

WRITING FOR INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS
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Introduction:

The recent proliferation of facsimile (FAX) machines has changed the face of communication worldwide, but no where has this impact been more strongly felt than in the international business community. In a time of global recession and outrageous operating costs, FAX machines provide instant, inexpensive, and clearly detailed communications, resulting in a dwindling reliance on face-to-face and oral communications. At the same time, effective use of FAX communications demands an increase in the level of English writing skills, for in international business clarity and conciseness are critical. If we are to provide a well-rounded education for our students in an effort to prepare them for the rigors of the business world, a course emphasizing written communication skills, I think, is required.

From talking with the students at Asia University, most seeking a career in the business world suspect that written communications skills are, or will be, critical to their future success. With the end of the Cold War, and the European Economic Community and North American Trade Agreement looming on the economic horizon, the international business community is engaged in a fierce competition for the new markets, sources of raw materials, and inexpensive labor

suddenly open to commerce. And in this post Cold War environment, the role of English in general and written English in particular assumes an ever increasing importance, for English is the language of international business; it has been for the last two hundred years and will be in the foreseeable future.

As in the acquisition of any skill, one can only learn to write by writing: an understanding of vocabulary, diction and sentence structure are worthless without experiential application. Consequently, a business writing course should be dedicated to applying writing skills, not listening to lectures regarding them. An understanding of the writing process, the perpetual need for revision, etc. are only arrived at through trial and error. An ideal ninety minute class should involve a fifteen to twenty minute lecture regarding a particular aspect of business writing or dealing with a specific grammatical problem (i.e. article or preposition use) experienced by the majority of the class, followed by hands-on practice working with the new material by actually writing. The instructor should spend the remainder of the class circulating amongst the students or workshops answering specific problems as they arise and providing short tutorials as needed.

What follows is a brief explanation of the methodology involved in teaching such a course. In order to meet the length requirements for this publication, I have chosen to include useful appendices rather than an actual syllabus,

including a diagnostic writing sample, a brief summary of the five-paragraph essay format, a simple explanation of sentence combining, and ten rules for writing concisely.

The goal of the class is to improve written communication skills in English by having students do a variety of writing, both in and out of class, experience peer critique, and develop the skills necessary to write memoranda, FAX messages, summaries and basic reports for international correspondence. The emphasis is on developing a clear, concise writing style that emphasizes concrete language and avoids ambiguity.

Methodology:

Initially, teaching writing skills is a battle over the students' mindset: instructors are trying to teach process and students are thinking product. Old habits combined with dubious skill levels frequently result in obstinacy, resentment and a basic fear of change. To overcome this problem, an instructor must exercise patience and reconcile her/himself to a gradual transition in student thought patterns; like good prose, the instructor must show, rather than merely tell, the virtues of the writing process.

The best way to initiate this transition from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented approach is to guide students through a simple example of the writing process in action. For this task, I recommend an experiential topic immediately accessible and non-threatening to the student (see appendix a for an example). For the purposes of

demonstration, I prefer using myself as an example while each student generates his/her own similar model. In essence, the student is beguiled into creating his/her own sample of the writing process in action under the guise of a parallel construction. In this manner, students will be lead through initial brainstorming, idea convergence, the generation of thematic and topic sentences, and the natural outgrowth of supporting information leading to the generation of a first draft. Experience vividly illustrates that the writing process is a natural extention of the thought process. As the student contemplates the accuracy and presentation of his/her thoughts, he/she is introduced to the habits of revising and editting for clarity.

At this point, the relationship between instructor and student breaks from tradional roles. Rather than wasting time and energy marking superficial errors on a *work in progress*, the instructor should attempt to guide the student to a better understanding of his/her intention by asking leading questions designed to engage the student, thereby helping the student arrive at a better understanding of his/her meaning rather than nit-picking grammatical trivialities. In this way the student assumes the burden of revising and editing on his/her own rather than coming to depend on the instructor for these two most critical faculties. Instructor-student exchanges without criticism increases student involvement, self-confidence and propriatorship of his/her work, for the goal should be for

each student to think of him/herself as a writer of his/her ideas, not an automaton spewing regurgitated formulae.

