

Five Fixable Flaws that Afflict Graduate Business Student Writing: Helping Writers Unlearn Bad Habits

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Abstract

Five fixable, frequent error patterns inhibit the ability of graduate business students to convey ideas clearly. Each of the five error patterns are outlined, using examples and corrections. Also included are ways to identify the patterns, why these patterns exist, and how each is problematic for both students and professionals. Practical advice and references to change conditioned habits of writers and a tool to support graduate business students and their instructors is presented. Finally, guidance is provided for incorporating revision and peer review into the graduate curriculum to improve student writing.

Introduction

Graduate business students must write with clarity and conciseness to succeed in both their graduate courses and in their careers (Dillon, 2004). However, the writing of MBA graduates is often wordy, pretentious, and not audience specific (Lentz, 2013). This researcher's experience with graduate business students points to a pattern of poor writing habits that must be unlearned. Years of conditioning and reinforcement have established kneejerk writing to be replaced with a new set of habits for clarity and conciseness.

In this paper, the author provides instruction for students enrolled in graduate business programs and their instructors to identify and remedy obstacles to effective business writing. The approach is diagnostic-prescriptive and pragmatic (Yeany, Dost, & Mathews, 1980). First, five of the most common writing habits of graduate students that are not conducive to business writing are identified. Then suggestions for changing these writing habits are provided. This information is formatted in tables that allow for self-assessment and identification of current writing habits, and strategies for replacing these habits with those more conducive to effective business writing. The use of macros in Word is reviewed as an effective means of expediting the review of student writing. Recommended changes to business writing course curricula to include revision and peer review is also discussed.

The research is focused on business writing graduate students will complete in a Master of Business Administration or Master of Science in Management program, as well as the writing they will do in their careers. The five fixable flaws in business writing presented here are a narrow focus but have broad application to many courses and programs. Incorporating macros into the review process can be adapted to many courses as well. Correction and feedback precede necessary next steps in revision and editing. Peer review provides a means for students to consider audiences beyond themselves and the professor. Pedagogical opportunities inherent in peer review provide another measure of support for the graduate writer.

Writing Roadblocks

Communication skills are consistently at the top of the ratings list for employers as an essential proficiency for business graduates (Brooks & Calkins, 2014). In follow-up questions asking which of the skill sets should receive the greatest emphasis in higher education, employers ranked written communication skills second, exceeded only by oral communication skills. Despite this compelling evidence to support teaching writing in all courses, some business school educators may forego development of writing skills to focus on discipline-specific learning outcomes. Additionally, large class sizes limit the amount of time instructors have available to work with students on their writing skills. Unfortunately, without consistent feedback on their writing throughout their program, students lack motivation to improve their writing skills, to the disappointment of their future employers (Bacon & Anderson, 2004).

Students enter graduate level courses with an expectation that skills acquired and grades earned in earlier academic pursuits will continue to carry them (McDougall, Ornelles, & Rao, 2015). Often they discover they bring with them undesirable skill sets that fail to meet expectations. Many graduate students are surprised to have papers returned with requests for revision. While they may have fared well as undergraduate students, their writing lacks the clarity and focus needed in graduate business courses. Further, many have limited exposure to the process of prewriting, writing, and rewriting. Professional writers write, rewrite, and then rewrite what they have rewritten (Zinsser, 1980). Many writers, students included, resist the revision process either because they believe the first draft is good enough, or they simply lack the time to complete the revision process (Flood, 2008; Lentz, 2013). Having their business school professors instruct them to revise and resubmit writing assignments is frequently an unwelcome experience.

Writing Baggage

Students arrive in graduate courses with myriad skill sets derived from years of writing, often writing poorly. Many have been trained by academic and professional environments to use long sentences, big words, and cluttered verbiage (Lentz, 2013). Helping students to identify these problem areas and to make needed corrections needs to be part of any graduate program – all courses, all professors. Some instructors, particularly those in the quantitative disciplines, may be reluctant to correct student writing. Hesitations stem from a combination of limited time in the classroom to address core learning outcomes in the subject matter, and for some professors, a level of discomfort reviewing student writing (Nanjappa & Grant, 2003). Providing a set of guidelines for identifying and correcting common errors can help support these professors (Watty, 2007). Even with all professors reviewing and correcting writing, years and even decades of bad habits cannot be overcome in a two-or three-year MBA program. However, identification and correction of some particularly troublesome errors can significantly improve overall writing. Focusing on a few key issues allows students and instructors to progress without feeling overwhelmed.

