WRITING COMMUNICATION SKILLS ENHANCED FOR BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION STUDENTS

Dr. R. Dean Lewis
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Writing is a developed personal skill and, in conjunction with good oral communication, contributes to one’s ability to express ideas effectively. These skills enhance one’s opportunity to excel in business careers. As an individual advances to management positions, writing and oral skills play a vital role in creating and maintaining an effective working environment.

Feedback from representatives within the business world indicates business administration graduates, and university graduates in general, often have weaknesses in written and oral communication skills. The first step in changing this pattern is to make faculty and students aware of the problem and to provide the avenues of training to correct it. The Across-the-University Writing Program is the main university resource to accomplish this goal. Through faculty and student workshops, greater attention has been focused on writing. These workshops provide faculty with methods and training to integrate writing into their courses whatever the subjects taught. In addition to workshops available to them, all SHSU students must take at least six writing-enhanced courses.

Business students are encouraged to take more than the required number to strengthen their writing skills. That is why the College of Business Administration has developed a variety of writing-enhanced courses in all seven undergraduate degree curriculums and in the graduate program. Through the writing assignments, students learn language and style adaptation in composing letters and reports related to business situations. They must write concisely, correctly, accurately, and clearly to selective audiences. Students also develop the ability to employ research terminology and methodology in the preparation of formal research reports.

Greatly complementing written communication skills are oral communication skills. Therefore, written communication assignments are typically followed with complementing oral presentations in College of Business Administration classes. Faculty include...
a variety of written and oral assignments, such as
(1) formal research papers that require extensive
library research, (2) article summaries, (3) business
development plans, (4) oral participation in case
presentations which are videotaped and critiqued,
(5) practice appraisals, (6) memorandums, (7) script
composition and role playing, and (8) short answer
and essay questions on exams.

The Across-the-University Writing Program continually
provides faculty guidance on new and better methods
for involving students and faculty directly in the writing
process. In the College of Business Administration,
faculty also placed more emphasis on written
communication as the College sought accreditation
from the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of
Business (AACSB) whose standards include a
significant aspect related to written communication
skills. As of March 8, 1996, the College of Business
Administration has been awarded this prestigious
accreditation which fewer than twenty percent of the
collegiate business programs nationally have attained.
In receiving AACSB accreditation, the College of
Business Administration commits itself to developing
strong written communication skills in its
business graduates.

ON THE MERITS OF LEARNING
WHAT YOU ALREADY KNOW

Dr. Kip Wile
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Department of Music

Ever since I began teaching—or at least thinking
about teaching, which I have been doing for as long
as I can remember—I have been impressed with the
value of repetition as a way of learning. What I have
noticed is that repetition, an apparently simple
technique, never really amounts to “repetition” in
the strict sense of the word. Even when we repeat
something immediately, we present it in the light of
having experienced it before, and so we are not
presenting it in the same way at all. But beyond this,
repetition need not be taken so literally and can be
varied in any number of ways. We can repeat the
parts having experienced the whole. We can repeat
the parts and culminate in the whole. Or we can
repeat the parts or the whole and relate them to
something else.

All of this might seem particularly relevant to my
occupation as a teacher of music theory, and it is.
Music seems to emerge in all of its richness only
when persuaded to do so in several different ways.
The study of music theory—the language and
properties of music—involves a delicate layering
of concept upon concept. The development of
musicianship skills, to which the remainder of my
teaching time is devoted, is still more elusive. The
training of the ear is accomplished only through a
painstaking combination of repetition and variation.
What's more, the two studies are intimately related:
the eye reinforces the ear and the ear reinforces the
eye. Each relies on “what we already know” about the
other.

