MEETING A NEED

(AN ADMINISTRATIVE WRITING COURSE FOR ESL WRITERS)

Marian Holobow

History

The history of the Administrative Writing Course (Mobile Command) dates back to 1975 when our School of Language at Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Montreal in St Hubert, Quebec, began to receive numerous requests for training in advanced English--in particular, the sort of advanced English required for administrative purposes. One might wonder why a course in English administrative writing would develop within a school expressly designed to teach non-Anglophones. Two important events must be recounted to explain.

First, in its drive towards attaining its goal of eventual bilingualism, the Canadian Armed Forces, in the late 1960s, stepped up its recruitment of young French Canadians who, in due course, reached positions where they were required to perform administrative tasks in their second language. Servicemen of officer rank are often graduates of military colleges or of Staff College where some administrative writing is taught. Non-commissioned servicemen received some training in military writing in their Junior Leadership courses or otherwise learned to write in a sink-or-swim situation (often by copying the writing style of their predecessors). By the time these servicemen reach the rank of corporal or sergeant, they are presumed to have graduated from the school of experience and are even expected to train others to do military writing.

Second, in 1972, under authority of the Chief of Defence Staff, the Department of National Defence (DND) produced a military writing manual (A-AD-121-C01/FP-000), familiarly called Canadian Forces Publication (CFP) 121, giving guidelines to administrative and staff procedures. CFP 121 was distributed to all offices in the DND. This publication replaced much of the military writing training previously offered by the DND. The assumption that a manual could replace classroom training was a valid one, especially since CFP 121 is a comprehensive manual elucidated by many specimens of military format. In actual fact, the drafter of the memo, message, letter or report is often bewildered by the writing rules in CFP 121, couched as they are in grammatical terminology. Imagine the confusion of someone who, never having studied grammar, reads that a sentence must have at least one "grammatically independent group of words containing a subject and a finite verb". Consequently, CFP 121 leaves the shelf mainly to be consulted for reasons of format:

- Does one underline the words "DISTRIBUTION LIST" and does one use first-letter or full capitalization?

- Is the attention block used with the salutation in Service Letters?

- What is the correct punctuation of the inside address?

In short, the situation of more military writers performing in their second language at the same time as a phasing out of writing courses in favour of a somewhat incomprehensible writing manual gave rise to requests for our school to provide some training in administrative writing in addition to our other second-language courses. Our French department had already prepared a writing course: Rédaction Administrative Militaire (RAM). Given primarily to Francophone candidates, RAM's objectives were somewhat different from ours, which we perceived to be the following:

1. To acquaint our candidates with the principles of English grammar without teaching a grammar course as such.

2. To provide instruction and writing practice in the kind of clear, concise and forceful writing our candidates needed for their administrative duties.

3. To clarify the rules of military format and style as set out in CFP 121.

Pilot Programme

The early stages of the pilot programme involved the efforts of seven teachers. We investigated courses already in the system - our French colleagues' RAM, the Junior Leadership Courses at Camp Borden and a multi-volumed writing course prepared by the Public Service Commission Curriculum Branch. Putting together bits of this and pages of that, a workbook was made ready for the first class beginning early in 1976.

The majority of our candidates were servicemen from a number of lodger units in and around Base Montreal, but we also received applications from civilian employees of Crown Corporations such as Pratt and Whitney, Canadair, Bell Telephone, Vickers, etc., as well as from other civilian personnel employed at Base Montreal (secretaries, draftsmen, engineers, radar technicians, computer people, mechanics, etc.). Our current courses receive essentially the same type of candidate.

In the beginning, the course was presented in two stages: an initial three weeks devoted to a survey of English grammar followed by three weeks spent in writing practice. No more than a year elapsed before a time limitation was placed on the writing courses. The six-week training period of the pilot courses was reduced to four weeks (actually 80 hours) of instruction.