The five fixable errors isolated for discussion in this paper emerged through review of student papers in a graduate level business communications course for MBA and MSM students. A quantitative analysis is being conducted to determine specific frequency and severity of student errors, and will be presented in a future paper. The initial list of fixable errors was established through an informal quantitative review of one instructor's pool of student submissions covering an eight-year time frame. Ongoing research will incorporate papers review by other faculty teaching the course, and a formalized review of corrections.

Errors marked on student papers with the greatest frequency include the following:

- Superfluous phrases, colloquialisms, and deadwood
- Passive voice
- Unclear pronoun reference
- Overuse of the article *the*
- Absence of first person/overuse of third person

The fixable flaws are presented in Table 1 with examples and corrections. References students and professors can access are also provided, including links to Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (OWL). Purdue OWL has been much in demand among students and professors since its inception in 1995. Inserting links to Purdue OWL in students' papers is an excellent way to direct them immediately to reference material for identifying and correcting errors. Providing students with the tools to see the errors and make the corrections supports their ability to become independent writers and editors.

Superfluous Phrases, Colloquialisms, and Deadwood

Unnecessary verbiage plagues student writers. Superfluous phrases, colloquialisms, jargon, excess verbiage, filler and junk needs to be carved out of much writing. For students, a sense of sacredness surrounding each word can be difficult to overcome, and leads writers to hold tight to everything they have written. Time available to students and professionals is also limited, resulting in a "good enough" approach to the writing process. Dense, wordy, convoluted, baffling passages are the most common error this researcher marks in student writing (Flood, 2008). Unfortunately for students, a lifetime of instruction that included support of big words and long sentences travels with them. Learning that less is more is a slow process. Strunk and White's (1979) passage can be reduced to its lean message for students: make every word tell.

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell (Strunk & White, 1979, p. 23).

Definitions and examples of clarity and brevity are in every business communications textbook in print. Typically the definitions include the characteristics of clarity, conciseness, efficiency, and effectiveness. Further, good writing is defined as being correct, accessible, and meeting reader expectations. Definitions can be useful, but far more productive is feedback to students with subsequent action on that feedback. Putting theory into practice is simply the best method for internalizing the editing process. The need to incorporate peer review, draft and revision into all courses is discussed later in this paper.

Passive Voice

Passive voice can result in a lack of credibility, and a tone that suggests insecurity or uncertainty (Flood, 2008). "Sentences that start with *it has been determined that* may never recover" (Weiss, 2005, p. 25). Students adopt passive voice because it sounds more "businesslike," a carryover from dated business prose. Passive voice is also prevalent in some disciplines where research results are written strictly in passive voice. Business writers consider the choice of active or passive voice in establishing the tone of

the writing. Active voice puts the emphasis on the action of the subject. Passive voice puts emphasis on the object being acted upon. Sentences written in active voice deliver the message clearly and forcefully. For this reason, active voice is more concrete and generally sentences are shorter, more direct, and easier to understand.

Clear, direct language is preferable in most instances. Passive voice does serve an important function when the intent is to de-emphasize the doer of the action. Delivering bad news can be managed more effectively using passive voice. For example, "The decision to reduce sales bonuses was reached by management due to slower-than-anticipated sales in the last quarter."

Graduate business students have a tendency to default to passive voice in response to previous instruction or workplace practices. Active voice is preferable as it results in livelier, more direct, and easier to read writing. Passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, but can produce clunky, lengthy, vague sentences. Passive voice is helpful for situations when the writer wants to be diplomatic about pointing out a problem or an error, or wishes to remain in the background. Passive voice emphasizes the action – The shipment was lost – rather than the actor – Joe lost the shipment.

Article Overuse

Excessive use of the article "the" relates to direct translation from speech to writing. Testing sentences without the article is an excellent editing strategy to determine whether the article is necessary or not. Students are advised to use word search features to locate and evaluate each use of the article.

Absence of First Person; Excessive Use of Third Person

Business communications has adopted a level of immediacy between reader and writer that is supported by the use of first person rather than third person (Flood, 2008). Graduate students have written academic papers in school, been assigned creative writing, read newspapers, and deciphered legal documents. These forms of writing serve their own purposes but many of the principles of academic writing, journalistic writing, legal writing, and technical writing do not apply to business writing. Streamlined, focused writing that puts the bottom line on top is the goal in business communications, and the use of first person provides clarity and flow (Weiss, 2005).

Unclear Pronoun References

Unclear pronoun references cause the reader to stop and backtrack to fill in missing or ambiguous information. Student writers assume readers see pronouns as referencing the intended antecedent. Often the error is difficult for students to identify because of their understanding of their own passage. Using specific nouns rather than pronouns helps to reduce ambiguity.

