Effective Business Writing

MBA 621 | Summer 2020

Professor

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Office Hours: Wednesday and Friday from 8am to 11am on Slack or Zoom

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Course Description

Anyone who has spent any amount of time in a business setting knows how important written communication is to the functioning of a successful organization. More than just the oil that keeps the engine running smoothly, effective business writing helps create, maintain, and sustain positive workplace cultures in areas of public relations, interoffice communication, and employee morale—to name just a few. On an individual level, being an effective writer in the workplace allows you to advance in your career in more dynamic and beneficial ways.

  The difficult part of this conversation is the fact that many of us have strong feelings of stress, anxiety, and insecurity when it comes to writing. The reasons for these feelings are varied. What is important at this stage in your life and career is that you start taking personal responsibility for your writing by reading, studying, and practicing the art. People are not born good writers; good writers work hard and diligently at their art and treat it like any other. This short class represents a step in that direction.

  This course is designed to provide students not only with an understanding of communication, specifically written, in business and management settings but also with an open space to cultivate the finer skills associated with becoming an effective business writer. These objectives will be accomplished through (i) exploring rhetorical theory that helps situate our written work and (ii) producing and revising documents that fall within common business writing genres. By the end of the course, students will be able to: analyze written communication through the lens of rhetorical theory; think critically about rhetoric and audience awareness; prepare clear messages using logical arguments and effective organization; and apply principles of design, style, and tone to workplace writing documents.

Course Texts

Bovee, C. & Thill, J. (2012). Business communication essentials: A skills-based approach to vital business English. (5th ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Websites

While Blackboard will be used to submit assignments, everything else is on the course workspace, accessible at https://MBA621summer2020.slack.com. Students will spend quite a bit of time in Slack, a business communication and project management platform. It is important that students create an account (if they don't already have one) and familiarize themselves with the site and its interface. Navigation of the site mainly happens through "channels," which have been divided according to projects. I will not be answering any questions about technical issues. There are sufficient help forums and videos instructing new users how to use Slack.

Technologies

Students will be expected to produce content in email, word processors, Slack, and a video production software of their choosing (e.g., iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, Camtasia). Quality of technical production skills will not be assessed.

Course Policies

Please review the following course policies and inform me immediately if you have any questions or concerns.

Plagiarism

Writers who use the words or ideas of others are obligated to give credit through proper acknowledgment and documentation. Failure to give credit is plagiarism and a violation of the ODU Honor Code that almost certainly will lead to failing the course and could lead to expulsion from ODU. If you have questions about how and when to acknowledge sources, please refer to your resources or see the instructor for advice.

The ODU Catalog defines plagiarism as follows: "A student will have committed plagiarism if he or she reproduces someone else's work without acknowledging its source; or if a source is cited which the student has not cited or used. Examples of plagiarism include: submitting a research paper obtained from a commercial research service, the Internet, or from another student as if it were original work; making simple changes to borrowed materials while leaving the organization, content, or phraseology intact; or copying material from a source, supplying proper documentation, but leaving out quotation marks. Plagiarism also occurs in a group project if one or more of the members of the group does none of the group's work and participates in none of the group's activities, but attempts to take credit for the work of the group." Take heed.

Email Policy

In terms of email, Old Dominion University recognizes email as an official means of communication between faculty and students. All email messages sent during the

semester must originate from your odu.edu address. All emails sent to the professor must have the following elements: pertinent title, appropriate greeting, clear sentences, concise paragraphs, and a signature indicating full name. It is expected that students check their Old Dominion email daily.

Lateness & Revision Policy

Late work will receive a penalty of a third of a letter grade per day. If you would like to revise an assignment, you must meet with the professor to discuss your plan for completing the revisions. You will also submit an approximately 300-word summary of your revisions with the revised assignment explaining the revisions.

Educational Accessibility

Old Dominion University is committed to ensuring equal access to all qualified students with disabilities in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Office of Educational Accessibility (OEA) is the campus office that works with students who have disabilities to provide and/or arrange reasonable accommodations. If you experience a disability which will impact your ability to access any aspect of my class, please present me with an accommodation letter from OEA so that we can work together to ensure that appropriate accommodations are available to you. The OEA phone number is (757) 683-4655 and the website is odu.edu/educationalaccessibility.