Candidates would carry a full office load but would be permitted to be absent from work in order to attend class for four hours each day for about a month. This time restriction limited both the scope of the writing activity and the amount of work we could expect from our students. In a real sense, however, it broadened the scope, since we often could exploit work-related writing as part of our assignments. Our candidates' demanding schedule indicates to some degree the very high motivation with which they approach their studies.

It was soon obvious that the weak organization of the workbook reflected its hurried preparation and the lack of strong editing control. Sporadic revisions over the years eliminated most of the typing errors and subtracted irrelevant material, but its content was little different from its earliest form.

Needs Analysis

We were beginning to accumulate feedback both from the end-of-course critiques written by students and from the several teachers of the course, but, up to 1980, no needs analysis had been made. That year a survey was made of previous years' course requests. Item 6 of the request form, Annex A ("I submit my application for this course for the following reasons") revealed valuable information about the work-related writing duties of our candidates. The range was wide:

- Writing short memos, messages, parts requisitions, work orders, etc.
- Writing performance evaluations of employees
- Reporting accidents or petty crimes
- Preparing project reports with conclusions, recommendations, and/or proposals
- Writing daily routine orders
- Typing, proofreading (and often drafting) employers' letters
- Compiling annual reports
- Editing the Base newspaper
- Writing copy for the Sentinel (the DND monthly magazine) and for public relations
- Reporting on meetings and conferences

- Translating documents
- Writing procedure manuals (The Canadian military, rooted in British military tradition, purchases much equipment from the U.S.; the accompanying manuals are written using American terminology and must therefore be rewritten. The M-16 rifle, for example, was packaged with a cassette of instructions spoken by an American sergeant in slangy, southern dialect.)

Course Critiques

A second survey followed the first. It was made of a collection of students' close-of-course critiques and gave a clearer insight into their expectations of the writing course.

- They wanted more military content and fewer examples of government writing.
- They expressed total disaffection for examples from English literature.
- They felt a need to see good models prepared on official format.
- They wanted a resource book, clearly indexed, for their personal use.
- They suggested work-related writing tasks be exploited as homework assignments.
- They asked that the grammar pitfalls of second-language learners be identified.

We felt a special responsibility for the last critique, since, following the last war, Skinnerian beliefs had influenced language teaching, resulting in the use of the audio-lingual method to the exclusion of other methods for several decades. The audio-lingual method tended to delay or even ignore writing skills and to bypass completely any teaching of English grammar.

Planning Stage

Following one of Training Command's reorganizational moves, our English department was reduced, leaving me with the sole responsibility for the writing courses. The inadequate material I was using gave me a great deal of frustration; therefore, armed with the results of the above two surveys, I attacked the preparation of a new book which would have to be all of the following:

- Curriculum
- Grammar text
- Folio of writing models
- Glossary
- Writing manual
- Workbook

As a manual, the book would function best by having a detailed table of contents and a glossary of business terms. The glossary would need to be bilingual, but with English headwords as opposed to French. Surprisingly, my students know the English word for an office item before learning its French equivalent. (This situation, fortunately, is swinging into proper balance.) CFP 121 provided me with excellent specimens of correct military format from which the Restricted classification has recently been removed. I wrote to the publishers of a number of texts for permission to use various glossaries and paradigms to flesh out the grammar sections. (This permission was granted at very little expense in return for our promises concerning printing and circulation.)

Format of Workbook/Manual

The next step in planning the "new" administrative writing course was to decide on the form the new workbook would take. Grammar and structural material ought to be subservient to functions and the functions ought to be those which respond to the needs of the needs analysis.

The writing conventions would necessarily be those of CFP 121 which opts for Oxford preferred spellings (with the notable exceptions of aluminium, gaol, tyre, etc.). Thus, I used defence, centre, labour and programme (in the computer context Oxford prefers program). CFP 121 directs that no punctuation be used for abbreviations, but, in general, its guidelines for punctuation, capitalization, hyphenations and use of numbers are in line with current editorial practice. Indeed, I frequently produce a page from the local newspaper or from Maclean's in order to compare their editorial practice with that of the military.

