

PROCESS AND PRACTICE: IMPROVING WRITING ABILITY, CONFIDENCE IN WRITING, AND AWARENESS OF WRITING SKILLS' IMPORTANCE

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of a two-semester writing-focused program on freshman students' perceived improvements in writing ability, confidence in writing, and recognition of the importance of writing skills for academic and career success. Participants were taught a five step writing process and were required to complete 10 writing assignments each semester using the five steps. The pre-test post-test design required participants to complete a questionnaire at the end of each semester that measured perceived improvements in ability, confidence, and awareness of the importance of writing skills. Mean responses on the pre-test showed improvements in all three areas, and means and t-tests results indicated additional improvements at the end of the second semester. However, only grammar, organization, and recognition of academic importance showed a significant improvement. The findings support the use of a writing process and practice to provide business students with a vital skill for academic and career success.

INTRODUCTION

Communication skills are critically important for both academic performance and career success. Both educators and employers emphasize the importance of oral (Barker & Hall, 1995; Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997) as well as written (Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Quible & Griffin, 2007) communication skills. However, more emphasis has been placed on written communication skills in recent years as technological advancements such as e-mail, text messaging, and instant messaging devices have become more common, and as businesses focus more on knowledge and sharing (Brandt, 2005). While business educators and employers agree that effective writing skills are important in higher education as well as in the workplace (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007), researchers suggest that many business students may lack this important skill (Ashton, 2007; Henricks, 2007; Quible & Griffin, 2007).

Although numerous researchers have addressed methods for improving writing skills, many of these studies only provide suggestions or a list of tips to follow rather than a teachable process to facilitate improvements. Also, while some studies document improvements in writing skills, most of the suggested techniques are implemented in upper level courses with minimal effort to address writing deficiencies or needed improvements during the earlier years of college.

In this study, we extend the existing literature by examining student perceptions relevant to improvements in writing ability, confidence in writing, and recognition of the importance of writing skills for academic and career success after completing two freshman courses that emphasize the use of a writing process and require the completion of 20 writing assignments. We propose a process and practice approach for teaching business writing skills and improving the writing skills of business graduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educational Perspective

While educators and employers agree that writing proficiency is a critical ingredient for success in both higher education and the workplace, there is a strong consensus that many graduates lack effective writing skills (Ashton, 2007; Henricks, 2007; Quible & Griffin, 2007). Business educators have been criticized for not developing students' writing skills and are facing pressures to implement curriculum changes to address writing deficiencies. This is especially true for business educators attempting to meet assurance of learning (AOL) standards set by accrediting agencies such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). AOL standards require that colleges of business provide evidence of student learning by directly and indirectly measuring the attainment of skills and knowledge (AACSB, 2006). Ironically, one of the core competences emphasized as important by the AACSB is the ability to communicate effectively (AACSB, 2011).

Business educators frequently express concerns about the writing deficiencies of students (Marcal, Hennessey, Curren, & Roberts, 2005; Rieber, 2005). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2002) indicates that many American students lack effective writing skills and are neither prepared for writing in college nor for subsequent internships or jobs. Researchers corroborate that many students enter college with writing deficiencies (NAEP, 2002), that writing skills do not substantially improve through four years of college (Bacon & Anderson, 2004), and that many MBA students lack effective writing skills (May, Thompson, & Hebblethwaite, 2012). Thus, many graduates lack an important skill that could contribute to their career success.

Many department chairs in business colleges also believe that writing skills are some of the most important skills for business graduates to master. Consequently, they suggest that business communication courses should focus on writing memos, letters, and reports that require business students to demonstrate their mastery of content, mechanics, and organization (Wardrope, 2002). Early academic requirements justify the need to focus on business writing prior to the business communication course taken in the sophomore or junior year. Addressing writing skills at the freshman level allows students to be better prepared for writing assignments in classes at higher levels.

Employers' Perspective

Employers consistently rank effective writing as one of the most important skills for business graduates to possess (Mitchell, 2008; Young & Murphy, 2003). Researchers suggest that effective writing skills are correlated with job placement (Stevens, 2005), career success (Rowh, 2006), and financial rewards (Fisher, 1999). According to the National Association of Colleges and Employment, employers list communication as the most important soft skill for college graduates to be successful in the workplace (2010); however, many of them express concerns over the writing deficiencies of newly hired college graduates (Henricks, 2007; NACE, 2011). In an attempt to rectify this deficiency, employers have spent billions of dollars on training to improve employees' writing skills (Quible & Griffin, 2007; Smerd, 2007). Consequently there is a consensus among employers that effective writing is an area in which improvements need to be made, and that college courses should include more rigorous writing and editing standards (Stevens, 2005).

