

Best Practice in the Teaching of Report Writing in Business Communications Courses

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INTRODUCTION

In the design of a business communications course for advanced level students, it is vital to include a *Report Writing* component.

This paper describes the design and implementation of the component in two courses at the University of New South Wales. The first is the Certificate in English for Business Communication (CBC) course, an ELICOS program at the Institute of Languages (UNSWIL). The second is the Writing for Managers (WFM) course in the MBA program at the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM). CBC targets NESB students while WFM targets ESB students who possess substantial business experience.

The paper is composed of four major sections. The first describes the *Report Writing* component in CBC and the second looks at the component in WFM. Both sections are organised under six headings:

- target students
- aims and objectives
- duration
- syllabus
- assessment
- source/teaching materials.

The third section compares the two components. The paper concludes with a discussion of best practice in the teaching of *Report Writing* in business communications courses.

THE CBC COURSE AT UNSWIL

Target Students

CBC targets four major types of clients who have upper intermediate to advanced level of proficiency in English (IELTS Levels 5.0 +):

- 1 Those interested in developing their business English skills.
- 2 Those wishing to seek employment in an international firm who require job seeking and handling skills.
- 3 Those intending to set up their own business in the future who require business concepts and communication skills in English.
- 4 Those planning to follow a course at a business college in Australia.

The current CBC class comprises fourteen students from seven countries. Most of them are university graduates with majors in accounting, architecture, business management, civil engineering, computing, literature and marketing. They are here in Australia to follow an intensive English course in business communications before returning home to further their careers. To them, pursuing a course like CBC at UNSWIL will not only broaden their horizon and improve their business English skills, but will also provide them with an edge in their future careers. A breakdown of the their profiles is provided overleaf.

| Age of Admission | | Place of Birth | | Professional Backg | |
|-------------------------|---|-----------------------|---|---------------------------|---|
| under 25 | 3 | China | 2 | Architecture | 2 |
| 25 - 30 | 8 | France | 2 | Banking/Finance | 6 |
| over 30 | 3 | Germany | 2 | Engineering/Mining | 3 |
| | | Indonesia | 1 | Marketing/Retail | 1 |
| | | Japan | 1 | Teaching | 1 |
| | | Korea | 4 | Other | 1 |
| | | Taiwan | 2 | | |

| Undergraduate Degrees | | Work Experience | |
|------------------------------|---|------------------------|---|
| Architecture | 2 | 1 - 2 years | 4 |
| Arts | 1 | 3 - 5 years | 4 |
| Commerce & Business | 7 | 6 - 10 years | 5 |
| Engineering | 3 | over 10 years | 1 |
| Other | 1 | | |

Aims and Objectives

CBC has been designed to address the needs of its target clients. The course consists of six aims and thirteen objectives. Details of these can be found in Cheung (1990). Those specific to *Report Writing* are cited below.

Firstly, the aims:

- To ensure that the learning environment will allow a transition from general English proficiency to a higher level of business specific proficiency
- To engender an awareness of the necessary attitudes and attributes essential for effective communication in the business sector.

Secondly, the objectives:

- To develop an understanding of the principles of communication and their relevance in the business sector
- To be aware of differing types of business documents and their functions

- To acquire skills in writing business documents including letters, memos, reports and committee documents.

Duration and Syllabus

The CBC spans a ten-week term. The *Report Writing* component is delivered in ten two-hour lessons, once per week throughout the term.

The syllabus is organised as follows:

| | |
|---------|--|
| Week 1 | Introduction: What is a report? |
| Week 2 | The Preliminaries of a Report |
| Week 3 | The Introduction of a Report |
| Week 4 | The Body of a Report |
| Week 5 | Using Tables and Graphs |
| Week 6 | Describing Trends and Expressing Functions |
| Week 7 | The Conclusion and Recommendations |
| Week 8 | The Bibliography and Appendices |
| Week 9 | The Executive Summary |
| Week 10 | Revision and Assignment Feedback |

Assessment

A continuous mode of assessment is adopted. This is based on class work and assignments. In addition, students are required to do a small scale market research project which commences in Week 6 and ends in Week 9. The project sets the following tasks:

- Designing and conducting a market study
- Compiling a market study report.