Yet the value of repetition struck me in an altogether
different way when I attended the Across-the-
University Writing Program’s annual retreat last
November. What was presented included a number of
things that I “already knew”; the problem was that how
I “knew” these things was not always very consistent.
Some items, such as a list of qualities that students
tend to value, seemed simple or self–evident. Others,
such as a hierarchy of passive and active pursuits and
their effect upon learning, I had thought about, but, I
must confess, had never worked out in any kind of
systematic way. Of still other methods I had only the
vaguest inkling. And so I was presented with the
opportunity to employ different kinds of repetition into
a new and more meaningful synthesis. Indeed, we
were learning about “what we already knew.” But this
knowledge also enabled us to reach out toward what
we hadn't known at all.
It is a privilege to be an educator. The plot of ground I work is carefully measured and cared for. It is an annual garden, one nurtured by many preceding generations of erudite souls who have been attracted to this noble craft of helping others in their pursuit of knowledge. When tended well, it blooms regularly.

Any success identity I may have earned has come with working the garden. The metaphor does not escape me. Sometimes, tilling the soil has been related to our classroom subject matter, sometimes not. Through the years, I have learned that tending the garden worked best when it became a mutual endeavor and certainly always, when based on mutual trust. Over time, not only have students and I often come to grips with the assigned subject matter, but also there have been those complete moments when we all walked away feeling better for simply having worked the garden.

I have had many teachers to thank for my gardening interests. Some have been paid to help me learn, some have been fellow students, and many are people whom I have only vicariously met through the textbook, the research journal, or the book that has come highly recommended as “must” reading. It has been this rather eclectic blend of nutrients that have nurtured my interest in writing. It is a miracle of sorts. It has led me to use word choice (or wordsmithing as one of my mentors likes to say) not only to communicate, but as one of the ways I have learned how to earn my keep on this planet.

As I examine the roots of this process, will I find it was Ms. Kerr, my third grade piano teacher, who planted the seeds of those marvelous melodies in my head, melodies that were crying out for supporting words? Could it have been the dreaded Ms. Crowley, my tenth grade English teacher? Yes! It was she who helped me truly see language in the way she diagrammed those beautiful word pictures on the blackboard. Or maybe, just maybe, could it have been my parents? It was my parents who first introduced the public library, summer reading groups, and the notion that I could always find the giant beanstalk of adventure growing between the covers of even the most dusty of books. Eureka!!! The next step seemed almost predictable.

Indeed, this eureka seemed to suggest that the right balance of seed, soil, light, and rain was beginning to sustain a realistic belief that a writer’s spirit was actually beginning to grow within me. And only now, it was I who had to come to that same conclusion. I had to feel a writer’s garden growing inside and to plot out the garden’s boundaries, choose the seeds, pull the weeds, learn how to use the special tools of cultivation, learn when to interfere with external conditions of growth. Yes, I needed to understand not only the nature of things surrounding me, but what was interdependently going on inside at the same time. What a process!

As I have labored at making my garden produce, it has only come after much internal debate about what a good harvest really is. I have learned that with each season the garden is planted there is always, always this incredible possibility of a good harvest. In turn, I have also learned that the sowing must genuinely reflect a best gardening practice if a rich harvest is
Yes, I read Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock* in which he told us that an information revolution was coming that would radically change the way we live, the way we work, the way we play, and the way we relate to one another, but I really didn’t believe it would happen so fast. Dramatic changes have been easily observable at Sam Houston State University. Can you remember using card catalogs and index cards to do research? Then, after a long search, you might obtain only a fraction of the articles you wanted. The journals were not available, or you might discover that someone before you had decided to cut the key article out of the journal. Our card catalogs were carted out of the library and reduced to ashes just a couple of years ago, the fate of so many other formerly indispensable commodities that have outlived their usefulness. Of course, it’s not what has disappeared so much as what has appeared that is dramatically different. The computer connects us with each other and a vast storehouse of information.

We at SHSU are very fortunate to have some of the best computer services available in the world. Well maintained personal computers are available across the campus, and in AB1, on a continual basis. Although students may have to wait for a computer at peak usage times, there has never been a need to ration the use of them. Of course, what we get from the computers is what is important, and that is what is truly outstanding. Our Sam LAN (Local Area Network) provides us with state-of-the-art tools that enable us to search, analyze, synthesize, organize, document, and communicate with the efficiency we could only dream about a few years ago.
A “connected” computer provides us with an extremely powerful tool for research and writing today. Sitting at our computers we can do the following:

- Search our libraries and obtain virtually all the information we traditionally obtained by physically going there.
- Search the World Wide Web to obtain an astounding amount of information from around the world—information that may be in the form of documents or from discussions using e-mail or Usenet Newsgroups.
- Use very powerful programs available to us on SHSU’s network such as statistical, mathematical, and sociological analytical tools.
- Compose and organize our findings on word processors that will also check our documents for spelling and grammatical errors.
- Embed charts, graphs, images, and sounds into our documents.
- Disseminate professional quality documents and presentation materials.

