WRITING IN MARKETING PRINCIPLES - PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT
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ABSTRACT
There is a continuing concern for the deficiencies in writing skills exhibited by the undergraduate students completing their respective degrees in marketing. This paper describes a technique used by a northwest university's marketing faculty to provide better writing skills that will be required during the career of its marketing graduates.

INTRODUCTION
One of the most frequently listed skills that employers expect from a university graduate is the ability to communicate in writing. In surveys of placement officials, employers, and alumni, writing is always mentioned as a basic requirement for employment and advancement (Bennett and Oiney 1985; Laufer and Crosser 1990; Horton 1985; Macmillan 1985). Most college students have had training in basic English skills and composition, both in high school and as a basic lower division university requirement. However, these same students often do not have practice in using or adapting previously acquired skills to a professional environment. One reason for this is that many college courses are taught in large mass sections which make grading writing assignments an onerous task for faculty. The paragraphs that follow describe a term-long writing assignment that effectively communicates the requirements of business writing, allows the student to interact with critical course material, and can be used in large sections.

BACKGROUND
Business writing involves the production of reports, letters, and memos, designed to communicate information (hard copy or electronically) to those who need it. In order for this written communication to be successful, it must be well organized, clearly and concisely presented, and free of distracting grammatical and/or spelling errors. Communications that do not have these characteristics not only fail to fulfill their intent but communicate undesirable messages about the sender. In the worst case, the message may be that the sender cannot think clearly or simply does not care about the communication process (Macmillan 1986). A variety of different programs have been employed to teach practical writing skills to students. One such program is the “Writing Across Disciplines” movement which encourages faculty in different disciplines to teach writing as part of their courses (Emig 1977; Zinsser 1988). Primarily developed by frustrated English professors who believed that writing skills could not be taught in isolation, the tenets of the movement have been successfully applied by professors in a variety of subjects. For example, Kirkpatrick (1995) has described a method for using marketing research paper assignments that involves breaking the assignment into parts and using peer reviews of drafts to help students revise their work. The approach has the advantages of allowing students to analyze important topics in marketing and experience the process of revising work done by themselves and others.

Some universities view writing as sufficiently important that they have developed university-wide programs to encourage the development of writing skills among students. Corbin and Glynn (1992) have described such a program at University of Iowa that involved three endeavors: requiring all students to take an English composition course, creating and funding a Writing Center, and implementing the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum program. In marketing specifically, marketing strategy students were given a proficiency course to improve their writing skills and to allow the college to assess student preparedness. This program, according to the most current review, has successfully helped students in need of remedial help.

Not all universities fund efforts to improve student writing skills that are as extensive as the one described above. Nevertheless, individual departments and instructors can develop assignments that help students form connections between English writing courses and business writing requirements. To the extent that these assignments help students develop better skills, they can improve the image of marketing programs and the subsequent marketability of students in those programs.
THE WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Our marketing faculty made a decision to require a series of writing assignments in the marketing principles course. The college's administration supported this writing requirement by providing faculty with a graduate student to help grade the papers. We guaranteed that all junior level students successfully completing this course would have ample opportunity to redirect and exercise their basic writing skills.

The intent of these writing assignments is four-fold:

- First, they provide an opportunity to prepare five business memos responding to different marketing situations.
- Second, the memo assignments provide practice in developing reasonable habits for preparing business correspondence. All assignments are written in a business memo format (see Exhibit 1). The memos provide students with an opportunity to improve and continually use their writing skills. The memo writing also encourages the students to digest and apply the material assigned before class discussions begin.
- Third, the assignments provide an experience with computer and library information searches needed for developing meaningful information on select marketing problems.
- Fourth, assignments provide meaningful marketing experiences with a World Wide Web capability both as shoppers and as users of marketing information available on the WEB.

MEMO REQUIREMENTS

The memos guidelines are strict. Every assignment must be typed on white paper (8½ x 11 inches). Students are encouraged to develop a personal business letterhead for use with all memos. While only one page of text will be read, a second page, in the form of an exhibit (picture, graphs, chart, advertisement, etc.), may accompany the text. Papers are not accepted before or after class unless there is a prior agreement. If the paper is satisfactory, the student receives five points (of 280 course points). A memo loses one point for every error in style, spelling, grammar, fact or logic. If a student fails to turn in a paper or fails to type the paper, they received no points. Students are advised during the first class and in the course syllabus that the memo scores can make a difference in the final grade. A loss equivalent to a letter grade is possible for non-participation or unsatisfactory participation in the writing assignments.

