

Teaching Graduate Students to Write Persuasively for Business Decision Making: A Workshop Approach

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ABSTRACT

Although writing skills are vital to a successful career in business, graduate students receive little instruction on how to develop such skills. In a pilot study, we designed and conducted a writing workshop, teaching graduate students to persuasively communicate business decisions. The one and half a day workshop focused on three topics: “thesis writing”, “how to structure and develop a persuasive essay”, and “language mechanics”, along with homework, in-class writing assignments, and prompt feedback. Professional writing techniques were also introduced, which helped students learn how to compose a multi-paragraph persuasive essay in a timed context. Students’ response towards the workshop was extremely positive.

Keywords: decision making, persuasive essay, writing workshop, business education

INTRODUCTION

Effective writing skills are central in both business education and students’ future professional assignments. Graduates with excellent writing skills provide more value to their employers and project a more professional image than those with poor writing skills. Writing is regarded as a core competence of a well-trained business graduate (Everson, 2014; Parent et al, 2011; Skapinker, 2013; Wright & Larsen, 2016). Nevertheless, our students do not write as well as we think they should (CBI/Pearson, 2016; Finch et al., 2013; Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007). Employers continue to complain that both undergraduates and MBA students fall behind their expectations of writing skills (Arum and Roksa, 2011; Everson, 2014; Lentz, 2013; Lin et al, 2010). Whereas considerable research and efforts have been made to address undergraduate writing deficiencies, the literature on graduate business students’ writing is sparse (Barrett, 2002; Mitchell et al, 2013), which may be due to the assumption that students entering the MBA or other business graduate programs already have substantial classroom instruction in English composition.

According to Penrose (2007), however, some graduate students may have acceptable English composition training; but are barely ready to work in an English-only and writing-intensive business environment. May et al. (2012) find that many graduate students’ English composition skills are simply rusty, and that other students come from undergraduate disciplines with no emphasis on business-style writing. As a result, “effectively organizing sentences and paragraphs” and “writing clearly and precisely” are identified as areas where fresh graduates need the most improvement (Jones, 2011, p.259). Among the many and varied reasons explaining the lack of writing proficiency, the most obvious one is that students receive a limited amount of instruction in English composition and they do not write very much if at all (Glen, 2011; Smit, 2010).

In this study, we designed and conducted a writing workshop with an objective to teach graduate students to persuasively communicate their business decisions. The ability to write persuasively is essential for managers, as it facilitates collaboration, consensus reaching, and decision making. Nevertheless, our students find it challenging to persuasively convey business decisions based on evidence. Both authors teach MBA level classes that require case analyses involving decision making, such as whether or not to extend the current product line, which distribution strategy to adopt, and which customer segment should the company target (e.g., Deighton et al., 2006). More often than not, students are uncertain about how to approach the analyses. Some of them turn in “bullet points” which look like PowerPoint slides. When asked to submit an “essay”, many students ramble on about details or numbers in the assigned cases without making clear inferences or providing convincing rationale for their decisions.

A Wall Street Journal article by Middleton (2011) echoes our observation: employers frequently complain that the writing of employees with MBAs is not on point and does not keep the audience’s needs in mind. Besides the qualitative observations, we noticed some quantitative evidence suggesting a similar writing predicament. We teach on a campus where students need to pass a Writing Skills Test (WST) as part of the degree requirement. The WST consists of authoring a persuasive essay that requires students to think and write critically, as they need to do in

communicating a business decision. Unfortunately, the pass rate for business graduate students is dismal, less than 50 percent, as there is no instruction or training for the students to prepare them for the writing skills test.

Therefore, the necessity and importance of instructions on how to persuasively communicate a decision cannot be overstated, which motivated us to design and conduct the writing workshop. Specifically, we taught students practical techniques to structure and develop a multi-paragraph persuasive essay. In what follows, we discuss the various components of the writing workshop, as well as of its effectiveness among a group of graduate students who attended our workshop. It is clear in the assessment results that by the end of the workshop, students developed an enhanced understanding of how to develop a thesis statement and structure a multi-paragraph persuasive essay, along with some practical writing tips.