Our SHSU Business Research Home Page (http://www.shsu.edu/~busrsch) is designed especially to assist business students in utilizing our computer resources for their research and writing needs. There they may find help, suggestions, and links to resource materials. Not only is it a good place to start, but also it’s a good place to return to for current basic information. We are continually working on improving the page to make it more useful and to keep it current. If you haven’t visited our page, please do so, and let me know your suggestions and comments. My e-mail address is mgt_ghw@shsu.edu.

**RECIPE FOR SUCCESSFUL CYBERCOMMUNICATION**

Dr. Kweethai Neill  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Health and Kinesiology

**Communication in the 1990’s is a very different menu item from that of twenty years ago. Today, we communicate via bits; we fax, e-mail, teleconfer, transmit by modem, upload, and download. We now live in a digital world! Our students need to cybercommunicate.**

In spring 1995, I was assigned to teach HED 392, Communication Skills for Health Education. I had to redesign the course to include the use of technology as a modality of communication. At the same time I found many students lacking in basic writing skills. The challenge to teach effective communication skills to students posed a greater task than I anticipated. When I discovered the Across-the-University Writing Program, I thought I had struck gold! Since then I have been enriched by seminars and workshops such as the Waterwood retreat, a one-on-one session with Dr. Ken Henson, and a workshop titled “Using the Internet for Research and Writing.” Most recently I benefited from attending the “Portfolios in the University Classroom” workshop. What is most valuable to me is meeting colleagues and learning from their experiences. The wealth of learning from
peers is something I want my students to experience.

How can I teach my students to write, speak, get into cybercommunications, share their knowledge, and learn from their peers? In the same recipe, I also want to encourage my students to be creative. Can all these ingredients be blended into a palatable product?

My students in HED 392 are required to create a portfolio using various modalities to communicate health promoting information. All written assignments are to be produced using a word processing application. Students learn to do e-mail and desktop publishing to create health newsletters of professional quality. It is exciting to hear squeals of wonder in the lab as students discover new information while surfing the Net.

While the portfolios showcase students’ abilities to be creative, their ability to collaborate with their peers is demonstrated in their group assignments. They are assigned groups and given specific criteria to generate presentations. In many of their progress notes, students have indicated their triumph over obstacles. Plus, they have enjoyed learning from one another.

In addition, I have ten students collaborating with four students from computer science to construct a home page for our department. While these computer experts have held lab sessions to teach my students about the Internet, the health education students are teaching computer science majors how to write and speak in user-friendly modes. One student is documenting the process, and two are writing and testing the usability of what could be a manual for others. I am thrilled to see the level of enthusiasm at the project meetings. Perhaps my recipe is not too difficult after all. The home page for the Department of Health and Kinesiology will be completed this semester. Bon Appetit!

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**Use the Expertise of the English Department.** During the Robert Morris WAC teleconference, a professor who required much writing from large classes called in to complain about her workload. A modern WAC program would provide her with handouts and a contact person in the English Department to work with her. A composition expert could point to research showing that the time-consuming method of response—covering the paper with critical comments—is the least effective. The expert would certainly suggest to her that successful papers are easier to process than unsuccessful papers. With good papers, she only needs to verify the success at learning; bad papers beg for extensive criticism to justify the low grades. The expert could show her how to succeed by preparing students thoroughly (e.g., discussion of model papers) and then assisting them as they work through a collaborative, multi-draft writing process. (2)
Writing exercises are being used in my third year interior design studio to broaden awareness of specific topics and issues related to design projects. On a canoe trip into the Atchafalaya Basin, students were encouraged to record their impressions by journaling and other graphic means. A clustering technique was used to help identify design elements such as line, form, color, texture, and pattern for three indigenous plant forms.

