
Sections

[Focus](#)
[Columns and Reviews](#)
[Consulting](#)
[Training](#)
[News & Announcements](#)

Archives

[Browse past issues of Praxis](#)

About Us

[About Us](#)

Submissions

[Submit an article to Praxis](#)

[Home](#) » [Archives](#) » [Fall 2005 \(Volume 3 Issue 1\) - Whom We Serve](#)

At Your Service: Teaching Rhetoric In A Business School Writing Center

Fall 2005 / Focus

by *Cristy Beemer, Sarah Bowles, and Lisa Shaver*

How a collaborative effort between the English Department and Business School at Miami University benefits writing in both fields.



Lisa Shaver, Sarah Bowles, and Cristy Beemer

In "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum," Lucille Parkinson McCarthy describes the experience of a student who struggled to understand the language and discourse conventions across several disciplines. Similarly, we—the graduate students in Composition and Rhetoric who joined the **Howe Writing Initiative** as WAC administrators—initially found ourselves strangers in the Business School. As newcomers from the English Department, unfamiliar with the language, customs, and citizens—not to mention discourse conventions—we soon had to familiarize ourselves with business genres: the executive summary, the memo, the report, the business plan. But as we have earned at least partial citizenship in this new land, we find ourselves constantly negotiating between our two cultures—that of the English Department and that of the Business School.

Fortunately, the constant cultural negotiation required of us makes us uniquely qualified to serve undergraduate students who are often themselves new arrivals in the School of Business. When these students come to the Howe for help with their business writing assignments, they too experience a bit of culture shock. They are often surprised by the advice we serve up: Get rid of the introduction and begin with your "Big Idea"...Use headers instead of in-text transitions...Get to the point as soon as possible...Use bullet points...Keep the length to two pages or shorter...Lose the flowery language. Students sometimes have a hard time swallowing such advice; after all, it contradicts much of what they learn in their college composition courses. Indeed, the advice we offer students in the Howe Writing Center often contradicts the advice we give

students in our own composition classes. In any case, because students are adept at writing academic-ese (thorough introductions that begin with a “hook,” narrative arguments that build up to the big finale, smooth transitions, sum-it-all-up conclusions), the biggest challenge many of them face is making the transition from academic writing to business writing. It’s a message we preach over and over again: stop thinking of yourself as a student and start thinking of yourself as a professional. Like us, business students must negotiate the language and customs of their new land if they are to succeed.

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Often when students are assigned their first business memo or report, they assume it’s merely a matter of mimicking the form—filling in the date, to, from, and subject headers; using block paragraphs; or creating section headings. But soon the questions follow. How do I keep my cover memo to one page? What information stays; what goes? How should I organize my report? How do I determine what information to put in each section? Do I cite sources in business writing? Ultimately, these questions reveal the students’ rhetorical concerns.

In the Howe Writing Center, we serve students by demystifying the rhetorical function of business genres. To understand the concise style of business writing required for an executive summary or the segmented arrangement of a business proposal, students need to understand the purpose and context for these conventions. Therefore, we discuss likely audiences and business scenarios for these different genres. We stress exigency and the importance of foregrounding conclusions and avoiding repetition. We show them that constructing executive summaries or case analyses requires decision-making and prioritizing; they are not neutral, objective genres. In essence, our teaching instills critical awareness. As a result, we are repositioning business students’ roles from that of mimics to analysts and decision-makers. Moreover, by demystifying the construction, function, and effect of business writing, we are preparing students to read and write more critically within the School of Business as well as in their professions outside of the academy.