THE WRITING WORKSHOP

The workshop was one and half days long, scheduled on two Fridays with a week interval. In general, we completed the bulk of the instruction on the first Friday and gave students homework due the following Monday. On the second Friday morning, we provided detailed constructive feedback to students on their homework and gave them a timed, in-class writing assignment. Comments on the in-class assignment were sent to students via Blackboard afterwards. During the workshop, we employed a variety of writing instruction practices that have been widely adopted, such as paired collaborative writing, student inquiry activity for writing, and providing models of good writing (Graham, 2010). By the end of the workshop, we expected that students would be able to complete an 800-word, seven-paragraph persuasive essay in 90 minutes on WST topics involving business decisions (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample Topics

Prompt 1: Some people argue that advertising educates consumers and promotes product benefits, while others argue that advertisements can be deceptive and unethical. Should the claims made by advertisements be regulated? Make sure you support your position with reasons, explanations, and examples.

Prompt 2: Some people believe that auto insurance companies have the right to charge young male drivers higher insurance rates because they have a higher incidence of getting into accidents and filing claims. Other people believe this to be a form of age and gender discrimination. Should insurance companies be allowed to charge higher rates to young men? Make sure you support your position with reasons, explanations, and examples.

Prompt 3: In the business world some managers encourage individual competition among employees, while others promote collaboration and teamwork. Which do you think is a more effective strategy? Make sure you support your position with reasons, explanations, and examples.

Day 1 (Lecture, 5.5 hours)

We began the day by collecting pre-workshop assessment measures, including specimens of diagnostic thesis writing and a questionnaire for assessing students' perceptions of their writing ability and habits. The following lecture was organized around three topics, "thesis writing" (1.5 hours), "how to structure and develop a persuasive essay" (3 hours), and "language mechanics" (1 hour).

Each lecture segment was followed by writing practice followed by in-class group review. Based on our past teaching experience, we found that students are oftentimes not absolutely sure about their decision making. When this happens, students tend to find a middle ground in the thesis writing, not explicitly expressing their views on the decision (e.g., to expand or NOT to expand the product line, targeting the connoisseur or "newly rich" customer segment). Such practice, however, results in undue confusion for the readers and should be avoided. After reading thesis statement samples written by their peers earlier, students are more susceptible to the advice on "making your view explicit and supporting it with three reasons." To help students write under time pressure, we recommended they use the *argumentative thesis statement* (i.e. making a claim about a topic and justifying the claim with specific evidence), as opposed to the analytical or explanatory thesis statements. Further, instead of constructing a traditional 3-part thesis sentence, students were urged to develop three stand-alone sentences for two reasons: 1) stand-alone sentences are easier to construct, especially for those who do not have good command of the English language; and 2) students can also use the stand-alone sentences as topic sentences for subsequent paragraph development.

Second, the area where students needed most help is how to structure and develop a persuasive essay. Before the workshop, many students believed that an essay of two or three paragraphs will suffice and did not seem to appreciate that a multi-paragraph structure can enhance flow of the writer’s ideas and inform readers what to expect in different parts of the essay. With audience awareness in mind, a key business writing consideration, we recommended the following seven-paragraph structure: paragraph 1 explicitly states the thesis statement (with three reasons); paragraph 2 and 3 elaborate on reason 1 (the strongest reason); paragraph 4 and 5 elaborate on reason 2 and 3, respectively; paragraph 6 provides a counterargument; and paragraph 7 concludes the essay. In addition, we offered students hands-on sentence-by-sentence coaching on how to develop the paragraphs (Table 2).

Table 2: Structure and Development of a 7-Paragraph Persuasive Essay

Main Structure	Sentence by Sentence Coaching
Paragraph 1 Introduction (thesis)	Sentence 1- describes the problem/focal subject Sentence 2- states author’s position with counter view Sentence 3- states author’s “three-part” thesis Sentence 4- re-iterates author’s position
Paragraphs 2 to 5 (Reasons 1-3 in the thesis)	Sentence 1- states topic sentence Sentence 2, 3- provide specific example with description Sentence 4,5 - explains why the example supports the position
Paragraph 6 Counter argument	Sentence 1- goes back and restates from the prompt Sentence 2- gives one reason to support the counter view Sentence 3- finds a flaw in the counter view reason Sentence 4- provides a specific example to describe why the counter view reason is wrong
Paragraph 7 Conclusion	Sentence 1, 2 - summarizes the thesis (claim) Sentence 3- presents any solution for consideration Sentence 4- encourages the audience to think about their own opinions on the topic (optional).