Alumni Perspectives

College alumni have ranked communication courses as the courses that contributed the most to their career advancement and promotion (Gustafson, Johnson, & Hovey, 1993). Ironically, graduates and alumni also highlight communication skills as most lacking in their overall educational training (Page, 2005).

Preparing Business Students to Write

In order to meet the rising demand for writing skill improvement, educators have been experimenting with various techniques for assessing and improving business students' writing skills. Assessment techniques such as manual essay grading and computer-scored essay grading have been developed for students majoring in various areas of business (Bacon & Anderson, 2004; Riordan, Riordan, & Sullivan, 2000).

Although assessment practices can be instrumental in evaluating writing and identifying writing deficiencies, it is also necessary to implement techniques for improving writing in order to address any deficiencies. A significant amount of research has been focused on methods for improving writing skills; however, many of the studies simply give a list of tips or guidelines (Rowh, 2006). While suggestions such as knowing grammar and

punctuation rules, being clear and concise, and using the right tone should be followed, these tips are insufficient for developing effective writing skills. They are useful only when students actively engage in the writing process, and they must be continually practiced for real skill development.

As part of their experimenting with various techniques for improving writing skills and better preparing students for successful careers, business educators have used a number of techniques which have proven to be effective. Some of these techniques include practice and feedback (Ericsson, 2006; Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007), peer review (Rieber, 2006), grade incentive for improvement (Bacon & Anderson, 2004), and intensive training (Beeler, Burke, & Turner, 2001). Additionally, researchers emphasize the need for continuous instruction on the fundamentals of writing (Pittenger, Miller, & Allison, 2006) and writing throughout the curriculum (Riordan et al., 2000) to further develop effective writing skills. However, in only a few studies have researchers collected data to measure improvements in writing based on the application of the recommended techniques.

Simply imparting information about writing to students is insufficient. They also need to be trained as writers with opportunities to practice and to apply their knowledge and skills (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007) so that they can learn by actually writing documents, receiving feedback, and making revisions (Ashbaugh, 1994). This learning process is similar to that applied in teaching someone to ride a bicycle or to play a guitar. Someone could receive months of classroom instruction, but actual mastery of the skill requires a lot of practice.

Specifically, the ability to write effectively requires more than just the knowledge of correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, diction, thesis statements, topic sentences, links in paragraphs, and organization of text. These are, of course, foundational to the writing process; however, in addition to knowing and being able to apply rules of writing correctness, students must be able to think critically and creatively in order to develop content for a writing assignment (Locke & Brazelton, 1997). It is also beneficial for students to identify their own specific writing weaknesses or challenges faced in order to make improvements in their writing skills (Ortiz, 2012). Recently, researchers have learned that improvements in confidence and self-efficacy relevant to writing ability can lead to improvements in writing skills (Likkell, 2012; Mascle, 2013).

Despite the importance placed on effective writing skills by recruiters and employers, the development of these skills has traditionally received limited attention in most business programs (Page, 2005). Most business students take one business communication course during the sophomore or junior year (Wardrope, 2002). This paucity of writing emphasis leaves room for concern about the effectiveness of a single course to improve business students' writing skills (Wardrope, 2002). It also indicates that business students spend

equal or less time developing effective business writing skills as they spend learning topics such as history, geography, psychology, or fine arts. Although these subjects are important, they are peripheral to a major in business.

In many business courses, students focus on developing critical thinking skills by analyzing problems or opportunities, and then identifying, evaluating, selecting, and implementing solutions. While such analytic skills are necessary, more is required. Business majors must also be able to communicate their findings - both orally and in writing.

Importance of the Freshman Year

According to Geiser and Studley (2001), the single best indicator of success during the freshman year is the ability to compose text, followed by the development of informative and analytical writing ability during the remaining college years (Benjamin & Chun, 2003). Another researcher concluded that students could benefit from developing proofreading and editing skills during the freshman year for improvements in writing skills throughout college (Enos, 2010).

Despite a plethora of research documenting the importance of effective writing skills for academic and career success, few studies have focused on teaching and facilitating a writing process for developing freshman writing skills and in even fewer have researchers collected data to gauge perceived improvements in writing skills (May, Thompson, & Hebblethwaite, 2012; Riordan et al., 2000; Rowe, 2006). In this study, we examine student perceptions regarding improvements in their writing skills, increased confidence, and their awareness of the importance of their writing skills at the completion of two consecutive semesters using the writing process.

