Report on
Making It Easier for Faculty to Raise the Quality of Writing Across the Business Curriculum

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May 15, 2011
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Problem Statement

Research reports are a common mechanism used by business faculty members to determine mastery of course material. Well-written reports allow faculty to more easily determine such mastery and make good evidence and insights derived from the research more usable. Developing and refining good writing skills serves the needs of future employers who routinely indicate that they want colleges and universities to place more emphasis on written and oral communication skills.1

Despite the value placed on good writing, anecdotally, students describe great variation in faculty emphasis on and expectations for quality in writing assignments. This is not surprising. To expect good writing skills, faculty must possess confidence in their own knowledge and ability to guide students yet few business faculty members are formally trained to teach writing. Hershey (2007) notes that there is little “howto information that instructors can use to show and/or explain to students a way of writing better” (p. 44). He found literally thousands of for-profit businesses devoted to improving business writing skills but very few academic resources upon which business faculty members could rely.2

Many faculty members may rely instead on the required courses in business communication to formally address such writing skills. These courses cover all aspects of communication but cannot make writing of research report skills a central focus. Even skills developed in these classes need rehearsal and repetition across the curriculum and within the student’s discipline.

Instead of relying on the independent efforts of select faculty or attempting to provide training to faculty members, we believed that a central, interactive, cross-disciplinary approach to more effective writing could be developed for faculty members to promote to their students. (Discipline-specific efforts have been applied in programs such as the Master’s of Taxation.)

Over the past three years, we’ve created an interactive web-based learning module – essentially a free online writing textbook – focused on business research report writing. It is available to any student or faculty at http://www.robinson.gsu.edu/~writing.

Our site is broadly focused, covering parts of a research report, writing in Plain English, communicating numbers, and effective use of graphs and charts. It was designed to be cross-disciplinary. The site can be used for general guidelines, freeing faculty to focus on discipline-

1 www.aacu.org/advocacy/leap/documents/Re8097abcombined.pdf
specific writing approaches. The site can be used in whole or in part and linked from MyRobinson or uLearn class sites.

In developing the module, the goal was to:

- promote student use across the curriculum by creating a central and free resource
- create higher involvement in learning by providing interactive content for complex topics
- allow student self-assessment through quizzes and exercises, and,
- importantly, reduce the burden of individual faculty members to develop their own instruction for students on writing effective reports.

The IIG proposal was to provide faculty with a set of tools that could be used or adapted to classroom use, freeing faculty from the need to develop their own materials. The result is a Faculty Guide that provides faculty a full overview of the content of the Writing module and associated assessment tools as well as feedback mechanisms. Specifically, we developed the Faculty Guide and four types of assessment tools:

- self-tests
- exercises
- rubrics, and
- student feedback surveys – tied to the content of Writing Effective Research and Technical Reports module.

The tools were designed to minimize instructors’ efforts to “teach writing,” instead letting them refer students to the module components for improvement. These tools can be adopted or adapted in whole or in part, and used as graded or ungraded elements of a course, in general form or adapted to a specific course, to determine that students have studied the content and can apply it to their writing.

In summary, we proposed to improve student writing by providing faculty members with tools to hold students to broadly-accepted standards for effective writing of business reports and apply them within their individual courses without developing their own teaching materials.

Importantly, the module and any of the assessment tools can be adopted in part as useful for a given course. A faculty member can use the module and tools to emphasize individual elements, such as organizing reports into appropriate sections, properly acknowledging research sources, proofreading, or designing more effective charts or graphs. Adapting exercises to course-specific topics will be even more effective.

**Results**

*The Faculty Guide to Writing Effective Research or Technical Reports* provides the full details for the materials created. Here, we provide a simple review.

Again, four major topics are covered in the module:

- What is a research report?
- Writing in Plain English
Communicating numbers  
Effective use of graphics

For each section, there are online self-tests for students. Some of these were created by the authors specifically from the module content and others are provided by third parties. The former are listed as Quizzes on the left-side bar in each section. Those from third parties are embedded. One such self-test is embedded in Acknowledging Sources and is a module on plagiarism with an associated quiz produced by the University Library at the University of Texas, Arlington. For each of these multiple-choice tests, students receive immediate feedback on their performance and, upon completion of the test, the students receive a final score. If desired, a faculty member can have students submit their final result by printing or emailing it to a designated address.

There are also exercises that address learning objectives such as identifying, comparing, checking, and critiquing. These exercises provide specific guidelines for topics like properly acknowledging research sources and editing for conciseness. They can be used as is or adapted to particular course content.

A rubric provides instructors with a checklist of writing problems that may be present (i.e., wordiness, inaccurate use of terms, etc.). These are tied to specific sections of the module so the instructor can simply refer students to that section for further study.

Finally, a student feedback survey provides faculty with feedback on whether students believe their own skills improved through use of the module. The survey is available on MyRobinson and can be linked from courses in either MyRobinson or uLearn.

Results of Student Feedback

Students who used the module in their classes were administered the student feedback survey developed. Surveys were anonymous and, to emphasize this, students placed surveys in an envelope.

The survey asks students the degree to which, if any, that use of the module had improved their writing skills. The table below shows the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed with each of the statements. Across all statements, a majority of students believed that using the module better prepared them to write research or technical reports.
The student feedback survey also included two open-ended questions. When asked what sections were helpful, students indicated different sections as helpful. As shown in the table below, the largest percentage mentioned the section on graphics and charts. We believe this is because this section’s content is under-emphasized in other courses in writing whereas other sections are more familiar.

When asked what insights they gained from using the Writing module, the largest percentage of students mentioned how to create more effective charts/graphs, consistent with the previous question results. The second most mentioned was the need to use Plain English or translate complex language for a broader audience. Twenty-six percent described the module as a good refresher for principles they had learned before or as a tool that would useful as a reference source.
Faculty evaluation

Since the set of assessment tools were complete, the modules have only been used in the authors’ classes so feedback would be biased. Other faculty have indicated interest in incorporating materials into their courses and we look forward to receiving external feedback.

Conclusion

The intent of building the Writing Effective Research or Technical Reports module and the associated tools was to improve students writing by providing an “online textbook” that faculty could leverage to improve student writing skills. Rather than teach writing per se, faculty can hold students to the standards exemplified in the Writing module, referring students to the site to identify and refine their skills. Rather than “correcting writing,” deficiencies can be identified and students can be encouraged to identify the remedies, a more effective means for learning.