Because our primary intent is improvement of writing skills, papers may be revised if the student does not receive all of the available points on the paper. A re-written paper must be submitted at the beginning of the class following its return and must have the original paper attached. This practice has been successful in encouraging continuous improvement. The number of revisions drops drastically through the term as most students recognize the efficiencies in submitting acceptable originals. Another technique for ensuring better memos is to read memos aloud to the class or to have students report on their memos to the class.

The memos are used for classroom discussion. Material covered in the memo are integrated into the lecture and the students make contributions to the lecture based on material explored in developing their individual memos. Example topics along with a brief description for one term's assignments are listed below. These can be modified depending on the instructor's interests or goals for the course.

SAMPLE MEMO TOPICS

The following describes five topics which have been used for memo assignments. Memo topics are changed each term to discourage cheating.

Memo 1 (due second week) - Market and Marketing Changes.

The intent of this assignment was to efficiently explore library materials available on and to identify trends taking place in one industry or market. A recent assignment was to read the text book insert on Levi Strauss (Kotler and Armstrong, Principles of Marketing, Seventh Edition, pages 33-34) and answer the questions from memo instruction sheet (Exhibit 1).

Memo 2 (due fourth week) - Consumer Markets.

First students read about lifestyles and the VALS system for classifying consumers by their uses of time and money. Students used Netscape or Mosaic to access a VALS questionnaire. They answered the VALS questions and obtained an assessment of their individual personal life style. Their memo described their primary and secondary self-orientations proposed by VALS (principle oriented, status oriented, or action oriented) and identified the product preferences predicted by VALS. Then
they listed examples supporting the preference prediction and/or examples suggesting the preference prediction was incorrect. In conclusion they were asked to assess the accuracy of the VALS personal assessment.

Memo 3 (due sixth week) - Pricing Products.

This assignment required students to compare the prices of a product in two different retail outlet categories, a convenience store (e.g., 7/11 or Circle K) and a supermarket (e.g., Safeway or Albertsons). Students looked for a national brand of beer or soft drink and a store brand or generic brand (the assigned product changes each term). The written assignment was to compare and describe the price differences between a national and store/generic brand by container size (price per ounce). Students also described the price differences for the same brands in the two different store categories. Part of the assignment was to explain the price differences by container size within and between brands for one store as well as between stores. The students are encouraged to provide an exhibit organizing and presenting the data.

Memo 4 (due eighth week) - Advertising.

For this memo the students located a recent magazine or newspaper advertisement. In this memo the students evaluated the advertisement based on its: 1) objective(s) and 2) type of appeal. Students evaluate the ad’s effectiveness in meeting its objective(s). They also evaluated the media choice for reaching identified target markets. They attached a single page photocopy of the advertisement to the memo, citing the source and the date. Every term dates for the example advertisement can be changed, thus eliminating (reducing) the chances of using memos from an earlier term.

Memo 5 (due tenth week) - Marketing Organizations.

Data for this memo was generated with an in-class assignment requiring the students of complete a modified SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1994) questionnaire during the seventh week. The survey results were summarized and given to the students during the eighth week of the term. They were to assume that they have been hired as marketing director at the university and were looking for ways to improve the educational services offered by the college and university. Students received copies of their survey results depicting student expectations and perceptions regarding the current services. They selected one area, (gap) between expectations and perceptions, and briefly described a potential factor for the gap’s existence. They then made recommendations for reducing undesirable gap sizes. They discussed who in the college and university should be responsible for implementing their recommendations for improving services.

GRADING AND ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIVITIES

Typically, the grading has been handled by a graduate student, usually with undergraduate degree in English, journalism, technical writing, or reasonable work experience in writing. The intent of the five assignments is to improve each student's writing skills; thus, the memos are graded primarily for correctness in presentation and secondarily for content. The memo style gives the grader a standard view of every presentation and the papers are relatively easy to grade in regard to content.

