TEACHING BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS STUDENTS TO WRITE AS READERS

Alice L. Gibson

Most of our business communications students know very little about why or how business letters are written when they first arrive in our classes. Memos, business letters and reports have seldom come their way. Very few have taken courses in business correspondence. They don't know that there are different formats or that the writing and the formats differ in effectiveness. And they believe that a special, formal vocabulary is essential.

When they come to us, then, we have to fill in these gaps and change their ideas about special language. After eight months--or even four--in our classes, they are expected to know a great deal about purpose, formats, tone, clarity, conciseness, correctness, and all the other c's of good business writing. Above all, they are expected to be able to produce reader-oriented writing which demonstrates their knowledge of having learned to write, to revise in light of their own critical analysis of their own work, to edit, and to produce effective work in acceptable language. Clearly, we believe in miracles.

How do we try to bring about these miracles? We carefully choose a communications text which offers examples of business writing, giving the students a chance to see the variety of reasons for writing. The examples are thoroughly analysed in light of lists of suggestions for achieving excellence. Students are told which of these examples represent good writing. They read the examples and concentrate on the provided analysis and suggestions for successful imitation. Both the analysis and suggestions are valuable to them--eventually. However, when the students are just beginning their course in business communications, sample letters and memos from the text may come to represent unattainable perfection. And students too often feel that these letters represent the only way of writing particular kinds of messages--and thus may end by copying sentences and paragraphs from the text. Students are not given the chance to test their reactions as readers or to value these reactions in deciding what is good or bad about the writing, even though their teachers tell them that getting from their reader a desired reaction to a message is the point of communication. They have little chance to develop confidence in their own judgement or in their own way of expressing themselves. Thus when it comes time for them to write, they have great difficulty in writing in their own words and then in looking at their own written work critically--as if they were readers.

How can we solve some of these problems? We can make a start by giving our students carefully chosen samples of writing without any analysis. Using such samples from several companies allows students to begin to see the diversity of purposes in writing existing in the business world. They can see the effectiveness (and sometimes lack of effectiveness) of using different writing styles, levels of vocabulary, tones, and formats in fulfilling various purposes in writing. They can see that not all letters begin with "Thank you for your letter of . . ." or end with "Thank you for your attention to this matter." They can react to the writing as readers before they must react as writers. Looking at correspondence recently used in real companies (which is sometimes--even often--imperfectly written) can help students overcome the impression of unattainable perfection that may attend the good examples in the text and help give credibility to the theory there. Because the correspondence has been prepared by different writers, students can see that there is more than one acceptable way to write any kind of message. The text remains very important for confirmation, clarification and further explanation of the theory, techniques and styles the students have discovered through their examination of writing produced in several companies.

To get samples of current business writing, I saved letters that came to the house advertising various products, as we all do. I also wrote to about thirty companies in Canada, asking for samples of letters, memoranda and reports. The response was usually generous from those who answered. Only two of those who replied wrote letters of refusal--both classics, which I gave to my classes. One, from a publishing company, was a direct refusal to send such writing, but was mailed with an excellent handbook of business letters and a reminder of the copyright laws. The other was an indirect refusal: the writer promised to investigate the feasibility of complying with my request. I am very grateful for the generosity of most of the replies. Applicable samples were printed and distributed to my classes. All other samples were left in the classroom for reference.

Using samples--without any analysis--from real companies is the first change from the customary method of making miracles. The second lies in the point of view taken in the questions the students learn to ask themselves when reading their own writing or someone else's. Questions are usually asked from the point of view of the writer: What do I need to say? How can I best say it? Instead, these questions should emphasize the reader's reactions.

The students make a start at learning to react as readers by looking at selected pieces of writing. I ask such questions as these:

1. Why was the message written?

2. Can you tell whether the writer and intended reader are acquainted? How? Can you tell whether the writer and intended reader hold different ranks? How?

3. If you received this letter, would you be likely to do what the writer asks? Why or why not?

4. Would you be able to follow the procedure as it has been outlined in this letter or memo? Why or why not?

5. If you received this letter, would you be pleased with the message? Why or why not?

The students determine why the message was written. They see different purposes, letter styles, formats, and writing styles.