Assessment & Grading

Student work will be assessed in Blackboard. Only work uploaded through Blackboard dropboxes or Slack will receive qualitative feedback. Late assignments will receive none. Categories of assessment include: quality of work, quantity of work, attention to detail in design and text, formatting, and audience awareness. The grade breakdown is as such:

90—100%: A, A— (Excellent/Good). You have met all of the requirements, and exceeded requirements in many areas. You have accomplished top-tier work for the expected level.

80—89%: B+, B, B— (Average). You have met all the requirements, and have exceeded a few. You have accomplished average work for expected level.

70—79%: C+, C, C— (Failing). You have met all or some the requirements, but have exceeded none. You have accomplished inferior work for expected level.

69% or below: D (Failing). You have fulfilled some requirements, but other requirements remain unfulfilled. You should consult the professor as soon as possible.

59% or below: F (Failing). You have fulfilled few, if any, requirements of the assignment. You should consult the professor as soon as possible.

Assignments

All assignments will be submitted through Blackboard or Slack and are due by 11:59pm EST on the dates listed below.

Topic	*Weight*	*Due Date*
I. Experiences with Writing	10%	24 May
II. On Rhetoric of/in Business Settings	15%	31 May
III. Common Topics	20%	7 June
IV. Planning Business Messages	15%	14 June
V. Writing Business Messages	25%	21 June
VI. Completing Business Messages	15%	27 June

This course is organized into two halves. The first three weeks are devoted to exploring your own perceptions towards writing and thinking about business writing through a rhetorical frame. The second three weeks are devoted to a single piece of writing that you will take from beginning to end, with emphasis on developing new habits of writing.

I. Experiences with Writing

Put simply: You are the subject of this course. You are a writer—and this class treats you as such. All of the knowledge about tips, tricks, and techniques on writing will be meaningless if you do not have a positive disposition towards writing. (Also many tips and tricks change over time.) So it is important to first take stock of your previous experiences and attitudes towards writing and how these might factor into your current attitudes and perceptions towards other writers, or even writing in general.

To begin, I am asking you to compose two brief stories—anecdotes, if you will. I am asking you to write five-hundred words on your most positive memory associated with writing. Then I am asking you to write five-hundred words on your most negative memory associated with writing. These memories can be as recent as yesterday or as old as kindergarten. Be creative with these. Take your time. Try and paint me a picture of these moments.

After you compose these stories, you'll read Jim Corder's article, "Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love" (go to "Files" in Slack). This essay offers some insight into how I—and many in my field—conceive of rhetoric and just how expansive we think argument is. I suggest sitting down with this article, perhaps even printing it out, and brewing a pot of coffee or a cup of tea. Keep an open mind and post any questions you have in the week one channel if you find yourself in need of conversation. After this, write a five hundred word response to the article. Combine this response with your two stories and upload as one Word document to Blackboard. I prefer single-spaced documents and twelve-point Times New Roman typeface.

Finally, you'll make a video no longer than sixty seconds that introduces who you are and briefly shares the details of any one of the three bits of writing you just completed (positive memory, negative memory, or reaction to Corder essay). This video will be shared on Slack, under the #week1 channel. You can upload the video file itself or share a link to the video. All components of this assignment are due by 24 May, at 11:59pm EST.

II. On Rhetoric of/in Business Settings

Having now taken inventory on the personal aspects of your experience with writing, let's turn outwards. For this week's assignment I am very curious to see how you interpret the cacophony of advice pieces on business writing. Every week there are new articles written for the business community about why communication is so vital for success and how individuals can improve their writing. The titles are often clickbait. Perhaps you can relate to my feeling that these pieces, while thought-provoking, often fall short on their promises, provide a restrictive vision of what writing is, or just plain ignore the fact that writing improvement takes time, takes new processes of habituation.

Regardless, I am asking you to find ten "advice" pieces on business writing. I will be providing a few for you in the Slack channel for week two. They'll have titles such as "How to Improve Your Business Writing," or "Five Ways to Improve Your Writing"—just to give you a sense of the types of pieces to which I'm referring. Outlets like *Forbes* and the *Harvard Business Review* are typically good places to start, but there are endless possibilities. Try and find ten strong pieces published by reputable websites or organizations, not just random blog posts from an individual. Once you locate ten, and put them in impeccable APA format, I ask that you read them all closely and try and find patterns or disagreements that you deem meaningful. Ask yourself: What are the messages these pieces are trying to communicate? What are some commonalities? Some differences? What are their reasons for giving advice? Who is their assumed audience? Then, compose a five-hundred word assessment of this collection of pieces, making a clear argument for how you interpret their value.