I further decided that the very appearance of each page should be an example of military format: page numbering, paragraph numbering and indentations, underlining and use of headings, etc., should constantly present the student with a model.

The Table of Contents should be so complete and tightly numbered that I could use the numbers to replace written comments on my students' assignments.

The context would be that of the business world or military life. With this intent, I studied my file of copies of actual correspondence brought to me in the past by my students from their various offices.

Much of this correspondence could appear in the workbook, either as good or as bad examples. When used in their entirety, the letters, memoranda, messages, etc., would be typed on the appropriate military format on the workbook page. Rather than using quotations from literature, I gleaned them from newspapers and current magazines. To be meaningful, quotations require constant updating, but a few, such as this headline from the Business Section of the Gazette late in 1964: Jeans are falling off all over North America, are classics. I'll use this headline many times when teaching the mixed metaphor. Another example, a quote from one of Mulroney's campaign speeches, illustrates vague pronoun reference, "Bob Stanfield put the stamp of a gentleman on the Conservative Party, and, try as we might, we can't erase it."

For the manual to function best as a workbook, I decided to allow blank space immediately below each drill and short writing project. When completed and corrected, these exercises could further illustrate the instructional material. Similarly, matching exercises and cloze drills would be set up for ease of completion on the page.

Curriculum

The next step was to decide on the scope and content of the curriculum and its organization. We have all noted the significance of the sentence as the highest structural unit in the grammar. The relation of elements within the sentence, together with the order in which these elements occur (which is one of the means of realizing these relations), is determined by the structure. The educational background of our students ranges from grade school to university completion, but a mutual problem is the inability to recognize the basic elements of a sentence. Clearly, an introductory chapter on the identification of sentence elements and the correction of sentence faults was called for. Moreover, writers of English as a second language needed to be made aware of the word order of English sentences--especially the placement of adjectives, correlative conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs--before going on to lengthier pieces of writing.

The needs analysis had shown that the most common writing task performed by our candidates was the writing of business letters. Therefore, it would be well to devote an entire chapter to letter writing.

Since the writing of good letters is the result of an application of all the principles of good writing, this chapter could be the summation chapter. It could include letter layouts, both military and civilian; special exercises on opening and closing sentences; instruction on tone and avoidance of English jargon; hints on letter organization and letter revision; and several examples of each type of letter from complaint letter to covering letter.

With the beginning and ending of the curriculum decided upon, the remaining chapters were yet to be chosen. Through the examination of several military manuals, I discovered what characteristics of good writing are most emphasized:

a. Clarity:

(1) Military writing must be explicit. It must be definite, detailed, and complete. Ambiguity and implications, from which false inferences may be drawn, must be avoided.

(2) Plain concrete words, short simple sentences, and unity in the development of ideas are means of achieving clarity. Trite and hackneyed phrases, jargon, and clichés impede clarity and must be avoided.

b. Accuracy.

Military writing must be precise. It must be scrupulously exact in detail and truth.

c. Relevance.

Military writing must be pertinent. Only those ideas that are relevant to the topic need be expressed. Digressive, extraneous, and redundant ideas impede the expression of the subject matter and must be avoided.

d. Logic:

(1) Military writing must be logical. It must adhere to the principles of correct reasoning.

(2) Premises must be clearly stated and deductions must proceed validly from these promises.

(3) The development of ideas must be in an orderly sequence so that each deduction or conclusion is preceded by the facts or premises upon which it is based.

e. Force.

Military writing must be forceful. A forceful argument can be developed only by logical sequence of sentences. The active voice should be used whenever possible.

f. Brevity.

Military writing must be concise. It must express ideas as briefly as is consistent with clarity.

If the military considered these as the most important characteristics to be found in military writing, I would devote a chapter of the workbook towards the attainment of each. Thus, the curriculum (and, consequently, the workbook Table of Contents) was realized as shown in Annex B.