It includes a collection of task-based communicative activities:

- Preparation of market study objectives
- Preparation of market study tools
- Conducting survey field work
- Meetings
- Preparation of market study report.

The procedure for the project is outlined below.

Tasks:

1. To conduct a market study to investigate the feasibility of business opportunities of your newly formed company. ⁽¹⁾

2. To compile a market study report.

Procedure:

Week 6

- 1 Introduction and organisation of the project.
- 2 Submission of:
 - a research/survey objectives
 - b draft research procedures
 - c draft questionnaires

by 10:30 am, Wednesday.

- 3 Field work to be conducted on Thursday or on the weekend.

Week 7

- 1 Data to be ready by 9:00 am, Monday.
- 2 Research data to be compiled and preliminary findings submitted by 4:00 pm, Thursday.

Week 8

Research report drafts to be submitted by 9:00 am, Monday.

Week 9

Research report drafts to be updated and final reports submitted by 9:00 am, Thursday.

The grades that students score in the market research project contribute to the Overall Grade which has six levels: Fail, Pass, Pass with Credit, Pass with Merit, Pass with Distinction and Pass with High Distinction.

Source Materials

The key texts used include the following:

Cheung, A. & Knapp, D. (in print) *Writing Business Reports*, Intercom Press, Sydney.
Comfort, J., Revell, R. & Stott, C. (1984) *Business Reports in English*, CUP, Cambridge.

THE WFM COURSE AT AGSM

Background

1995 was the first year that the AGSM had decided to run a course entitled *Writing for Managers* for its MBA 1 students. The course was designed and delivered by the Learning Centre, UNSW.

Target Students

The 1995 MBA 1 program comprised 100 students. Their profiles including Age of Admission, Place of Birth, Professional Background, Undergraduate Degrees and Work Experience are provided below.

| Age of Admission | | Place of Birth | | Professional Backg | |
|------------------|----|----------------|----|--------------------|----|
| under 25 | 14 | Asia | 53 | Banking/Finance | 25 |
| 25 - 29 | 44 | Australia & NZ | 34 | Computing/IT/ | 10 |
| 30 - 35 | 27 | Europe | 4 | Consulting | 1 |
| 36 - 40 | 11 | North America | 4 | Engineering/Mining | 19 |
| over 40 | 4 | Pacific | 2 | Law | 6 |
| | | Africa | 3 | Marketing/Retail | 8 |
| | | | | Medicine | 6 |
| | | | | Other | 10 |

| Undergraduate Degrees | | Work Experience | |
|-----------------------|----|-----------------|----|
| Arts | 21 | 1 - 2 years | 14 |
| Commerce & Business | 2 | 3 - 5 years | 36 |
| Engineering | 22 | 6 - 10 years | 25 |
| Science | 21 | over 10 years | 25 |
| Other | 10 | | |

The students were divided into two groups: an ESB group and an NESB group. The former consisted of 70+ students while the latter comprised 25+ students.

Course Aim

At the outset of Term 1, a course document containing the course aim and other details was distributed to the students. The course had only one aim: *'The course aims to provide an analysis of the structures of academic writing expected in the AGSM and experience with developing more expressive writing.'*

Duration

The course also spanned a ten-week term. The weekly programs included a lecture and two workshops. The lecture was attended by the whole of the ESB group while each workshop was attended by half of the group.

The Syllabus

As the course only focused on academic writing, the syllabus reflected this accordingly. Citing the course document again, *'The first 3 parts of the course will look at the structures to be found in academic writing ... The later part of the course will explore the expressive nature of language looking at both academic, professional and creative writing.'*

Below is an extract of the first half of the syllabus.