Moving to a more local level, your second task will be to locate a business writing document from your ecology and conduct what is called a rhetorical analysis of the document. What this means is that you will assess the effectiveness of the document in terms of its intended purpose by breaking down as many decisions the author made as you can. Consider: What is the context of the document? What is the intended purpose of the document—what is it trying to do? Who is the presumed or intended audience(s) of this document? Given the context, purpose, and audience, was the author effective in their writing? This analysis can be combined with the assessment above into one document, also single-spaced. Be sure to include a copy of the document being analyzed. This batch of assignments is due to Blackboard by 31 May, at 11:59pm EST.

III. Common Topics

What a great week for me—now you get to teach the course! Well, kind of. This week's assignment has students: select a common topic—what the Greek rhetoricians, particularly Aristotle, called *topoi*—of controversy, confusion, or unclarity in business writing; research said topic; and present to the rest of the students by way of video (one-hundred and twenty seconds long) and handout (one page long) how to go about approaching this topic in our day-to-day writing practices. What is the right way to use a semicolon? Can sentences begin with a numerical character? When can the use of passive voice be appropriate? How long should a paragraph be? How do we engage in appropriate usage of gendered pronouns?

There are several ways to gain inspiration for a topic here. First, you can use personal experience. What confusions do you have about a particular aspect of writing? Second, you can search the internet for common mistakes or pitfalls in business writing, ensuring the source is reputable. Third, you can consult the following longitudinal study conducted by researchers at Stanford university that identified the top twenty errors made in undergraduate writing (PDF in "Files" section):

—Lunsford, A., & Lunsford, K. (2008). "Mistakes Are a Fact of Life": A National Comparative Study. *College Composition and Communication, 59*(4), 781-806.

In terms of the video and handout, it is important that you make the video engaging and informative and the handout chock full of examples to facilitate application in business contexts. The goal here is to create a repository of handouts to help each other learn more about the more challenging or uncertain aspects of business writing. The video and handout will both be posted to the week three channel in Slack; nothing will be uploaded to Blackboard this week. Both the video and handout need to be posted by 7 June, at 11:59pm EST. As with before, the video can be uploaded or shared via link.

IV. Planning Business Messages

In the second half of this course, students will engage in a three-phase writing process with the goal of developing new or improving existing habits. In doing so students will cultivate a stronger sense of rhetorical dexterity, understanding how decisions in writing vary by rhetorical purpose—and putting this understanding into practice.

There are myriad ways to categorize different types of business communications. Some base it on structure, such as formal or informal. Some base it on medium, like verbal, nonverbal, textual, or digital. Some base it on response type, like one-way to two-ways channels. For the purpose of this course, and for the purpose of highlighting the value of rhetorical attentiveness, we will be categorizing business communications in terms of directional flow: upward, downward, lateral, and external.[1] Adjustments in tone, content, grammar, syntax, diction, and style will all be based on the flow of the communication.

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[1] Based on Kimberlee Leonard's "Types of Business Communications," a short piece in the *Houston Chronicle* (chron.com).

And in this way we'll see that there is no such thing as "good" business writing or "bad" business writing. There is only effective business writing for the situation at hand. Using em dashes can be appropriate in emails but not in policy documents. An abundance of acronyms can be effective for lateral communication but not in apology letters to clients. The decisions we all face as writers in professional settings need to be framed in terms of context, audience, and purpose if we are going to make the most effective ones.

Now to the assignment. Each student will select two of the following four scenarios and begin planning out their approach to the writing situation at hand. The scenarios are based on the concept of directional flow (note that the first three are all internal).

Upward: This type of business communication is anything that comes from a subordinate to a manager or an individual up the organizational hierarchy. Most communication that flows upward is based on systematic forms, reports, templates, and other resources to help employees provide necessary and complete information. Scenario: Compose a formal letter asking for a cost of living or performance-based wage adjustment in your current (actual or hypothetical) position.