Writing instruction involves devising and implimenting a sequential approach for improving student writing ability and bolstering student confidence. An initial period of observation and diagnosis of general patterns of error precedes grammatical instruction. Only after the student has a clear understanding of his/her purpose and goal with his/her writing and has produced a working text should grammatical issues be broached. Ongoing mini-lectures (see syllabus) of general grammatical problems accompanied by exercises to acquaint or remind students of the finer points of English grammar are supplemented by tutorials late in the writing process to deal with the specific problems experienced by each student. Since each lesson, exercise, and assignment is designed to build upon the skills previously explored and utilized by the student, competency with written English is garnered rather than instilled, appreciated rather than survived.

Once a certain amount of confidence is experienced by the student writer, the transition from expository writing to business or technical writing is realized simply through promoting an understanding of its application and function. Business writing is a specialized, utilitarian prose format employed to relate specific, concrete ideas. A businessman, or scientist or engineer for that matter, may be brilliantly innovative and creative, but unless he or she can "convince

his coworkers, clients and supervisors of (his/her idea's) worth, his or her ideas and technical skills will be unnoticed, unappreciated, and unused"(Hucklin and Olsen, 3). In other words, ideas which cannot be related in the written form will be superfluous. Professionals work in organizational environments where teamwork is essential, and without good communications skills teamwork is impossible. Frequently, "the ultimate product of their work is a written document," and "if the document is badly written, it reflects badly not only on the individual involved but on the entire organization"(Ibid,3). Even if a person works independently, he or she must be able to communicate his or her ideas or proposals with customers, other professionals, and sponsors. From this perspective, written communications skills "are not just handy; they are critical tools for success, even survival, in 'real world' environments"(Ibid, 3).

APPENDIX A: DIAGNOSTIC WRITING SAMPLE

HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS*

The following adjectives describe common characteristics of people's personalities. Put the words into one of the categories below according to where you feel they fit best. Use your dictionary as needed.

patient	outgoing	reliable	self-confident
selfish	arrogant	open-minded	greedy
generous	friendly	stubborn	childish
energetic	kind	superficial	crabby
dogmatic	dishonest	shy	gentle
independent	passionate	jealous	hardworking
humorous	inventive	resourceful	reclusive

POSITIVE

NEUTRAL

NEGATIVE

After you have categorized your impressions of these adjectives, **pick two characteristics from each column** that best describe your personality and write an essay describing yourself. In your essay, make sure you consider what you consider to be your positive attributes, those neutral attributes you believe can be improved, and those negative characteristics you feel you need to change. Using examples, explain why these characteristics reflect your personality.

*** NOTE:** This diagnostic writing sample is adapted from an exercise I found particularly effective in my level 5 Freshman English class (Rilling, 113). With a few slight modifications, I used this exercise as a springboard to introducing my students to writing a basic five paragraph essay.

APPENDIX B: THE FIVE PARAGRAPH ESSAY

The five paragraph essay is the most basic of all prose forms in the English language. From an understanding of this basic format springs most of the writing done throughout your academic and professional career. Expository, comparison/contrast, and persuasive writing, research papers, business summaries, letters and proposals, can all easily be viewed as variations on the five paragraph theme and format.

Broken down into components, there are three essential parts to a five paragraph essay. The first part of the essay is called **the introduction**; it tells the reader what your essay is about and provides a general notion of your thoughts on the matter under consideration. The middle part of your essay is called **the body**; the body of your essay is where you provide your thoughts on a topic, usually dividing the topic into three equal parts and writing a paragraph about each part. The last part of your essay is called **the conclusion**; it should echo your main idea without simply repeating it, may be relatively short, and may be used to summarize your essay's key points. So in short, as Hacker terms it, "The introduction announces the main point; the body develops it, usually in several paragraphs; the conclusion drives it (the point) home" (21).

What follows are some important ideas regarding each component of a five paragraph essay that you need to keep in mind when writing, editing or revising.