Module 1 Assignment Writing

Week 1 ***Lecture*** *AGSM Genres of Writing*
Workshop

Week 2 ***Lecture*** *The Pre-writing Phase*
Workshop

Week 3 ***Lecture*** *Writing the Body of an Assignment*
Workshop *Analysis of sample reflective essay and creative writing*

Module 2 Language Structures in Academic and Business Writing

Week 4 ***Lecture*** *Paragraphs*
Workshop *Writing paragraphs for different purposes*

Quiz 1

Week 5 ***Lecture*** *Sentences, Punctuation and Vocabulary*
Workshop *Correcting sentence faults*

The Revised Course

If one examines the course aim and syllabus closely, one may wonder why a ten-week course entitled *Writing for Managers* for MBA ESB students should only focus on academic writing. Predictably, the students became increasingly dissatisfied with the course. In Week 5, a meeting was held during which the discontent of the students was formally communicated to the course organizer.

As a result, the direction of the course changed. For the remainder of the term, the focus would be on business communications instead. In Week 6, the author was invited to take over the ESB group. Although the circumstances were difficult and the lead time for preparation extremely short, the author nonetheless accepted the challenge and started in the second half of Week 6.

The Revised Course Aim and Objectives

The revised course aimed to develop the necessary attitudes and attributes essential for effective communication in the business sector. This aim was supported by the three objectives identical to the CBC component:

- To develop an understanding of the principles of communication and their relevance in the business sector
- To be aware of differing types of business documents and their functions
- To acquire skills in writing business documents including letters, memos, and in particular, short business reports.

The Revised Syllabus

The revised syllabus is provided below.

| | | |
|----------------|--------------------|--|
| Week 6 | Workshop | Mock Assignment |
| Week 7 | Lecture | Report Writing 1 Introduction to Report Writing |
| | Workshop | Report Writing 2 Administration of Needs Analysis Questionnaire Experimental and Questionnaire Design |
| Week 8 | No Lectures | Public Holiday |
| | Workshop | Report Writing 3 Needs Analysis Feedback Writing Introductions and Terms of Reference |
| Week 9 | Lecture | Report Writing 4 Presentation and Discussion of Findings |
| | Workshop | Report Writing 5 Writing Executive Summaries |
| Week 10 | Lecture | Report Writing 6 Writing Conclusion and Recommendations |
| | Workshop | Other Business Documents Letters and Memos |

A needs analysis questionnaire was administered in the Week 7 Workshop. Appendix A provides a copy of the questionnaire. The major findings were as follows:

Out of a total of 52 respondents, only six had not written a report before. One had written one report, thirteen had written two to five reports, five had written six to ten reports and 26 had written over ten reports.

Of those who had report writing experience, they mainly wrote analytical reports (46 responses) and a smaller number had written descriptive reports (14 responses)

'*Problem - solution*' was the most frequently used argument method (94 points), followed by '*chronological*' (46 points), '*pros and cons*' (40 points), '*topical*' (28 points) and '*deductive*' (27 points).

Aspects of report writing which respondents wished to improve on included structure, strength and flow of argument and the writing of conclusion. There was also concern about the impact and conciseness of language.

Letters and memos had been identified as other types of business documents that they wished to examine.

Assessment

The original course document states, '*Assessment is via 3 Quizzes. These will focus on your understanding of the areas of work covered to that point.*' However, the third quiz was not administered. It was replaced by the assignment below.

End of Term Assignment

Write an **Executive Summary** for the report entitled
Floral Preferences of Wesley Consumers.⁽²⁾
You could do it individually, in pairs or in groups of three.

Submit the assignment to **Dr Anthony Cheung**
by 4:00 pm on Thursday, 4 May 1995.

There were only two grades to be given: Pass and Fail.

Source Materials

The key texts used in WFM were similar to those used in CBC, ie Cheung et al (in print) and Comfort et al (1984). In addition, materials were also drawn from the following:

Eunson, B. (1994) *Writing and Presenting Reports*, John Wiley & Sons, Brisbane.
Lewis, R. & Inglis, J. (1994) *How to Write Reports*, Collins Educational, London.
Mohan, T, McGregor, H. & Strano, Z. (1989) *Communicating! Theory and Practice*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Sydney.