Among all the paragraphs, the counter argument was the most challenging to teach. Students usually have misconceptions about the counter argument process, as was evidenced in a paired writing assignment which we gave during the workshop. They are well aware that any business decision has its pros and cons and therefore could easily come up with possible arguments against the thesis or some aspect of the reasoning. However, they learned that the counter argument process does not stop there. As a tip, we reminded students to return to their thesis and reason about the proposed counterargument by refuting it or suggesting that it is relatively less important. The counter argument process requires writers to anticipate doubts and pre-empt objections from a skeptical reader, making the decision making more convincing.

Finally, we discussed major grammar and language use mistakes spotted in previous students’ case analyses, namely, misuse of articles, lack of punctuation, excessive capitalization, use of symbols or numbers in formal writing (e.g., use “&” for “and”, and “4” for “for”), and subject- verb inconsistency. During the discussion, we also introduced the “20-word” rule regarding sentence length: when having more than 20 words in a single sentence, novice writers begin to lose control of their writing. The longer the sentence, the greater loss of control. Students were advised to keep their single sentences within a 20-word limit when possible. The classical book by Strunk and White (2000), *The Elements of Style*, was assigned for further reading. Before they were dismissed, we gave students homework: a thesis statement and a seven-paragraph essay due in three days.

Day 2 (Feedback and Timed Essay Writing, 2.5 hours)

While only half a day long, the second Friday session was critical to the success of the workshop. Students not only received detailed comments and feedback on their homework, they also had an opportunity to immediately use the feedback to improve their writing. We commented on students’ homework by providing them a rubric that highlights six important aspects of persuasive essay writing (Table 3). If a student receives 19 points or higher (out of 24) according to the rubric, she or he passes the writing task. A 90-minute essay and post-workshop survey were administered to students afterwards.

Table 3: Rubric for Evaluating a Persuasive Essay

Statement of purpose, thesis or controlling idea	Points: 4 Demonstrates clear understanding of purpose of communication. Clearly develops thesis. Adheres to topic.	Points: 3 Demonstrates an adequate understanding of purpose. Generally develops thesis.	Points: 2 Demonstrates inconsistent or superficial understanding of purpose. Shows minimal development of thesis.	Point: 1 Lacks an understanding of purpose. May have inadequate or missing thesis.
Audience awareness	Points: 4 Demonstrates clear understanding of audience.	Points: 3 Demonstrates an adequate understanding of audience.	Points: 2 Demonstrates inconsistent or superficial understanding of audience.	Point: 1 Lacks an understanding of audience.
Organization, cohesion, and clarity	Points: 4 Uses clear structure and a range of transitions, and is easy to follow.	Points: 3 Has adequate structure with some transitions, and is generally easy to follow.	Points: 2 Has minimal structure and few transitions, and is somewhat difficult to follow.	Point: 1 Lacks structure and transitions, and is difficult to follow.
Presentation of supporting ideas	Points: 4 Presents ideas and evidence that clearly support purpose, thesis, or controlling idea.	Points: 3 Presents ideas and evidence that generally support purpose, thesis, or controlling idea.	Points: 2 Presents ideas and evidence that minimally support purpose, thesis, or controlling idea.	Point: 1 Does not present ideas or evidence that support purpose, thesis, or controlling idea.
Language usage, sentence structure	Points: 4 Uses a variety of sophisticated and varied sentence structures. Demonstrates appropriate language choices.	Points: 3 Uses somewhat varied sentence structures. Generally demonstrates appropriate language choices.	Points: 2 Uses little variation in sentence structure. Generally demonstrates appropriate language choices.	Point: 1 Lacks variation of sentence structure. Uses language that is consistently hard to follow.
Mechanics: grammar, punctuation, and spelling	Points: 4 Shows correct use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.	Points: 3 Shows mostly correct use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. May have occasional errors in grammar that don't disturb meaning.	Points: 2 May have grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors that are distracting and occasionally interfere with meaning.	Point: 1 Contains grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors that are highly distracting and often interfere with meaning.