Table 1

Five Fixable Flaws in Graduate Student Writing

Error	Sample with Correction	Finding the Error	Why the Error Exists	Why it's a problem	Resolving the Error & References
Passive Voice	The final candidates were chosen. Committee members selected two candidates.	To be verbs (is, was, were, are) followed by -ed verb form, usually at the end of the sentence	Outdated rules persist both in habit and training	Passive voice is clunky, lacks a complete idea, and fails to say who did what.	Put character before action. APA, 2012, p. 77 OWL Passive Voice
Article overuse	The committee members will choose the questions for the final interviews. Committee members will chose questions for the final interviews.	Try sentence without "the" and omit if the sentence is clear without	Speakers use "the" excessively, transferring to writing.	Clutters sentences, reduces clarity	Use search feature in Word to find and consider each use and delete as needed OWL Using Articles
Absence of first person; excessive third person	Questions will be selected. We will select questions.	Look for absence of first person "I" or "we"	Outdated academic/scholarly writing	Creates a distance between reader and writer; third person adds unnecessary verbiage	Close distance between reader and writer by using personal pronouns APA, 2012, p. 69 OWL Point of View
Unclear pronoun reference	Applicants seek input on improving through interviewer feedback. They want . . . The applicants want . . . The interviews want . . .	Excessive use of pronouns rather than specific nouns	Writer assumes antecedent is clear to reader	Confuses reader; creates ambiguity	Replace unclear pronouns with specific nouns APA, 2012, p. 79 OWL Pronoun Referent

Use of Word Macros for Feedback

Repeat errors in student writing is nothing new to writing instructors. Revision symbols and elaborate coding systems populate writing handbooks to reduce time spent indicating errors. This researcher began grading student papers in 1987. Years were spent marking papers, first via ink on paper submissions, and then using digital comments. In the interest of expediency, the author developed a series of macros in Word to streamline the grading process and provide meaningful, detailed feedback to students (See Table 2).

This researcher found that through the process of marking student drafts and requiring resubmission, errors diminished. The reduction in errors is made as a general observation on the part of a single instructor but is the foundation for a study currently underway from which this paper emerged. The research team pursuing a study of writing feedback to graduate students is seeking a means to measure improvement in the reduction of errors. Macros guiding student revision processes are central to the research strategy.

Macros provide an expedient means of providing students with feedback. This researcher has prepared several macros that offer encouragement as well as correction. These can be customized for courses, focusing on the objectives outlined for students. For example, if application of critical thinking skills is particularly important, then students can be praised who successfully accomplish this objective. Macros are supplemented with additional personalized comments and observations. The macros cover the basics – recurring grammatical issues, problem areas in APA citation, weaknesses in paragraph development, and so on. The macros compile comments repeated into a consolidated set of shortcuts that free up additional time to comment on other aspects of the student assignment.

Table 2 is a set of macros developed to address the issue of excessive verbiage. Empty phrases and introductions that frequency student writing are addressed with explanations of why the phrase should be avoided. Macros were developed to more generally address unclear or repetitive passages.

Table 2
Macros Used to Provide Feedback to Students

ERROR	MACRO COMMENT
"In conclusion"	"In conclusion" is one of those fillers that should be removed. It is the final paragraph of your document and therefore a given you are about to conclude. The only time "in conclusion" serves a purpose is in an oral presentation as it lets the audience know the speaker is wrapping up, and the audience needs to wake up and prepare to do something else. In writing, it states the obvious which should always be avoided. "In summary" serves the same function - takes up valuable real estate in your writing.
"As you can see"	"As you can see" is over used and largely unnecessary. First, it's dangerous to tell your reader what he or she can or cannot see; second, if they can see your point, then you pointing that out is a waste of words, and if they cannot see your point, then you are telling them they can do something that they have been unable to do. Let your readers reach their own conclusions without you assigning a level of understanding.
"As you know"	"As you know" is a good phrase to avoid in your writing. If your reader already knows, he or she might wonder why, then, are you repeating this information? If you believe the information bears repeating, then do so without prefacing it. And consider, too,