RESULTS

The results of these efforts have been excellent. At the end of each term we survey the students in regard to the usefulness of the course and the value of each course ingredient. Two of the sixteen questions in the course evaluation relate to the memo assignments. The students respond to one statement that "memo writing should be discontinued" on a five point scale. Every term the students strongly disagree (4 on a 5 point scale with 5 being strongly disagree) with this statement and their written comments on the evaluation form indicate that this exercise has been very beneficial.

In the comments section of the course evaluation students have regularly stated that they appreciated having a second chance to repair memos. They have indicated that the repetition has increased their appreciation of good writing skills and has instilled self-esteem in submitting quality work. Unfortunately, however, a third of students with less than all possible points do not exercise their option to correct and submit the memo(s).

By the end of the term very little editing is required. The students have developed and gained confidence in their writing skills. The remaining challenge is to continue these writing activities beyond the course in order to maintain and develop the newly acquired skills.

A number of the faculty members of the senior level courses, both in marketing and management, have
adopted the memo writing format (often increasing the memo length to fit the needs of the assignments in these courses). These faculty members have observed that written assignments with this format are much easier to interpret and grade than traditional papers. An advantage of the memo format for students is that the student doesn’t spend time second guessing the instructor’s preferences for presentation style and can devote their time to the assignment’s content.

The secondary payoffs from the assignments are important, too. With completed assignments instructors are confident that students have, at a minimum, reviewed the portion of the book related to this assignment and can discuss the material in a meaningful way. These discussions have worked well and provided proof that there are dividends in preparing for class. Students appear to recognize the advantages of the practice as teacher evaluations have been rising.

CONCLUSION

Select writing assignments can achieve a number of interests and provide windfall gains. We, as faculty, are primarily interested that students obtain a good grasp of the intellectual substance of our respective courses. Videos, cases, class visitations of business executives, computer games, etc. can all be used to provide views of the material from a different vantage point than the text or lectures. We can also, with a minimal effort, provide an environment where the student is gaining more than a cursory understanding of the text, and also developing writing skills that will play a role in their career success. In this paper, we have described a method that has been successful in developing, practicing, and retaining a skill that will be used beyond the class. Responses to course evaluations (again not to be confused with instructor evaluations) related to the areas of the writing assignments have always received high scores.

REFERENCES


EXHIBIT 1

Writing a Memo

DATE the memo

RECIPIENT (name of individual(s), title where appropriate)

SENDER (name of individual, title where appropriate)

Include a statement about the SUBJECT of the memo.

The INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT may be a sentence or a short paragraph. Complex topics may require longer introductions. The statement should identify what the memo is about and why it was written. If there are subtopics, identify what they are here.

The BODY OF THE MEMO is where the "meat" of the memo is placed. If you have identified subtopics in the introductory statement, divide the body into sections based on these topics and identify with a heading.

The CONCLUSION is brief and courteous. It may recommend an action, it may request an action to be taken by the recipient, it may provide an offer of further help or instructions on what to do after the memo is read.

Memos should be CONCISE, CLEAR AND READABLE. Avoid unnecessary topics and don't repeat information. Headings and set-off lists (with bullets) may add clarity and coherence under certain circumstances.

Inform the reader if ATTACHMENT(S) should be reviewed as part of the memo.

Memorandum

Date: September 25, 1995

To: BA 390 Students

From: William Browne, Ph.D.

Subject: Levi Strauss

This memo describes the first of your paper assignments.

The introductory paragraphs of Chapter 2 of Principles of Marketing, discusses the Levi Strauss Corporation. I want to know in what ways macroenvironmental trends (see Chapter 3) have influenced Levi Strauss marketing mix (i.e. styles, prices, outlets, promotion, new products) for its clothing products.

I suggest you go to the library and use ABI Inform (a CD-ROM citation index) to find an article about this topic. You also may find information by using the Wall Street Journal Index. Please remember, I want only one page of information. This is not a term paper - you don't need to read everything that was written on the topic. The memo is to update information presented in the case. You may assume that I have read the case and understand the background of the issue. In your memo, please tell me the source of your information.

This assignment should take you about one or two hours to complete. It would be wise to get started soon. Do inform me if you have a problem. I will expect your memo of reply by October 2, 1995.

Attachment: [include only if additional pages accompany memo]