



Eng. 407A, Business Writing Projects and Outcomes Summary

UNLV's business writing curriculum takes a socio-rhetorical approach that emphasizes writing in context and, following the research of Dias et al.,¹ aims to move students through a continuum of writing experiences ranging from less contextualized, hypothetical workplace simulations to more situated, more authentic client-based projects. In our curriculum, students learn principles of effective business writing by completing a series of problem-based writing tasks, producing:

- a business memo written to the teacher about the student's background
- a set of letters and memos responding to a business case
- a resume and cover letter for an actual advertised job opening
- a team presentation addressed to fellow students about a business communication topic
- a series of individual and team written reports written to an actual external client

1. Introductory Memo Assignment

The Introductory Memo is the first writing task. Students are asked to respond to the instructor's request for information about the student's academic status and relevant work, writing, and computer experience. The student is asked to follow a specified memo format and length requirement. Background readings and class discussion accompanying the assignment help introduce students to the fundamental principles of business writing. The instructor uses this assignment to learn about the student, assess the student's writing abilities, and acclimate the student to writing in a simulated workplace environment (the networked computer classroom). The assignment is either counted as a small percentage of the overall grade or counted toward the student's Miscellaneous grade (see below).

Goals: Students learn to identify the multiple purposes of business writing, observe the conventions of business memos, and write using an appropriate business tone and style (i.e., being clear and concise, and using page design elements like headings and bulleted lists to aid readability). Students also learn how to manipulate existing electronic document files, or templates, using Internet browser and word processing software.

2. Case Project

For the second assignment, students complete a case project, or writing assignment based on a description of a business problem (instructors typically choose from one of the available cases listed below, but they sometimes teach more than one case). Students are asked to read a fictitious scenario and respond as they would were they in the situation described in the case by writing multiple documents. Case assignments help engage the student in real world communication problems by simulating the ambiguity and political complexities of writing in business organizations. Therefore, cases help develop the necessary critical thinking, problem analysis, and close reading strategies that are part of the writing process. Background readings introduce students to more principles of business writing, including ethical awareness and the conventions of formal business letters. Students are asked to write a Project Assessment Memo, or PAM, that describes and justifies their response to the case.

Goals: Students learn to use writing to define and analyze complex problems; to understand and negotiate rhetorical issues of context, audience, and organization; and to plan and produce appropriate responses following the conventions of business letters and memos. Students gain additional practice using electronic writing technologies.

2.1. The Scanner Slip-Up

In this case, the student works as a communication manager at Online Training Services, Inc. (OTS). The company has partnered with Thomson, a computer products manufacturing company, to run a one-month Web-based training program aimed at retail sales associates (RSAs) working in electronics stores across the country. The training program

¹ Dias, Patrick, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Paré. *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999.

offers a free scanner to the first 500 individuals to score 100% on the program's final quiz. However, due to a program slip-up, OTS sends the e-mail winning notification to 1,000 people instead of the first 500. Students are asked to write a memo to OTS's director of marketing explaining the company's options and recommending a solution. Students are also required to draft any necessary correspondence with either Thomson or the RSAs.

2.2. A Business Faux Pas

In this case, students assume the role of an Account Representative at BellCom, a regional telecommunications company aiming to expand to international markets. Bill Nestor, the students' immediate supervisor and family friend, has offended Madame Marie Jeaneaux, the CEO of an important French company, during an overseas business trip also attended by the student. Jeaneaux writes a complaint to BellCom's president. Students are asked to write a report of what happened at the business luncheon. Students have also been asked to sign an apology letter drafted by Nestor. The letter is poorly written and likely would fail to mollify the French CEO. But Nestor asks the student to cover for him. Students must decide how to placate both their immediate supervisor, Nestor, and company executives in the documents they write.

2.3. Big-1 Car Rental

In the case, Frank Page, the Plant Manager of "Continental Car Corporation" or "CCC," asks his Assistant Director of Human Resources (the role the student/writer assumes) to draft a letter addressing a problem between CCC and a local rental car agency called "Big-1." The situation is purposefully ambiguous and complex, requiring the student to think carefully about the situation and what constitutes an appropriate response to Page's request.

3. Staff Development Presentations

The third project asks students to form collaborative teams and assume the role of corporate "staff trainers." Student teams choose from a broad list of possible subjects relevant to business writing, conduct research on this subject, prepare a 12-minute training session focusing on hands-on, practical knowledge, and deliver this presentation to the rest of the class. Background readings introduce students to principles of effective business presentations. The project emphasizes the planning and design of professional-quality visual aids, including PowerPoint presentations and handouts. Students write group or individual PAMs reflecting on project decisions and/or the group's collaboration.

Goals: Students learn to design and produce effective visual aids that support presentations in business contexts, to practice using the Internet as a tool for researching various subjects, and to see writing and communication as broad subjects inseparable from other workplace activities.