Then we concentrate on two or three examples of a particular kind of message--requests, for example. I tell them to imagine that they have received each letter or memo and to ask themselves such questions as these:

1. Why has the writer sent me this message?

2. Exactly what does the writer want me to do or know?

3. Do I have all the information I need to decide whether I will do what the writer wishes?

4. What would I like this message to contain? How would I like it to start? (if the message contains good news? bad news?)

5. What more do I need to know? (5 w's, 2 h's--who, what, where, why, when, how, how much)

6. What other details would be helpful to me?

7. What's in it for me if I do what the writer asks?

8. What will happen if I don't do what the writer asks?

9. Does the writer make me feel that I want to do what was asked? Why?

10. Do any words make me feel resentful or uncomfortable or discouraged (happy, pleased, hopeful)? What word(s) could be substituted or omitted to make my reaction more positive?

11. What kind of appeal is the writer making in trying to persuade me?

12. Did the writer choose an appropriate appeal for me? Would another kind of appeal have been better?

13. Is the message clear? concise? correct? What can be done to make the message more . . .?

14. Does the appearance of the message please me? Why or why not?

15. How does the format make the message easy to read? What kind of information would be most clearly presented by using this set-up?

All these questions should stress the students' reactions. The next step is to elicit their suggestions for changes which would make their reactions as readers more positive.

Then they are asked to write a similar kind of letter or memo. This involves a switch from role of reader to that of writer--but the questions they learn to ask themselves in preparing to write still emphasize the reader:

1. What do I want my reader to do or to know?

2. What does my reader need to know in order to do what I want her to do?

3. How can I show the reader how he'll benefit from doing what I ask?

4. How can I persuade my reader to . . .? What kind of appeal would be most likely to persuade this particular reader?

5. Since I have to say "no" to her request, what can I offer or say to make her feel better about not getting what she has asked for? What would I like to be told?

At first, they often work on assignments in groups in class to produce a draft, which is then set aside until the next class. It is important that there be a space of time between the writing and the revision of the drafts at the beginning of their course. This interval helps in attaining objectivity when they come to look at the drafts again. Groups may look at their own drafts or they may exchange drafts when they come to class again. The revision process begins by their asking the same questions--as readers--that they asked when looking at company samples (What does the writer want me to do? Do I have all the information I need? and so on).

They revise their first drafts, making changes indicated by the answers to these questions and submit this second draft. I check these revised drafts and write on them questions intended to help them look at the drafts as readers:

1. What more do you need to know here?

2. What do you think the writer meant by this word?

3. Does this word encourage you to do what the writer wishes? Is there a word that would make you feel more . . .? less . . .?

I try hard to leave correcting the mechanics until the final draft. We use a reference manual which numbers its rules and guidelines. Again, I ask a question as a comment (What punctuation would clarify this statement?) or include the appropriate reference manual number. Making helpful comments is time consuming. It's also difficult to resist the temptation just to write in the right word or punctuation mark for the students.

The number of drafts required from each student depends on the quality of the writing. From a practical point of view, group productions are good for limiting the number of drafts the teacher must check as well as for the support the students give each other. Teachers may prefer to avoid the drawbacks of group work, however. Students need to write on their own as well as in groups. As they become more skillful, students may check one another's early drafts in groups, or they may submit only one draft before the final one. Later, of course, students must check their own drafts, asking themselves the questions that they have become accustomed to asking. Later, too, the students get practice in writing and then revising and editing immediately in preparation for test and office situations.

Where does the textbook come into all this process? That varies. At first, applicable reading in it may be assigned after the examples have been analyzed or after the draft has been produced. Assignments come from their text as a rule. Sometimes students suggest changes to improve the examples given in the text. The text is used as needed: the theory set out in the texts provides a strong base for students to work from, and it is important for them to react to the letters there.

This method of teaching business writing--giving students the opportunity to react to examples, without any analysis provided, to ask and answer questions that emphasize the reader, to write their drafts and again ask questions from the reader's point of view--does help students develop the ability to look at their work objectively. Their letters tend to sound less stuffy and more comfortable. They come to trust their ability to say what they wish rather than to rely on the text's wording. Their writing tends to be fresher and more "like them." And, of course, all the emphasis on the reader also results in writing which is much more reader-oriented. Using this method does help students learn to write as readers.

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Alice Gibson teaches business communication in the Department of
Secretarial and Administrative Studies at the University of Western
Ontario.