong guess in business is, at best, the acknowledgment that a student does not understand or know two things: what the correct answer should

be or an understanding of the “guess” that they substituted, which is also clearly wrong. Lower the grade for unsupported and undocumented opinions, provided by students in their answers, thus helping students to understand that in a business setting an opinion is a privilege, not a “right of passage,” based simply on their attaining a college degree.

CONCLUSION

As one might expect, students differed in their areas of writing weaknesses. The writing problems examined in this study are not the sole culprits. But these basic difficulties occurred regularly and in nearly the same proportion, albeit to differing degrees among three-fourths of the student papers. My expectations for this pedagogy was not to turn marginal communicators into “Ernest Hemmingways,” but I did find that grades, even in the short run of a semester, improved over 0.5 of a grade point, or one-half letter grade. These data do suggest that the attention to detail that marketing faculty can provide can be instrumental in raising student academic and professional competencies.

Therefore, there is much that we can do to help prepare students more effectively for real-world marketing positions, far more than we are generally doing now. It does not have to take a lot of additional faculty or student time, but, rather, a slightly different focus as professors of marketing. The rubric to a form-specific pedagogical approach is to require students to write short but frequent in-class explanations of two types: (1) quantitative, and these would include writings about sample size, break even, forecasting, etc., and (2) qualitative, and these would include writings about market mix, positioning, diffusion of innovation, etc. And then evaluate their assignment deliverables for mechanics, articulation of true knowledge, explanation of quantitative applications, writing succinctly, following specific instructions, resistance to “delegating upward,” eliminating guesswork, and avoiding opinions, making each a substantial factor in the final course grade. We need to add to our pedagogy these proficiency requirements for effective marketing communication, skills that will not only transition students to a job in the marketing field but to a marketing management career as well – remembering that businesses are our customers, not the students. The students are our “product” and our reputation.

References Available on Request