To make the materials more relevant to the course, the students were invited to bring in samples of reports that they had written before. However, only one student responded. Many explained that the difficulty was due to the confidentiality of their reports. This lack of response reveals that it is generally difficult to gain access to authentic business reports for teaching purposes.

Nevertheless, there are other viable sources. For instance, published business reports prepared by consultancy firms for the government may be used, eg *Business Opportunities in Advanced Technology: Computer Software* compiled by Coopers and Lybrand Services. Moreover, materials published by educational institutions can be adapted. Consider the following extract of *Key Strategies* from the *Corporate Plan* of the University of New South Wales:

- ‘* *The following initiatives will enable us to achieve our mission during the current planning period and move us substantially towards our 2020 vision. Some of the strategies will be realised during the lifetime of the 1994-99 corporate plan, some will take longer. New strategies will be considered as new opportunities arise.*
- * *Develop new models of educational delivery and information access that improve academic quality and student access. Establish a support centre to help faculties develop teaching and learning packages utilising new technology and new approaches to curriculum design.*
- * *Increase the proportion of research students, and establish graduate and professional schools that will facilitate both focussed research and cross-disciplinary training.*
- * *Focus research on areas of excellence that enable UNSW to achieve worldwide recognition.*
- * *Provide equity in access and in programs for students from diverse backgrounds.*
- * *Diversify the funding base so that an increasing proportion of income is received from sources other than Commonwealth government operating grants.’ (pp. 13-14)*

The above could be adapted for Power Business Machines (PBM) as follows:

The following strategies will facilitate us to accomplish our mission during the 1995-2000 period. Some of these will be applied during the period. Others will take longer. As occasions and opportunities change in the future, new strategies will be considered and applied.

- Develop new promotional models that improve centralized promotion. Establish PBM as a major provider of business machines.
- Increase the proportion of new products, and expand the research and development department which will facilitate enquiry into innovative ideas and products.
- Focus research on areas of quality that enable PBM to achieve the leading role as the provider of business machines internationally.
- Provide equity in employment and promotion for staff members from diverse backgrounds.
- Diversify the revenue base in order that more income is derived from sources other than the current centralized distributional network.

A COMPARISON OF THE TWO COURSES

This section provides a comparison of the *Report Writing* components in CBC and WFM. It examines their similarities and differences.

The Similarities

There are three major similarities. First, most of the students in both groups have business background. Many are business graduates and possess working experience. Second, as far as business communications is concerned, both groups have similar goals and expectations, ie students generally wish to better their skills in business communications, and in the context of *Report Writing*, better their skills in the writing of business reports. Last, both courses have provisions for student feedback and course evaluation. Student feedback was elicited on a continuous basis, both formally and informally. Formal course evaluation surveys, by means of questionnaires, were conducted towards the end of the courses.

The Differences

From the description of student profiles above, it is evident that students of the two courses have vastly differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Clearly, the MBA group held a superb advantage over the CBC group in terms of English language proficiency. The former group is also more experienced in the writing of business reports. These differences had strong implications towards the design of the *Report Writing* components.

As the CBC group was less proficient in English and had less experience in *Report Writing*, the subject matter had to be presented in great detail from scratch. A whole two-hour lesson could be spent on each of the major sections of a report. Take the section Presentation of Findings for instance. Using data presented in a table as input, there could be detailed discussions on trend descriptions and comparisons. On the other hand, the MBA program laid emphasis on selected topics put forward by students, eg the structure of reports, the strength and flow of arguments, the writing of conclusion, etc. As a result, much less time was dedicated to basic language work. Most of the lessons focused on critical examinations of relevant examples and models.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion provides suggestions for the two courses so that best practice in the teaching of *Report Writing* would prevail.

In so far as CBC is concerned, student feedback has been most favourable. This indicates that the direction and focus of the course is largely satisfactory. However, one has to bear in mind the wide range of expectations and the diverse backgrounds of students. Their expectations could change from term to term as groups differ. For this purpose, a close monitoring of student needs is essential. At the outset of each school term, a survey should be conducted to help shed light on their needs and expectations so that the course may be shaped and designed accordingly.