Using the free association method, students were to write any words or phrases that came to mind for each topic, looking for action words and allowing the plant images to take on human or animal qualities. The works were collected into a brief statement or poem and checked against their personal impressions of the selected plant.

**Example:**

**Images:** moss
curling, tendrils, net, maze, 
lacy, wiry

**Animation/Action:** fingers, cling, intertwine, weave, capture

**Poem/Impressions:**
Tendrils of moss, like wiry fingers cling to winter branches, intertwine weave a lacy maze, a curling net to capture Winter’s breeze

Clustering and similar types of writing exercises used early in the conceptual phase of the design process are found to broaden awareness. The student then approaches the design project with heightened sensitivity; therefore, creativity is enhanced.
THE “I-SEARCH” PROCESS IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Dr. Rodney Henningsen
Associate Professor
College of Criminal Justice

For the past two semesters, I have taught the writing-enhanced class, Special Offenders and Special Needs Offenders. The first course goal is to study various types of offenders, including serial killers, wildlife poachers, computer hackers, cult criminals, and women prisoners with babies. The second major course goal is to use writing to learn the subject. Therefore, much of the work and grade is based upon writing assignments.

Early in the semester, the students view the videotape entitled Searching Writing. In this tape, Ken Macrorie discusses the I-search process. Using a “hands-on” delivery style along with numerous examples, he successfully involves his viewers in this unique process. According to Macrorie, the I-search should come out of a student’s life and answer a need in it. By using this approach, a student testifies to the subjective-objective character of research. The paper becomes “alive.” Writing it, students will often discover that writing is a way of learning. Their sentences become not only finished statements, but also starting points for new directions.

In the video, Macrorie tells students that their I-search papers should answer four questions. What did they know about the topic before they began their research? What did they need to know? How was the research conducted? What did they learn from their research? My students conduct their search as Macrorie suggests. They select a topic that meets a need in their personal or professional lives. Initially, I was surprised by the enthusiasm that students displayed for this assignment. No one complained.

Nor do I complain! I like this approach, especially for two reasons. One, the recorded subjective, experiential side of the I-search process provides a built-in protection against plagiarism. Plus, the papers are interesting and informative. They have been on such diverse topics as deer poaching in East Texas, the Houston Banditos, and a student’s personal experience with, and later research of, bank credit card fraud.

Ken Macrorie’s I-search approach works. As one student stated, “I was glad I had the chance to research something important to me—something I needed to know.”

A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Jennifer Bowman
Alpha Chi Member
Tutor, Learning Assistance Center

The use of writing in mathematics has always had a particular interest to me because of my experiences in college mathematics classes. The following is a brief explanation of those experiences.

As a college freshman in calculus, I was resentful because of my obligation to be there to get a degree. Luckily, I had a calculus professor who incorporated writing into his math class. As the first-ever writing-enhanced calculus class, the course had an ambitious overload of seven labs and three projects (reduced in the future to four labs and one project). These writing projects touched the writer in me and showed me how math was fascinating, understandable, and useful to my career-oriented technical writing, my fiction writing, and in other
aspects of learning. That first calculus class changed me from resentful to curious to see what else I could understand. After thriving in all three writing-enhanced calculus classes, I was hooked as a math major and English minor, for awhile.

However, as my course numbers increased by hundreds, the reluctance of “old school professors” to teach the way I was taught in my early calculus classes began to effect me. I do not blame them or criticize their methods, rather their techniques did not reach me the way the writing projects did. I was not adapting to memorizing my theorems and formulas along with the future engineers and math teachers surrounding me. At some point I had been in math classes for four semesters and had yet to write in a journal, on a test, or in homework. I could not grasp the new material, was too frustrated to teach myself, and was no longer excited about math. I am now an English major, math minor. While things typically work out for the best, I feel I am one example of a population of students who learn differently and could be hooked into mathematics through writing.