Downward: This is any type of communication that comes from a superior to one or more subordinates. Communication might be in the form of a letter, a memo, or a verbal directive. There should be no room for interpretation of the requirements. Scenario: Compose an organizational policy that defines and describes appropriate email practices for a chosen company or agency. Write this document as if you were in the human resources department.

Lateral: This refers to the talking, messaging, and emailing among co-workers in the office. This might be cross-department communication or just internal department dealings. Co-workers should always be encouraged to communicate in a respectful and professional tone when at work. Scenario: Compose an email to multiple departments trying to gather interest and support for bringing in a business writing consultant to lead an all-day workshop on improving employee writing quality.

External: External communication is any communication that leaves the office and deals with customers, prospects, vendors, or partners. It could also involve regulatory agencies or city offices. Sales presentations or marketing letters need to be exciting to generate interest from the customer but they also need to be based in fact, and may even at times need to present negative information. Scenario: Your company Twitter account, run by a junior member of the communications team, recently garnered unwanted media coverage for liking and retweeting controversial political posts. The employee has since been fired. Compose a press release as the owner repairing the image and reputation of the company, which is a regional restaurant chain with over a dozen locations that started business over thirty years ago.

Students will work through their chosen scenarios, conducting research when necessary (e.g., researching examples of email policy language). Then, students will read chapters three and nine of the textbook. This will help clarify the terms in the questions below. Finally, students will complete a five-hundred word planning document for each scenario that answers the following questions:

—What is the general purpose of your message?
—What is the specific purpose of your message?
—How feasible is the change that your message hopes to bring about? Are there issues with what is realistic?
—Is the message a common genre or type of message composed at an organization? Are there are examples of this type of message you can consult? Explain why or why not.
—Who is the primary audience? What is their level of understanding of the topic at hand? What are their expectations and preferences? What is their probable reaction?
—What is the main idea of your message? Not the topic, but the specific statement you are making about the topic.
—Will you be using a direct or indirect approach to your message? Explain your rationale.
—What does your outline look like? (See figure 3.6 in the textbook as an example.) Be as detailed as possible.

Both planning documents will be combined into one and submitted as a Word document via Blackboard by 14 June, at 11:59pm EST. Formatting is of little concern here; just ensure there is clarity between the questions and answers to allow for readability. The five hundred words includes the questions themselves.

V. Writing Business Messages
Having done research and thoughtful rhetorical planning, you can now begin to compose the documents required by each scenario. Each document will be in between five hundred and eight hundred words (no longer than two pages each). Formatting matters significantly here as you move from planning to actually envisioning what the document looks like. The email should look like an email. The memo should look like memo. The press release should look like a press release. Note: Chapter four of the textbook will help you complete this week's assignment.

Here is where it gets a bit complicated, though. You'll need to actually write the documents from your two selected scenarios, of course, but you'll also include an appendix answering a series of questions about each of your two documents. In total, then, this week you'll be creating four separate items: the two scenario compositions and an appendix for

each. The appendix for each scenario will address the following questions, considerations, and tasks:

—In what ways does your text put the audience's needs first (adopt the "you" attitude)? In what ways can it currently do a better job at anticipating what the audience will need and/or want? Name specific aspects.

—List any instances of bias (e.g., gender, ethnic, political, etc.) in your piece. Explain how you will resolve these instances. Also, explain in one sentence below (even if you did not have any instances) why using bias-free language is so important in a business setting.

—The textbook describes three types of tone on page seventy-eight: formal, conversational, and informal. They identify conversational as "just right" for business messages in today's world; however, there are many contexts in which formal and informal writing is still appropriate. Do you think conversational tone is best for your message? Why or why not?

—Read through your piece and identify all the instances of passive voice; list them. Describe why you will keep the use of passive voice, change it, or continue not to use it.

—Find two abstract words in your text. Discuss if you will keep them or change them and state why. List and discuss the two words below.

—List any words that are weak, unfamiliar, cliché, or jargon. Comment on each word and proffer an alternative.

—Copy and paste the most important paragraph of your text. Edit the paragraph so that it includes all four types of sentences outlined on pages eighty three and eighty four of the textbook. They don't have to be in any particular order (i.e., your compound-complex sentence could be the topic sentence). Note: You need not keep your paragraph this way—it is just an exercise for this question.