Content

The divisions of the curriculum now needed to have instructional material and exercises--some short enough to be completed in ten minutes and other, lengthier, exercises (which could be work-related). The instructional sections of the workbook would point out the grammar pitfalls of a second-language learner as well as cover other areas of writing common to both first- and second-language learners.

The problem was always how to integrate the grammar-centred instruction into need-centred assignments. Because they are second-language English writers, my students need much more instruction in using the English verb system than do first-language English writers, but I didn't want to succumb to the idea of relegating countless pages to discrete-point exercises. I found that I could include a review of tense and aspect of English verbs in the section of the workbook that deals with the writing of minutes of a meeting. Here, also, was a good opportunity to practice the subjunctive and reported speech. Since one of the purposes of conditional verb forms is to serve as a cohesive device, I included a paradigm for these forms in the chapter on cohesion. I followed this with writing assignments which would force the writer to use a conditional form (e.g., a memo giving the arguments for placing a photocopier in the writer's office). Judicious use of the gerund can often be substituted for entire phrases, so instruction in the English gerund was included in tips on writing concisely. Preterite verb forms were reviewed during the writing of résumés and covering letters.

In short, the second-language grammar pitfalls were included in this writing course but only as instructional material that was secondary to the real purpose--which was to write a memo, letter, message, etc., as concisely, clearly and forcefully as possible.

Type of Exercise

Because my students are allowed such a short time in which to complete the writing course, it seemed important to include in the workbook a number of brief drill-type exercises which focus on specific writing problems. Therefore, punctuation exercises were introduced to correct run-on sentences; cloze exercises for placement of conjunctive adverbs, pronoun referents and synonyms; matching exercises to pair positive and negative connotations and to join embedded questions; multiple-choice exercises for subject/verb agreement; and so on. Several of these exercises can be completed and corrected during the class period.

Longer pieces of writing are assigned as daily homework to be returned on the following day. I continue to be troubled by the tightness of our schedule which restricts the assigning of lengthy reports, and I have considered various ways of solving this problem. For the present, however, I content myself with the conviction that if good writing techniques are mastered enough to produce well-organized, concise and forceful letters, memos, messages and other short pieces, the same techniques ought to produce good writing, whatever the length.

Conclusion

The Administrative Writing Course, as taught in Mobile Command, is a course organized for the needs of those who write administratively for the Canadian military. It meets a further need: that felt by the servicemen who must write English as their second language. The success of the course is measured partly by the fact that each year we must refuse one fifth of our applicants.

The Administrative Writing Workbook has been used in CFB Gagetown, CFB Shilo, CFB Petawawa, and in CFB Montreal. In CFB St Jean, the first group of candidates has, this month, completed the course (using the workbook); their close-of-course critiques show a very positive reaction.

Teaching the Administrative Writing Course and observing the conscientiousness with which they treat assignments and respond to new ideas has heightened the deep-seated respect I have for the Canadian Serviceman and Servicewoman: their dedication to fairness (for example, in writing personnel evaluations) gives them extreme concern in choosing precise vocabulary and they spend long, excruciating hours at this task. Their motivation towards self-improvement results in a gratifying response to every lesson.

REFERENCES

1. Brocklehurst, M., English for the Business World, McGraw-Hill, Montreal, Quebec, 1979.

2. Davies, A. and Widdowson, H.G., "Reading and Writing" in Techniques in Applied Linguistics, ed. by J.P.B. Allen and S. Pit Corder, Oxford University Press, 1974.

3. Department of National Defence. A-AD-121-C01/FP-000, DND Administrative and Staff Procedures Manual, Staff Procedures and Military Writing for the Canadian Forces, Volumes 3 and 4, 1974, 1979, 1984.

4. Halliday, M.A.K., Cohesion in English, Longman Group Limited, London, England, 1976.

5. Huseman, R., Stockmayer, D., Lahiff, J., and Hatfield, J., Business Communication, Holt, Rinehart and Winston of Canada, Ltd., Toronto, Ontario, 1984.