Research Question 1: Does use of the writing process impact student perceptions of improvements in their writing ability?

Research Question 2: Does use of the writing process impact student perceptions of improvements in their confidence in writing?

Research Question 3: Does use of the writing process impact student perceptions of the importance of writing skills for academic and career success?

There is a gap in the literature relevant to the impact of the role of the writing process on improving writing skills over a period of time. This impact of the extended use of both process and practice on student perceptions of writing improvements would justify the need for early intervention strategies to facilitate the development of effective writing skills.

Research Question 4: Does extended use of the writing process result in additional improvements in student writing skills, confidence, and their awareness of the importance of writing?

In this study, we examine students' perceptions regarding improvements in their writing ability, increased confidence in their ability to write, and their awareness of the importance of writing skills after completing two freshman courses and 20 writing assignments over two consecutive semesters.

METHOD

We used a pre-test/post-test experimental design method to gauge changes in student opinions relevant to improvements in their writing skills, confidence in writing, and their awareness of the importance of business writing skills. Participants for the study were freshman business majors at an accredited institution in the southeast. The students were enrolled in two core courses in consecutive semesters, Freshman Seminar-101 and Introduction to Business-150; in both courses, students were required to complete 10 writing assignments each semester using a process and practice approach aimed at improving writing skills.

We taught and facilitated use of a step-by-step writing process during the two semesters for each of the 20 writing assignments. The topics that we selected were relevant to their academic studies the first semester (college courses in general, strategies for success, careers) and to business the second semester (ethics, social responsibility, management, marketing). The writing process consisted of the following steps:

Topic Introduction and Discussion. The instructor introduces the topic and facilitates brainstorming of relevant ideas, which students record in random order.

Outline and Rough Draft. Students refine their list and develop an outline by adding or deleting ideas, grouping related ideas, and then organizing the ideas in order. Each student then types and prints a rough draft.

Review and Revision. Assignments are subjected to a multi-stage review and revise process.

- Self Review-after sufficient time has passed to avoid skim reading
- Peer Review-during class with written comments and verbal discussion
- Electronic Review-using the Criterion ETS, an online writing evaluation program that provides diagnostic feedback and automated scoring
- Instructor Review-feedback on additional revisions

Identification of Challenges. Students are encouraged to review all feedback and list specific areas to concentrate on for future writing assignments in an effort to identify writing weaknesses and determine areas to focus on for improving writing skills.

Final Revision and Submission. Students submit the final assignment for a grade. (It is important to use a rubric for grading and to provide students with a copy of the rubric when the assignment is given. It is also useful for students to compare the final version of the assignment to the rough drafts to see the improvement process.)

The writing process taught and facilitated during the two semesters incorporates a series of techniques considered important for developing writing skills that starts with topic development, emphasizes multiple steps for review and revision, and encourages identification and improvement of writing weaknesses. The process starts with topic development to encourage students to generate and organize ideas prior to writing. This should lead to more creative writing and better organization and flow of ideas. The process also emphasizes the use of a multi-step approach to review and revision to encourage students to closely review and continuously improve their writing. The final area of emphasis in the writing process encourages students to critically evaluate their writing and identify their writing weaknesses to determine specific areas that should be focused on for future writing assignments.

At the end of each semester, we asked the students to complete a questionnaire to measure their perceptions relevant to improvements in their writing skills, confidence in writing, and awareness of the importance of writing skills. In the questionnaire, we included a section on improvements in writing skills that covered overall improvement as well as improvements in sentences, paragraphs, punctuation, grammar, and organization. A sample question would be, "My ability to develop complete and accurate sentences has improved."

In the questionnaire section on confidence, we included a list of possible ranges of perceptions such as 'more confident, score higher, and less apprehensive.' A sample question might be, "I am less apprehensive about completing writing assignments."

In the final section of the questionnaire, we covered their awareness of the importance of writing skills for college, business students, and business careers. An example of a question in this section of the questionnaire would be, "Effective writing skills are important for career success." The questionnaire contained 12 items using a 5-point scale from 5=strongly agree to 1=strongly disagree. We also asked demographic questions such as age and gender for classification purposes.