—List all transitions (from transition words to sentences or even paragraphs). Note that there are many more types of transitions than just words like "therefore" or "since." Choose one and paste it below. Give a two-sentence rationale as to what type or form of transition this is.

—Topic sentences are vital for communicating effectively, as they give the reader insight into what each paragraph is about. Effective topic sentences reveal an attention to a "you" attitude because they allow the audience to skim the document as they see fit. Copy and paste each topic sentence in their own line, starting from the top and going down. What you should see from doing this is an overview of your piece. The topic sentences should act as an outline for the material you wish to cover. Now, go back to last week's assignment. Does this sequence of topic

sentences match your outline? If so, how? If not, why not? How can you better compose your topic sentences to ensure they align?

—Paragraphs are much more than just topic sentences, however. The trickier part is filling in or developing the rest of the paragraph with meaningful content. Any content that does not relate to the topic sentence or that constitutes a new idea should be excluded from the paragraph at hand. The topic sentence should act as a filter for deciding what should go into the paragraph. Table 4.5 in the textbook gives five techniques for developing paragraphs. Choose one paragraph from your text and paste it below. Then, describe immediately underneath it what development technique is being used and justify why that is the most effective for the content at hand.

There are no word limits for the appendices, but do note that I am looking for quality and depth of thought. Really take your time and slow down with these.

All four documents will be combined into one and submitted as a Word document via Blackboard by 21 June, at 11:59pm EST. Formatting is of great concern here; be sure to conduct research on how each genre gets formatted and designed.

VI. Completing Business Messages

So you have written both scenario documents and yet this course is still not complete. And I argue neither are your documents. Now that you have thoughtfully planned and composed the documents, you will now need to tend to what are called "lower order concerns." Thus, we end here on grammar and style; grammar and style are important but just the tip of the iceberg of writing. First you need to assess yourself, understand rhetoric and advice, research various elements of writing, plan, compose, and then stylize. That is the argument I am putting forward with this course. Writing is far more than just knowing comma placement and properly executing plural possessives.

But before we cover such lower order concerns, I ask that you read Larry Beason's article on error and ethos in business writing (go to "Files" in Slack). It's a modest but enlightening study on the various ways individuals react to grammatical "errors." After reading, write a five hundred word response to the article in Slack (#week6 channel), aligning yourself with one or some of the categories he outlines.

Finally, return to your scenario documents and—you guessed it—polish of your documents and complete, after reading chapter five in the textbook, another appendix for each one, answering and considering the following:

—At times we can take readability for granted because most of what we read is readable. Good design usually means we do not see it. Same goes with readability: the best readability means we can use the object (in this case, the text) with great ease. Go back over your business message and re-evaluate the organization of the piece. Are all

the points covered in the most logical order possible? List two changes you have made to ensure a higher degree of readability for your text.

—Pay attention to the first ten sentences you have in your message. List the length (amount of words) of each sentence. Observe your results. How can you take steps to vary your sentence length to keep the reader engaged? Provide one strategy you will implement to do this and why you think this will enhance readability.

—Select two aspects of editing for clarity (as defined by textbook) and describe the changes you made to your document.

—Select two aspects of editing for conciseness (as defined by textbook) and describe the changes you made to your document.

—What is "white space"? Does your document use it effectively?

—Pay close attention to the formatting of the document, including justification and margin. Do not style the piece is if this were an academic assignment (e.g., APA format). Rather, format the piece as if you were submitting it later today. What changes can you make to improve the overall look of the document?

—What typeface have you chosen for your message? Why do you think this is most appropriate?

—Print your message out. Read your message aloud. Have a pen in your hand. Note any proofreading changes you can make. Pay close attention to commas, which are used to help indicate a pause in a sentence but not the starting of a new sentence. Any changes made after doing this?

All four documents will be combined into one and submitted as a Word document via Blackboard by 27 June, at 11:59pm EST. The response to Beason on Slack is also due by this time.

Withdrawal

A syllabus constitutes a contract between the student and the course instructor. Participation in this course indicates your acceptance of its content, requirements, and policies. If you believe that the nature of this course does not meet your interests, needs, or expectations (amount of work involved, class meetings, assignment deadlines, course policies, etc.), you should drop the class by the drop/add deadline, which is indicated in the ODU Schedule of Classes.