	the possibility the reader does NOT know. That puts both of you in an awkward position.
Excess	This passage contains excess verbiage. Work to streamline your prose and eliminate deadwood, excess words, and cloudy passages. Keep your prose as clean and clear as possible. Here is an example of how this phrase could be revised: [I then offer the student suggested edits for clarity]
"That"	Often the word "that" can be removed with no loss of meaning. Try your sentence without "that" and see if it flows smoothly. Remove it when you can to increase flow and readability.
"Utilize"	"Utilize" means "to make use of." It often sounds pretentious; in most cases, "use" is sufficient and preferable for clarity and brevity. Remember this: Never utilize "utilize" when you can use "use."
"Redundant and Repetitive" R&R	This phrase is redundant and repetitive. Don't use two words when one will suffice. Examples of R&R include assemble together; final outcome; attached herewith; complete monopoly; continue on; cooperate together; new beginning; new record; past experience
"Clunky and Cluttered" C&C	This phrase is clunky and cluttered. Why use four words when one will suffice? Some C&C offenders and (their preferred substitutes): at the present time (now); due to the fact that (because); for the reason that (because); is of the opinion that (believes); make an inquiry regarding (inquiry about).
"There are" and "there is" sentence starts	Avoid beginning sentences with weak phrases like "there are" and "there is." The sentence "There are eight repair issues in this division that were not completed today" can be revised to "Eight repair issues in this division were not completed today" reducing the word count from 13 to 10 and improve the effectiveness.

Making Revision Part of the Process

Making progress in fixing student writing flaws requires more than providing feedback. Students must take action to apply corrections and suggestions to their documents, practicing the skills and principles. Graduate school demands many transitions for students, including a shift to required revision. Their undergraduate programs may have had only one-way submissions, turned in for a grade, end of process (Nelson, Range, & Ross, 2012). Further, beyond reporting and summarizing that typically defines undergraduate work, graduate students are engaging in challenging tasks that involve interpretation, critical analysis, observation, and assessment (Cooper & Bikowski, 2007). Study after study supports the use of revision to build writing skills, and highlights the often wasted effort in feedback that is not incorporated into a revision cycle. Dohrer (1991) wrote, "Research indicates that when teachers make remarks on papers and return those papers to students while offering them no opportunity to revise, the remarks have little effect on subsequent papers" (p. 49).

Stern and Solomon (2006) advise the following key steps to engage in positive feedback relationships with students:

- Provide positive comments in addition to corrections
- Provide feedback only on a few select areas that are deemed important for that particular assignment—those tied to the student learning goals for the paper assignment
- Provide comments that identify patterns of weaknesses, errors, and strengths.

Recommendations made in this paper employ Stern and Solomon's (2006) guidance. Identification of successful passages through macros or personalized comments builds dialog between student and instructor. Limiting feedback to key areas reduces the anxiety of a paper dense with corrections. Identification of patterns of both areas of strength and weakness guides the writer to make global changes to the way they write and edits.

When researchers studied the effect of teachers' comments on assignments upon subsequent drafts of papers, they uncovered telling results. Beach (1979) found that students' revisions in response to teachers' comments were associated with significantly higher quality ratings. Hillocks' (1982) study of the interrelatedness of instruction and teachers' comments found the following: Focused comments coupled with the assignment and revision produced a significant quality gain. Hillocks (1982) indicates that teachers' written comments that are focused and related to some aspect of instruction are more effective than isolated comments. Hillocks' (1982) and Beach's (1979) studies both suggest that the opportunity for revision and relevant instruction are essential if written comments are to improve students' writing.

Feedback on student writing through peer review and instructor review conveys the need for improvement, a conversation between reader and writer that changes must be made. As Sommers noted, "Student writers will revise in a consistently narrow and predictable way. Without comments from readers, students assume that their writing has communicated their meaning and perceive no need for revising the substance of their text" (Sommers, 1982, p. 149).

Writing assignments that are scaffolded through the course require students to revise their papers. The process-centered approach to writing assumes that students learn to write best using multiple drafts rather than just one final product. Many writing faculty advocate multiple draft assignments that build upon one another in order to promote student learning. Alternately, faculty who require only a "final version" of a paper may require students to revise one paragraph or page of the paper in order to provide the students with the learning opportunities associated with revision, while necessitating minimal faculty time in the re-reading of that one paragraph or page (Stern & Solomon, 2006).

A sizable literature informs the design of scaffolded feedback in writing instruction. Lipnevich et al. (2014) noted that "...comments that prompt students to meaningfully and thoughtfully approach revisions tend to result in the highest gains in performance" (p. 542). In an experimental study conducted in situ in a large introductory psychology class, Lipnevich and Smith (2009) found that detailed written feedback from the instructor without grades or praise was the most effective form of formative assessment for improving writing performance" (p. 541).