My experience makes me a passionate believer in writing in math, and the connections I’ve seen between English and math make me hope the bridge will be a two-way street. English students could benefit from more math, perhaps not high content math, but writing math to train them to think in an alternative way. I unexpectedly excelled in my grammar class that many English majors struggle in because I could adapt to the “structured” nature of the material. I feel it was my math background which gave me an advantage. As a writer and English student, I use math to structure my thoughts, modified outlines, if you will. I have used Venn Diagrams to determine how topics fit together. I have used mathematics study techniques to learn how to diagram sentences, and I have used mathematical shapes to describe mountains and smiles in my creative writing.

I know completely removing traditional methods would harm a large number of students who effectively learn that way, but attracting more students to mathematics may be achieved through writing. The best solution is a combination and openness to all approaches.

(Dr. David Ruch, Associate Professor of Mathematics, was Jennifer Bowman’s calculus teacher.)
MY MENTOR

Jennifer Maurer
Outstanding Freshman Writer

Life started out simple for me, I guess. It was Dad, Mom, Jason, and me. Anyone would have classified us as a “normal” family, but that was before April 2, 1979 when Jeremy was born. I didn’t know it then, but the little boy who was three years my junior would have a tremendous impact on my life.

Like any older sister, I was excited about the new face around the house. I was a little apprehensive, considering that he was to take my much cherished position as “the baby,” but Mom had always tried to be fair in allocating the time she spent with each of us. At first, everyone doted on Jeremy and talked about how cute and sweet he looked. Personally, I didn’t see it. In my honest, and of course unbiased, opinion he was rather silly looking. I just didn’t understand how lying on the floor all day cross-eyed with a blank stare on his face was cute. When I did it, I was told that I was being lazy; understandably I was confused. Mom just laughed and told me that certain things were only cute when babies did them, but soon Jeremy would be old enough to participate in all kinds of mischief.

The adventures that I had planned for Jeremy and me would never be possible. When Jeremy was ten months old, the doctor told my parents that he would never be “normal.” My mother had contracted CMV, a virus that is the equivalent of the common cold, but if contracted during pregnancy usually has a detrimental affect on the fetus. The doctor told my parents that Jeremy was mentally retarded and that he would probably spend the rest of his life as a vegetable. He suggested that Jeremy be institutionalized because he would only be a financial and emotional burden. Mother, always the eternal optimist, had other plans for my brother; she was going to do the best with what God had given her.

Nothing from that day on was ever the same. By the time Jeremy was a year old, my family had a routine unlike that of anyone else I knew. Monday through Friday, Mom spent two hours every morning getting Jason, Jeremy, and me up and ready for the day. Jason usually got up first and got ready for school while Mom made his lunch. Then it was time for Mom to get Jeremy and me dressed. She usually did this between making breakfast and dressing herself. At 7:30 a.m. we sat down for a quick family breakfast. Jason and I usually ate bacon and eggs while Jeremy ate his “special” cream of wheat, which consisted of butter, milk, two drops of polyviosal vitamins, and half a dilantin—the same breakfast he has eaten the last fifteen years. At 8:00 a.m. we all rushed out the door to begin the day. Jason got on the bus first; then Mom, Jeremy, and I got in the car and were off to Jeremy’s therapy sessions.

The doctors, not sure exactly how slowly Jeremy would develop, decided that it would be a good idea if he got an early start on things; therefore, he started school the same year I did. I was semi-jealous at first because I was six and could only stay half a day, but my three-year-old brother got to stay all day. The other students weren’t sure how to react to such a little boy being in school. Most of them just looked at Jeremy in confusion, especially when he went through the halls singing at the top of his lungs. Others thought he was cute or amusing and left it at that. I never really understood why Jeremy was so fascinating to everyone; after all, to me he was just another little kid. Unfortunately, Jeremy still had to have extensive therapy done outside of school, and this was left up to my mom to do. Sometimes I became a little angry about all the attention Jeremy received, but I never stayed mad because I always had Jason to play with.