RESULTS

At the end of the first semester, 225 students completed the pre-test questionnaire; this number included 119 males and 106 females. At the end of the second semester, 210 students completed the post-test questionnaire; this number included 115 males and 95 females due to attrition that occurred between semesters. The majority of the respondents who completed the instruments were between the ages of 18 and 21. We conducted t-tests for each survey item based on demographic characteristics, and we found that there were no significant differences based on gender or age.

Improvement

Mean responses on the pre- and post-test were computed for each item, followed by t-test and p-values comparing the pre- and post-test results. From the pre-test results, we conclude that that students believed that their writing skills had improved at the end of the first semester. As shown in Table 1, the means on the pre-test were high for overall improvement (m = 3.64), sentences (m = 3.58), paragraphs (m = 3.64), punctuation (m = 3.55), grammar (m = 3.52), and organization (m = 3.72). Since the means were higher on the posttest, the students indicated that they were continuing to improve from the first semester to the second semester for all 6 variables: overall improvement (m = 3.79), sentences (m = 3.63), paragraphs (m = 3.72), punctuation (m = 3.62), grammar (m = 3.73), and organization (m = 3.89). Additionally, the students' responses indicate significant increases for overall improvement (p = .03), grammar (p = .01), and organization (p = .02) from the pre-test to the posttest.

TABLE 1

Means, SD, and p-values for Improvement Variables

	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	t-test (p-value)
Overall Improvement	3.64 (0.83)	3.79 (0.57)	-1.82 (0.03)*
Sentences	3.58 (0.87)	3.63 (0.67)	-0.61 (0.27)
Paragraphs	3.64 (0.85)	3.72 (0.68)	-1.00 (0.16)
Punctuation	3.55 (0.86)	3.62 (0.69)	-0.92 (0.18)
Grammar	3.52 (0.88)	3.73 (0.79)	-2.33 (0.01)*
Organization	3.72 (0.85)	3.89 (0.64)	-2.01 (0.02)*

Note: Items measured on a 5 point scale from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.
*t-tests and p-values shown in bold are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

Confidence

Student responses on the pre-test indicate perceived improvements in their confidence after completing the first semester. As shown in Table 2, students were more confident about writing ($m = 3.76$), expected higher scores ($m = 3.89$), and were less apprehensive about future writing assignments ($m = 3.58$). The means increased from the pre-test to the post-test for all three variables: confidence ($m = 3.85$), score higher ($m = 3.94$), and apprehension ($m = 3.69$). However, the increases in the means from the pre-test to the post-test were not significant with p-values of 0.14, 0.30, and 0.10 respectively.

TABLE 2
Means, SD, and p-values for Confidence Variables

	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	t-test (p-value)
Overall Confidence	3.76 (0.84)	3.85 (0.73)	-1.08 (0.14)
Expect Higher Scores	3.89 (0.83)	3.94 (0.69)	-0.54 (0.30)
Less Apprehensive	3.58 (0.77)	3.69 (0.76)	-1.29 (0.10)

Note. Items measured on a 5 point scale from 5 = strongly agree to 1 = strongly disagree.

Importance

The highest overall means were found in the category addressing their awareness of the importance of writing and indicated that students are more aware of the importance of effective writing skills. As shown in Table 3, the pre-test means were high relative to the importance of writing skills for academic performance ($m = 4.50$), business students ($m = 4.47$), and career success ($m = 4.55$). The mean scores increased from the pre-test to the post-test for all three variables: college ($m = 4.60$), business students ($m = 4.53$), and career ($m = 4.56$) indicating that students were even more aware of the importance of effective writing skills for success in college, for success in their major as a business student, and for their overall career success. However, we found that the only significant increase was the importance of writing skills for academic success ($p = .04$).

TABLE 3
Means, SD, and p-values for Importance of Writing Skills

	Pre-test Mean SD	Post-test Mean SD	t-test (p-value)
Academic Success	4.50 (0.50)	4.60 (0.32)	-1.75 (0.04)*
Business Majors	4.47 (0.51)	4.53 (0.37)	-1.05 (0.15)
Career Success	4.55 (0.45)	4.56 (0.33)	-0.25 (0.40)

Note. Items measured on a 5 point scale from 5 = strongly agree to 1= strongly disagree.
*t-tests and p-values shown in bold are significant at the $p < .05$ level.

DISCUSSION

In this exploratory study, we found support for the use of process and practice to improve business writing skills. After completion of their first semester using this approach, students believed that they had improved their written abilities in the areas of constructing sentences, paragraphs, punctuation, grammar, and organization. Since the means for all the variables were above 3.5 on the pre-test, we conclude that this indicates the positive impact that can result by teaching and facilitating the application of a step-by-step writing process that includes topic development, a multi-step approach to review and revision of a document, and identifying writing challenges.