With the MBA program, the situation is more complex. The key issue to address is the aim of the course. Apparently, for a course entitled '*Writing for Managers*' to merely focus on academic writing was an error. Citing the feedback of some of the students,

'Great teacher but need to fix up course overall.'

'It's basically a problem with the structure and content of the course. It should be more skewed towards business writing than academic writing.'

'Tony provided a much better class than Z... If the AGSM intends to keep a writing course in the future, the class should contain communication skills as presented by Tony and not basic writing techniques as presented by Z.'

It is evident that the students wanted more business writing than academic writing. Feedback from the course evaluation exercise also reinforced some of the topics that students deemed important at the outset: in addition to *Report Writing*, the course should also incorporate letter, memo and resume writing, oral presentation skills, as well as computer skills including the use of PowerPoint. Perhaps business communications should be run as a full program with a combination of lectures, writing workshops, computer workshops and oral presentation sessions.

The two-grade assessment system (Pass and Fail) should be replaced by a five-grade system. This is supported by the following student comment:

'Course changed mid-term for the better ... Assessment system not clear. Assessment/Assignment at Pass/Fail only. Does not give useful feedback (as H,D,C,P,F does).'

As the ESB group was composed of over 70 students, it is logical to assume that there exists varying levels of writing competence and expectations. At one end of the spectrum, there were those who did not require any help in business writing at all. At the other end, there were those who needed much help. If a proficiency test was administered at the beginning of the term, a clearer picture of students' proficiency levels would emerge. The writing class should be optional for those who scored above a given cut-off point and obligatory for those who scored below it. This view is backed by another student:

'I don't think this subject is relevant to MBA and should be made optional for weaker language students.'

Finally, conducting weekly writing workshops for groups of 35+ students is almost an impossible task. At UNSWIL, the maximum number of students in each of the language classes, including CBC, is sixteen. This has worked very well over the past decade. So it seems the optimum size of the WFM workshop groups should be sixteen.

NOTES

- (1) The Market Study Project is part of a Company Project in the CBC program. Students working in groups of three or four form fictitious companies and perform communicative tasks and activities. See Cheung (1990) for details.
- (2) A model business report provided in Appendix A, Cheung and Knapp (in print).

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- UNSW (1994) *UNSW Corporate Plan 1994-99*, UNSW Publications Section.

Appendix A:
MBA Needs Analysis Questionnaire

Name (optional): _____

1. Have you written any business reports in the past?

Tick the appropriate box.

If **YES**, please go to Question 2.

If **NO**, please go to Question 5.

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

2. How many business reports have you written before?

Tick the appropriate box.

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

3. What **TYPE** of business reports have you **MAINLY** written?

Tick the appropriate box.

| | |
|--------------|--------------------------|
| Descr | 03 |
| Analytical - | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Analytical - | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Ot | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If **OTHER**, please specify: _____

4. A list of **ARGUMENT DEVELOPMENT METHODS** is provided below.
Choose **THREE** and rank order them according to **FREQUENCY of USAGE**.

1 = the **MOST** frequently used;

2 = the **SECOND MOST** frequently used;

3 = the **THIRD MOST** frequently used.

| Argument developm | Approach | Ra |
|--------------------------|---|-----------|
| A. chronological | from the past to the present, and into the future | |
| B. inductive | from specific to general | |
| C. deductive | from general to specific | |
| D. geographical | from one suburb / state / country / continent to anothe | |
| E. topical | from subject to subject | |
| F. problem - solution | the problem is... the solutions / options are... | |
| G. pros & cons | the advantages and disadvantages | |
| H. question words | what, where, when, why, who, how | |
| I. ideal / reality | what we would like is ... what we are stuck with is.. | |
| J. other | please specify | |

5. List **TWO** aspects of report writing in which you would like to improve your skills. Please be as **SPECIFIC** as possible.

A. _____ 14

B. _____

6. In Week 10, there will be a lecture and a workshop on **OTHER BUSINESS DOCUMENTS**. Name **ONE** type of business document that you would wish to examine then.

_____ 15