ASSESSMENT RESULTS

We successfully implemented the workshop in the winter and spring 2016 quarters. In total, 30 graduate students attended the first day workshop and 14 of them completed the homework and second day workshop. The 14 students (57% female) consisted of 10 MBA students and 4 graduate students specializing in business analytics and accountancy. We used a combination of assessment tools including diagnostic thesis writing, homework, and pre- and post-workshop surveys; and the results generated some interesting findings. First, only 36% (5 out of 14) students could develop a thesis statement properly before the workshop (inter-coder reliability .93), while that number doubled after the workshop (71%, 10 out of 14; inter-coder reliability 1.00). Second, results of the pre- and post-workshop surveys suggested that students' perceptions of their writing ability and habits changed little as a result of the workshop, with a few exceptions (measured by 7-point scales, 1= "not at all" and 7= "certainly can do"; summarized in Table 4, items 7 to 9 are exceptions). The discrepancies may be explained by the fact that during the workshop, we emphasized the difference between opinion and evidence-based writing and constantly reminded students to be more professional with their writing tasks.

Table 4 Pre- and Post- Workshop Survey Results

Survey Items	Pre Mean	Post Mean
1. I can write a coherent essay.	5.29	5.36
2. I know a variety of information organization patterns to use in essay writing.	4.79	4.86
3. I can write a paragraph that has a clear topic sentence.	5.00	5.07
4. I create a main point outline before I write.	5.50	5.36
5. I prepare a complete draft before making revisions.	4.71	4.64
6. I browse through my drafts to check the progress of my writing	5.21	5.29
7. I can differentiate between opinion and evidence-based writing.	4.50	5.14
8. I can write a well-organized and sequenced paper with effective introduction, body, and conclusion.	5.29	4.86
9. I reread my work several times to find errors in my writing.	5.36	4.86

Finally, students' evaluation of the workshop is overwhelmingly positive: they found the workshop extremely helpful ($\bar{x}_{\text{helpfulness}} = 5$; 5-point scale, 1= "not helpful at all" and 5= "very helpful"). Specifically, the workshop helped them "understand how to structure a 7-paragraph persuasive essay", and gain hands-on experience in "developing a thesis statement", "developing body paragraphs based on topic sentences", and "writing counterargument" ($\bar{x}_s = 4.86$; 5-point Likert scales, 1= "strongly disagree" and 5= "strongly agree"). Responses to the qualitative questions were consistent with the quantitative findings. For instance, "it is a pity that such a great effort does not have adequate advertisement among needy students", "the professors are so enthusiastic to teach us the writing skills we ignored before. The examples are well organized; instruction is clear; the teaching material is in very good order", "very helpful techniques", and "I thoroughly enjoyed the workshop". After the workshop, some students took the WST and passed. They emailed us the positive news along with comments such as "I can 100% endorse that, if I had not attended the workshop, I would not have cleared the test in the first go", and "I want to thank you immensely for the great training that you provided in the workshop and believe that it should be made MANDATORY".

CONCLUSION

Although persuasive writing skills are vital to a successful career in business, graduate students receive limited training on the development of such skills. We designed and conducted a writing workshop, teaching graduate students to persuasively communicate their decisions/ideas. Special emphasis was placed on "thesis writing", "how to structure and develop a persuasive essay", and "language mechanics". Equally important to the workshop success were the plan of student homework, in-class writing assignments, and punctual and detailed feedback on the homework and assignments. Among 14 students who attended both required sessions, 4 students took the WST exam right after the workshop, with 3 earning "clear competency" pass and 1 earning a "developing competency". Although our sample size is too small to draw any generalizable conclusions, unsolicited qualitative feedback from students were extremely positive, many urging the college administration to launch future workshops on a larger scale. Greater promotional efforts and increased administrative support are needed to build and develop a sustainable writing workshop program.

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