Peer Review

Formative assessment can be effectively integrated into the classroom using peer review techniques. In 1997, I was teaching writing at Colorado School of Mines, an engineering school in Golden. Many students who possessed top academic skills in math and science found writing courses to be a general waste of time. Some detested writing and hated only one thing more: peer review. One student in particular grumbled, moaned, and complained when it was time for peer review. However, these students were also academically driven, and no one was going to skip class even if I was going to subject them to peer review.

The day for peer review arrived. Teams were established, guidelines reviewed, and papers circulated. Grumbling Student sat at a table with his group, chin to chest, ball cap pulled tight, reading his peer's paper. I kept an eye on him and was pleased when he sat up in his chair, head lifted. He looked around the room, the hint of a smile on his face, and began completing his peer review form.

I was surprised and curious. The class drew to a close and Grumbling Student turned in his review. I said, "Looks like you had a good experience with the process! Do you think peer review has some value after all?" He smiled large and said, "Peer review is great! I thought I was the worst writer in the class and now I know I'm not!"

Now, of course that is not the purpose of peer review. However, often students do think their writing skill is far below or far above that of their peers. Often peer review lets us know where we are in the scheme of things. Many studies support the use of peer review for improving student writing. Further, much of the value in this process is via what the students learn about themselves and their own composition skills by reviewing the work of others (Baik & Greig, 2009). It often brings to light weaknesses in the student's own work, which they can then remedy.

Peer Review in One Business Writing Course

Students in one graduate business communications course participate in two peer review experiences over the course of the six-week term. The first peer review assignment is a "safe" review for students to gain knowledge and experience with the peer review process. In Unit 1 of the course, students write a request for funding memo in which they request that their employer provide funding for their participation in a business writing course being offered in their community. In the 350-word memo students justify the benefits of a business writing course to their supervisor, outlining the course outcomes, cost, and how the student will manage the time to complete the class. Students submit the assignment at the end of Unit 1 for feedback from the professor.

In Unit 2, students post their memos to the Discussion Board Peer Review in the online course; paper distribution could be done in a face-to-face course. They then review memos written by their peers and offer the following: three strengths, three weaknesses, three suggestions for improvement. The experience is "safe" because the assignment has already been submitted for a grade, so the reviews are supplements to the feedback the students will receive from the professor. Much of the value comes in becoming comfortable with the peer review process itself, and in students being able to see how others managed the same assignment. Kellog and Whiteford (2010) noted that "An essential feature of learning skills through practice is that a mentor, coach, tutor, or instructor provides the student with informative feedback that highlights the gap between current and ideal performance and corrects mistakes" (p. 173).

The next opportunity students have to complete a peer review is with the rough draft of the course researched proposal. Students are placed in teams in the order in which they post their rough drafts to the discussion forum. This is an excellent strategy for team formation in an online course as it means students do not get a team assignment until they have a draft ready for review. The professor provides a set of specific questions for students to respond to in the review process as this helps direct their efforts. Students review the papers of two peers. We do one final peer review of the PowerPoint presentation in the last unit. Students may choose which PPTs they wish to review, with specific questions to guide the responses.

This researcher shares with students that one of the most challenging things we are asked to do in our lives - both academic and professional - is to critique the work of others. What they are being asked to do in the peer review forums is just that: provide one another with useful, tangible, practical advice. Students are urged to consider what they would like to hear from their peers and respond to their peers' work accordingly. While a "good job" here and there can be encouraging, it's not terribly helpful. Students are encouraged to provide specifics - what won't work in the idea, what grammatical problems exist, what issues will the peer encounter pursuing a specific topic? Boud and Falchikov (1989) define self-assessment as 'the involvement of learners in making judgments about their own learning, particularly about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning' (p. 52). The reflective process of assessment can potentially guide students toward improvements in their own work.

Conclusion

The absence of effective writing skills among graduates of MBA and MSM programs continues to be a major issue for businesses (Butler, 2007; Cassner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Middleton, 2011). Writing skills will continue to be in high demand in all industries for the foreseeable future, justifying investments in time and effort for institutions to build this skill. Business schools can take simple steps toward engaging students in the process of becoming adept writers, and particularly at being able to identify and correct their own errors. Integration of revision processes and peer review into the curriculum will close the loop and demonstrate the need for students to prewrite, write, rewrite, and rewrite again. Writing is a highly complex and highly effective learning tool. The complexity of the process carries through to the grading of writing, which is also difficult and time-consuming. Despite the challenges inherent in grading student writing, it remains one of the best means for evaluating student understanding of course material, and their ability to convey that understanding in writing. Regardless of the discipline, students must be held to high standards in their writing. All careers demand efficient writing abilities, and failure to arm our students with this skill reflects poorly on both our institution and ourselves as educators.

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