6. Leech, G., and Svartvik, J., A Communicative Grammar of English, Longman Group Limited, London, England, 1975.

7. McCrimmon, J., Writing with a Purpose, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, Mass., 1976.

8. Perigoe, J.R., and Perigoe, L., Message and Meaning, Prentice-Hall of Canada Ltd., Scarborough, Ontario, 1974.

* * * * * *

Marian Holobow now teaches administrative writing at the Royal Military College in St.-Jean, Québec.

ANNEX A

REQUEST FOR ENGLISH ADMINISTRATIVE WRITING COURSE

NAME/GIVEN-NAME ______________________________

SIN NO ______________________ RANK ____________

HOME PHONE NUMBER ______________________________

OFFICE PHONE NUMBER ______________________________

MOC OR CIVILIAN CLASSIFICATION ______________________

I submit my application for this course for the following reasons (explain).

____

____

____

____

____

I am willing and able to devote the time of self-study as directed by the teacher:

______________________________ ______________

Signature of Candidate Unit/Section/Local

____

Name/Responsible Office (in block letters)

I concur with this candidate's request and if selected, he will be made available to all classes.

____

Commanding Officer's Signature/Local

NOTE: Application forms to be reproduced locally.

ANNEX B

1 SENTENCE STRUCTURE

1.1 Sentence Identification

1.2 Distinguishing Subject from Predicate

1.3 Sentence Classification
1.3.1 Simple Sentence
1.3.2 Compound Sentence
1.3.3 Complex Sentence
1.3.4 Compound-complex Sentence

1.4 Sentence Function

1.5 Sentence Fragments
1.5.1 Verbals and Verbs

1.6 Run-on Sentence
1.6.1 Correction of Run-on Sentence
1.6.1.1 Introduce Terminal Punctuation
1.6.1.2 Separate Main Clauses

1.7 Word Order in Sentences
1.7.1 Correlative Conjunctions (Placement of)
1.7.2 Conjunctive Adverbs (Placement of)
1.7.3 Normal Word Order of English Sentences
1.7.4 Inverted Word Order

PUNCTUATION: period, question mark, exclamation point, comma

MILITARY FORMAT: Minutes

2 COHERENCE

2.1 Linking Words and Phrases
2.1.1 For Comparison and Contrast
2.1.2 For Consequence
2.1.3 For Enumeration
2.1.4 For Example and Illustration
2.1.5 For Repetition or Reaffirmation
2.1.6 For Summary
2.1.7 For Time Sequence
2.1.8 For Warning

2.2 Parallelism
2.2.1 Parallel Grammatical Form
2.2.2 Parallel Series
2.2.3 Charting Parallels

2.3 Completing Comparisons
2.3.1 Making Correct Comparisons

2.4 Pronoun Reference
2.4.1 Referents in Lengthy Sentences
2.4.2 Unclear Referents
2.4.3 Vague Referents
2.4.4 Indefinite Pronouns

2.5 Use of the Conditional
2.5.1 Hypothetical Conditions in the Present
2.5.2 Hypothetical Conditions in the Past
2.5.3 Possible Conditions in the Future

2.6 Relative Clauses
2.6.1 Commenting Relative Clauses
2.6.2 Defining Relative Clauses

2.7 Coherence in the Paragraph
2.7.1 Under Paragraphing
2.7.2 Over Paragraphing

PUNCTUATION: comma, semicolon, oblique stroke, colon

MILITARY FORMAT: Memorandum

3 CLARITY

3.1 Confused Pronoun Reference

3.2 Pronoun Case
3.2.1 Who or Whom
3.2.2 Common Errors in Pronoun Choice

3.3 Pronoun Agreement

3.4 Subject/Verb Agreement

3.5 Subject/Verb Shift

3.6 Misplaced Modifiers
3.6.1 Misplaced Participles
3.6.2 Misplaced Infinitives
3.6.3 Misplaced Elliptical Clauses
3.6.4 Misplaced Modifying Words
3.6.5 Misplaced Relative Clauses