Just as we encourage students to critically analyze their own writing, we help instructors critically analyze their writing assignments. The Howe Writing Center serves as a recursive space for Business instructors to examine their own pedagogical practices. Many professors encourage students to use the Howe Writing Center, but it’s not required. However, if we find that students are struggling with a writing assignment, we approach the instructor to discuss ways to more effectively introduce students to a particular genre or type of business writing. We review assignments, develop supplemental materials, and serve as guest lecturers and co-teachers in Business classrooms. Yet even while we’re presenting to students, we consider our primary audience the course instructor as we demonstrate effective writing instruction. Indeed, helping faculty interrogate and disclose the discourse conventions they expect their students to use is another way that we try to demystify business writing. To use David Russell’s term, we attempt to expose the “transparency” of business rhetoric to faculty and students. Therefore, one of our goals in the Business School is to highlight and analyze—with faculty before they devise an assignment and with students as they complete it—the rhetorical assumptions,

forms, stances, and styles embedded in the context of the task.

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The rhetorical emphasis of our work with both faculty and students is evident in our recent consultation on a junior-level Marketing assignment. In Fall 2004, we led a workshop entitled "Writ Large: Using Writing in Large Classes" in an effort to persuade and teach professors how to keep writing in their classrooms despite increasing class sizes. At this workshop, one professor expressed a desire to maintain her commitment to writing while teaching a class whose size tripled to 120 students. Using one of our suggestions for team writing, she devised a collaborative project that asked students to write a two-page analysis of a current popular business text. In the spring semester, we visited both sections of her Marketing course and introduced tactics for team writing, including the importance of working together throughout all the phases of invention, information gathering, drafting/revision, and editing/proofreading. But because we know that students benefit little when writing is discussed abstractly, we also held an evening session during which students could workshop drafts.

Despite the professor's instruction to integrate course concepts into their analysis, many students resorted to the familiar academic model of summary. At the workshop we handed out a checklist of the major requirements of this paper. To help students fulfill these requirements, we suggested using headers to group, organize, and succinctly communicate. More importantly, we reiterated the professor's aim that students model common business practice by reviewing current literature to explicate important business concepts. We then fanned out to work with each group on their papers. With a staff of three, and a significant student turnout, this was a challenging event that felt more like speed dating than a workshop. In the days following, we saw more students in our writing center.

We observed some important outcomes from this collaborative effort. Students told us that they started writing earlier because of the workshop. Using headers to organize their analysis around business concepts assisted students in making their papers intellectually rigorous despite the short length. With so much to pack in a two-page essay, students had to prioritize, make decisions, and adopt a concise business writing style. At the same time, the length and organization of the paper made grading manageable for the instructor. Finally, students knew that our advice as consultants came from their professor. The students did not have to negotiate our feedback, but rather were grateful for the mediation between their concerns and their professor's expectations. Soon after the workshop, we received an e-mail from the professor commenting that, "these are some of the best written papers I've ever seen." To close this recursive loop, we will meet with the professor again to suggest ways to make this assignment even clearer by addressing some of the difficulties and concerns students shared with us.

So who was served in this consultation? We directly served the professor and her students. More broadly, we served the Business School as a whole by inspiring pedagogical change and ensuring that writing remained part of Business curriculum. We also served ourselves. Just as we employ rhetoric in the School of Business, we take the concerns of business back to our English classes, fundamentally altering the way we teach, discuss, and think about

writing. In the English Department, we now teach concise writing, highlight real-life applications, and ask students to inventory the rhetorical skills that will easily translate across the curriculum. We also import forms of business writing such as the executive summary, talking points, and project proposals. Ultimately, because we inhabit two diverse writing spaces, we gain a broader view of writing in the university, and we deliver that broader view to our students and ask them to make connections across the curriculum. As English TAs who were initially strangers in the Business School, we learn what any traveler knows: you bring your experiences in a new land back home with you and are forever changed.

Cristy, Lisa, and Sarah are all completing their doctoral degrees in Rhetoric and Composition at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. They have all served, under the direction of Kate Ronald the Roger and Joyce L. Howe Professor, as Assistant Directors of the **Howe Writing Initiative** in the Richard T. Farmer School of Business.

[< Fall 2005 \(Volume 3 Issue 1\) - Whom We Serve](#)

[up](#)

[Fall 2005 / The Merciless Grammarian >](#)

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