When Jason was old enough he started helping with Jeremy’s therapy, so I figured I would try to help too. I wasn’t as successful as Mom and Jason when it came to teaching Jeremy important things like bathroom skills, or how to eat by himself, so Mom came up with other tasks for me to do, such as teaching Jeremy how to stack blocks or color. Jeremy had to be taught many simple tasks, but by the time he was three he
had mastered walking, crawling, eating by himself, and even toilet training.

At four-and-a-half Jeremy made eye contact with Mom for the first time. This was a very special moment for her because it had taken months of sitting in a closet with him for hours on end telling him, “Look at me, Jeremy.” I’ll never forget how excited she got; she couldn’t even speak. She just sat there crying and holding him. I don’t think I’ll ever understand how much that one event meant to her.

My great-grandmother once told me, “God will never short you in one area without making it up in another,” and I guess that’s what He did for Jeremy. Though Jeremy had to struggle to achieve even the smallest goals, there was one thing he never had to be taught—how to play the drums. It was his natural knack—he could play any song after he heard it the first time. Mom, because she knew how much Jeremy enjoyed music, bought him his first mini-drum set when he was six, and over the years she encouraged him to play and improve. When Jeremy was seven years old, we moved to Fredericksburg, and the change was difficult for him. He had always needed to have a routine, but he eventually adjusted.

When Jeremy turned nine, Mom got her first job. Not only was this hard for Jeremy to accept, but also it was hard for Jason and me because it was now Jason’s responsibility to take care of us until Mom got home from work. At sixteen, Jason got his first after-school job, and I began taking care of Jeremy. For the most part I didn’t mind. However sometimes, I felt as though I was being treated unfairly and would complain to Mom because I had to come directly home everyday. She tried to explain that I had to baby-sit because it was too dangerous to leave Jeremy with someone else. This usually ended the conversation because deep down I knew that she was right and there was no other option. Basically, my job was to make sure that if the house caught on fire we escaped, and there was nothing difficult about that. I have a great deal of respect for my older brother, Jason, because he helped Mom so much and never once complained about it. I, on the other hand, was always complaining.

When I started high school the whole situation changed drastically. I began to notice that there were more and more activities I wanted to be involved in, but I couldn’t because I had to be home for Jeremy. I really began to resent him for this. I was finally driven to the point where I lashed out uncontrollably. I told Mom I wished she had never had Jeremy—that he would just die. I was so angry, so busy feeling sorry for myself that I never stopped to think about what I was saying. When I stopped yelling and looked into my mother’s eyes, I knew that I had gone too far. I wanted her to get angry, to yell back, but all she did was turn and walk away. There has never been a time in my life when I hated myself as much as I did at that moment. I had to get out of there. Later that night, I expected my mother to be furious, but she acted as if the whole argument never happened. In all honesty, I knew that there was nothing that she could have said that would have made the situation any better.

Coming home everyday and having Jeremy hug me hello or kiss me goodbye was the worst he ever did to me. He never got angry or cared about all the hateful things I had said that day. He didn’t have to forgive me; he never understood, but I was left to understand myself. Everything I had said and done, in those few explosive moments, gnawed at me constantly. Finally, all the “why’s” overwhelmed me and the truth was painfully clear. For the first time, I thought about Jeremy, and all he was. Without knowing, understanding, or caring, he’d taught me so much. From this simple little boy, I had learned what unconditional love really is because no matter how horrible I was, he still loved me. I also learned to appreciate the smaller pleasures in life, to have patience with people. Most importantly, Jeremy taught me how to never lose faith in people.

There are still people who see my sixteen-year-old brother sitting at the desk coloring, or playing with his toys, and all they see is the things he can’t do, or will never do. Most of them shake their heads, look at him with pity, and go on their way. I find this kind of amusing now because it has taken me a long time to understand that Jeremy should not be pitied. He should be envied because he still has what the rest of us have lost—innocence.
The Across-the-University Writing Program Newsletter is an official publication of Sam Houston State University. Addressed to university faculty, the newsletter seeks to further the understanding of current practices used to incorporate writing in courses. Please send articles concerning writing assignments or evaluation techniques that you use in your classroom to the following address: Patricia Williams, Editor, Teacher Education Center, SHSU, Huntsville, Texas 77341.

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