3.7 Mixed Metaphors

3.8 Clarity in Choice of Words
3.8.1 Archaic Vocabulary
3.8.2 Imprecise Vocabulary
3.8.3 Borrowed Words
3.8.4 Vocabulary Enrichment

3.9 Confused Pairs

3.10 Antonyms

3.11 Spelling
3.11.1 Alternate Spellings
3.11.2 Spelling of Plurals

3.12 Word-splitting

PUNCTUATION: comma, dash, hyphen, colon, apostrophe

MILITARY FORMAT: Service Letter to non-federal government departments, agencies, civilians, and civilian organizations

4 CONCISENESS

4.1 Wordiness

4.2 Elimination of Wordiness
4.2.1 Elimination of Trite Expressions
4.2.2 Reduction
4.2.3 Subordination
4.2.4 Use of Gerunds
4.2.5 Use of Prepositions
4.2.6 Use of Possessives

4.3 Subject Heading

4.4 Over-reduction

4.5 Abbreviations

4.6 Use of Numbers

PUNCTUATION: apostrophe, period, colon, quotation mark

MILITARY FORMAT: Message, Lettergram

5 FORCEFUL WRITING

5.1 Use of Specific Action Verbs

5.2 Use of Active Voice
5.2.1 Unnecessary Passive/Active Shifts
5.2.2 Situations Requiring Passive Voice

5.3 Avoid Verb Tense Shifts

5.4 Vocabulary Choice
5.4.1 Use the Positive
5.4.2 Avoid Qualifiers
5.4.3 Be Accurate
5.4.4 Denotations and Connotations
5.4.5 Unnecessary Capitalization

5.5 Emphatic Word Order

5.6 Definite Article (*the*)

PUNCTUATION: dash, quotation mark(s), capitalization

MILITARY FORMAT: Agenda

6 ORGANIZATION

6.1 Classification
6.1.1 Definition
6.1.2 Relevance
6.1.3 Jargon

6.2 Methods of Logical Organization
6.2.1 From General to Specific
6.2.2 From Specific to General
6.2.3 Through Repetition
6.2.4 Through Time Sequence
6.2.5 From Cause to Effect
6.2.6 For Contrast or Comparison
6.2.7 By Order of Climax

6.3 Conclusions and Recommendations
6.3.1 Generalizations
6.3.2 Conclusions vs Summaries
6.3.3 Recommendations

6.4 Organization of Minutes
6.4.1 Note-taking Techniques
6.4.2 Cue Words
6.4.3 Outlines
6.4.4 Fact from Fiction
6.4.5 Reported Speech
6.4.6 Use of Subjunctive
6.4.7 Logical Verb Tense Sequence

PUNCTUATION: comma, period, quotation marks, numbering

MILITARY FORMAT: Minutes of Meetings

7 LETTERS

7.1 Letter Layouts
7.1.1 Letterhead and date/time Block
7.1.2 Inside Address (Addressee Block)
7.1.3 Salutation (Form of Address)
7.1.4 Body of Letter
7.1.5 Complimentary Close
7.1.6 Signature Block

7.2 Drafting a Letter
7.2.1 Before Writing
7.2.2 When Writing
7.2.3 Revision
7.2.4 Opening Sentence
7.2.5 Letter Tone
7.2.5.1 Natural Tone
7.2.5.2 Jargon
7.2.5.3 Courtesy
7.2.6 Closing Sentence

7.3 Types of Letters
7.3.1 Routine Information Letters
7.3.2 Acknowledgement Letters
7.3.3 Letters of Inquiry and Reply
7.3.4 Complaint and Adjustment Letters
7.3.5 Appreciation Letters
7.3.6 Reminder Letters
7.3.7 Application (Covering) Letters
7.3.7.1 Résumé
7.3.8 Recommendation (Reference) Letters
7.3.9 Rejection Letters
7.3.10 Acceptance Letters

PUNCTUATION: comma, colon, parenthesis, date/time block

MILITARY FORMAT: Letter to non-federal government departments, agencies, civilians and civilian organizations