4. Job Application Project

In the fourth project, students target an actual job or internship, conduct thorough job and company research, and design job documents that appeal to that specific job. The project emphasizes the process of research that should accompany the preparation of effective employment documents—the resume and cover letter. Students practice using the Internet as an additional tool in employment research and document production. The project also emphasizes *visual rhetoric*, or how effective page design appeals to readers and contributes to professional quality business documents. Students are asked to submit a PAM reflecting on their design decisions. Students may also practice using UNLV's Career Services Center as another important career/employment resource.

Goals: Students learn principles of effective resume and cover letter writing, including how job documents work together to construct an overall persuasive appeal about the writer/applicant's qualifications. Students also learn page design techniques, including ways to assess effective page design. They also learn the role of research in job searching and the strengths and limitations of the Internet in this process.

5.1. Client Project

The final project is considered the major capstone project that integrates all of the course goals outlined in the course description. Drawing from the concept of experiential or "service-learning," each student is put in the role of consultant and asked to identify an actual university or community organization that has some communications-related problem and that could benefit from researched information. The student works with this client to develop a proposal for a suitable research project. From this collection of possible projects, some six "client organizations" are selected by the students, who then form teams to address their client's need by conducting extensive research from a variety of sources. The groups articulate the results in a recommendation report addressed to the client. This project introduces students to the "report writing cycle," or the process of documents and deadlines by which collaboratively written reports are produced in business contexts. Students write a variety of documents, including the proposal, a project plan, and

progress reports, culminating in the final report. Students also prepare an oral presentation that accompanies the final report and an individual or group PAM.

Goals: Students learn the conventional elements of proposals, progress reports, and research reports. Students learn the necessary project management, research, and collaboration/co-writing techniques for the production of effective reports. They learn to identify manageable problems or needs within organizations and articulate them as researchable questions; to plan and carry out a multi-stage, collaborative research and writing project; and to research, analyze and present large amounts of information clearly and persuasively in professional quality reports.

5.2. Usability Project

An alternative to the Client Project, this final project is also considered a major capstone project that integrates all of the course goals outlined in the course description. This major collaborative research project is a website evaluation and usability study that you will perform for some actual client. Teams made of 3-5 members will perform the work. The students' job will be to help a client by researching users and providing professional feedback and design advice for a more user-centered site on the World Wide Web. For this project, then, students will:

- Describe in detail the client organization and target demographic for the website. The more information that students can begin with, the better your research design and analysis will be
- Design a research plan to elicit relevant information for the students' client about the usability of its website
- Perform tests on the existing site with intended users to determine its effectiveness in specific areas
- Assess or Analyze the extent to which the client's site meets its users needs as well as those of the users
- Write a usability report to that organization providing it with information about the students' assessment of the users' needs and the usability of the site, and recommending ways the client might revise or upgrade or improve its web-based communication strategy
- Deliver an oral report on the students' findings to their classmates

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Quizzes

The standard syllabus calls for 4 quizzes administered during the semester. The quizzes test student knowledge of assigned readings. Each quiz typically contains 10 multiple choice or true-false questions, with each question weighing one point, totaling 10% of the overall grade. Instructor variations on quizzing include requiring un-graded quizzes (as a study aid), offering only mid-term and final exams, and offering make-up or optional quizzes.

Miscellaneous Grade

The miscellaneous grade is based on student attendance, in-class participation, and completion of day-to-day assignments not listed as major projects. Examples of miscellaneous assignments include the Introductory Memo, planning assignments, project drafts, and Client project oral presentations are. The instructor can ask students to submit a copy or go around the room and check to see which students can produce the required assignment. Generally, miscellaneous assignments are graded on a pass/fail basis.

Because 407A is a project-based course, that is, students learn by solving problems, by actually doing rather than passively regurgitating knowledge as they do in lecture courses, active, day-to-day participation is crucial to effective learning in the course. Attendance is expected and required. Absences can affect the Miscellaneous grade accordingly: Two absences = A; 3 = B; 4 = C; 5 = D; More than 5 absences = F (note: this assumes good to excellent performance on day-to-day assignments.).

The instructor reserves the right to assess the miscellaneous grade on a student-by-student, case-by-case basis. The grade is determined after reviewing your record of attendance, in-class participation, and miscellaneous assignments and comparing it to the other students' performance in these areas.

Project Scheduling

Students who participate in class typically find the workload reasonable and manageable. Assignments are staggered and no major assignments are ever due on the same day. Throughout the semester, there is class time set aside as “workshops,” for drafting documents, reviewing drafts with peers, doing research, and planning in groups. As long as students pay attention to the schedule, they will end the semester knowing that they can manage complex, overlapping writing tasks. They also find that they can produce professional quality documents with more efficiency and effectiveness than they could have at the start of the semester.