Additionally, the students perceived that their overall confidence in their ability to write had improved. They expected higher scores on writing assignments and were less apprehensive overall about writing. Results also indicate that students were more aware of the importance of effective writing skills for academic success, business majors, and career success. We found that the results support all three Research Questions pertinent to the impact of the writing process on perceived improvements in writing skills, confidence in writing, and awareness of the importance of writing skills for academic and career success.

At the end of their second semester, students again reported that they believed their writing skills had improved. The means for all post-test variables were above 3.6. We believe that these data not only provide support for Research Question 4, but also provide

support for extended practice using a writing process to improve student writing skills, confidence in writing, and raise their awareness of the importance of writing.

We posit that the high means on the pre-test and the increase in the means for every variable on the post-test indicate that use of a writing process and practice can have a positive impact on student perceptions of personal success and improvement in their writing skills, their confidence in writing, and a realization of the importance of writing for academic and career success. We believe that these results further support the use of early intervention strategies, such as the one we used, to develop effective writing skills for both academic and career success.

While the means for each variable increased from the pre-test to the post-test indicating continued improvement, the only significant differences were for overall improvements, grammar, organization, and academic success. We suggest that this may indicate that the process and practice approach had a greater impact on improving writing skills and on creating a greater realization of the importance of writing for academic success, and less impact on improving confidence in writing and realizing the importance of writing for career success. We believe that this may be an indication that extended practice (beyond two semesters) is necessary to improve students' confidence in writing, and that educators should emphasize the importance of writing skills for career success and not only for achieving better grades.

An interesting finding was the significant increase from the pre-test to the post-test in student understanding of the relation of academic success to the ability to write. In fact, the relationship to academic success was the overall highest mean on the post-test. We believe these results indicate a possible relationship between realizing the importance of writing skills and students making improvements in writing. Thus, if educators emphasize the importance of writing skills for academic success, this could lead to student improvements in writing skills.

Clearly, the most significant result was in the area of grammar. In the pre-test, grammar had the overall lowest mean; yet, on the post-test, grammar showed the most significant increase. This may be an indication of a strong positive relationship between practice and improving grammar.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the findings of this study support the use of a process approach to writing and practice to provide business students with one of the skills most vital for their academic and career success. We believe that there are several implications of this study for future research and practical application.

First, educators should teach and facilitate the use of a writing process similar to the one outlined in this study to improve students' writing skills, increase their confidence, and emphasize the importance of writing. The steps taught should emphasize writing as a process that starts with idea generation, includes multiple opportunities for review and revision, and identifies weaknesses for writing improvement.

Second, educators should implement techniques to improve student writing, not only for one or two semesters but also over time in order to realize continued improvements in their writing skills, confidence in their writing abilities, and increase their awareness of the importance of writing.

Third, any intervention aimed at improving writing skills should be implemented early in the curriculum to facilitate development of effective writing skills for academic and career success. We suggest beginning in the first semester of students' freshman year.

Fourth, educators should emphasize the use of the writing process and the importance of effective writing skills for academic and career success throughout the curriculum, not only in writing-specific courses.

We believe that the findings of this exploratory study support the need for more research on the techniques and practices necessary to provide business students with effective writing skills. One suggestion for future studies is to focus on using both direct and indirect measurement techniques to assess and improve business writing skills by comparing student perceptions on improving writing skills to actual improvements. This would allow for use of a triangulation method to compare improvements in writing skills, and would move colleges of business one step closer to compliance with AOL standards that require evidence of student learning by directly and indirectly measuring the attainment of effective writing skills (AACSB, 2006).

We also suggest soliciting input from professors on strengths and weaknesses of student writing skills in order to identify specific target areas for improvement. It would correspondingly be useful to measure student perceptions of their writing skills and compare it to employer perceptions. Informing students of these differences might make a powerful impression on the need to hone their writing skills.

Another possibility for research includes educators' using business clients for class projects and soliciting their perceptions of students' end-products, such as formal business reports, resumes, cover letters, etc. These employer perceptions would be shared with the students along with any recommendations for improvement.

Business educators should focus specific class assignments across the array of business disciplines to highlight the connection of the importance of writing to success in business

careers. Given the importance of effective writing skills for academic and career success, business programs could benefit from emphasizing these critical skills early in the program and throughout the curricula.

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