THE INTRODUCTION:

1. Your immediate goal is to interest your reader in what you are writing about. If your essay is boring, no one, least of all a busy teacher or an over-worked employer, will take the time to read it.
2. Somewhere in your introduction, which usually ranges from 50 to 150 words, you must include a **thesis (or thematic statement)**: a statement of the main point of your essay. How you introduce your thesis is entirely up to you as the writer; however, it is well to remember that business-related writing, in which a straightforward approach is most effective, usually begins with the thesis. For other essays you have more flexibility regarding where you can locate your thesis in the introduction, but it is a common practice to get your reader's attention with some interesting idea or provocative statement (known as a hook) and conclude the introductory paragraph with your thesis.
3. Limit your thesis, or thematic statement, to a notion or idea that you can competently cover in the course of five paragraphs. A common mistake is to try to take on too broad a topic in this *short* essay format. Although you can always shorten or condense your thematic statement, it is best to have a general idea of what your essay will consist of before beginning to write. It is also wise to group your ideas into

three categories of ideas, or aspects of your thesis, before beginning to write.

THE BODY:

1. Each of the three paragraphs in the body of your essay should explore a different aspect of your thesis. Each paragraph must contain a **topic sentence**, which introduces the ideas to follow.
2. In business writing, usually the topic sentence is the first sentence of each paragraph of the body of your essay.
3. You should be able to easily write at least three sentences explaining or supporting how your topic sentence expands upon your thesis statement; if you can not generate at least three sentences, rethink your topic sentence for it may be too narrow a focus to adequately support your thesis.
4. Think of ways to show your reader what you mean by using good **examples and concrete language**; do not simply tell your reader your point because unsupported generalizations are worthless, particularly in business writing. Make your points specific and vivid by helping your reader see what you mean; examples and relevant statistical facts can help you do this.
5. When arranging the body of your essay, if your paragraphs are not evenly balanced in terms of information, purpose or effect, try to arrange the paragraphs in an order which presents your weakest point first and your strongest point last. This has the effect of your essay building to a climax and leaves the reader with a lasting impression of your strongest point.

THE CONCLUSION:

1. In addition to echoing your essay's main idea, you can use your conclusion to summarize your essay's key points, make a recommendation based on your observations, or call for further study.
2. The most difficult part of writing a conclusion is making it sound different than the introduction. To make a conclusion "...memorable, consider including a detail, example, or image from the introduction to bring readers full circle..." (Hacker 25).
4. Whatever strategy you choose in writing your conclusion, NEVER introduce new ideas in the conclusion of your essay.
5. Avoid offering apologies or weak endings; try to make your essay end cleanly, preferably in a positive fashion.
6. Arriving at the perfect conclusion before you have written your essay is foolhardy because as you write your ideas will become more clear to you; how can you write a conclusion before you've thoroughly explored your topic?

APPENDIX C:
SENTENCE COMBINING
Coordination and Subordination

Using a variety of sentence structures, or constructions, in your writing insures that your style itself does not bore your reader. To avoid endlessly repeating the subject-verb-object pattern, you can, if you choose, vary your sentence construction by effectively using coordination and subordination. A general rule is to "coordinate equal ideas, and subordinate minor ideas"(Hacker, 72).

Coordination involves the joining of two related sentences of equal importance. To join two sentences, use either a coordinating conjunction and a comma(,) or a semi-colon; frequently, a conjunctive adverb, such as however or consequently, is used to point out a contrast or a result linking the two ideas.

Sometimes it is easier to remember the coordinating conjunctions by their acronym, **fanboys**: **f**or, **a**nd, **n**or, **b**ut, **o**r, **y**et, **s**o. Only by employing a comma and a coordinating conjunction may two sentences be combined. Failure to use a comma results in a grammatical error called a **run-on**; failure to use a coordinating conjunction results in a grammatical error called a **comma splice**. The following sentences are examples of correct and incorrect coordination, using the two sentences, "Grandmother lost her sight." and "Her hearing sharpened." as a model(Hacker, 72).

Correct Coordination:

- a. Grandmother lost her sight, but her hearing sharpened.
- b. Grandmother lost her sight; however, her hearing sharpened.
- c. Grandmother lost her sight; her hearing sharpened.

In examples a and b, the words "but" and "however" are used to contrast the two ideas, suggesting one is the result of the other. Example c, on the other hand, because it implies no relationship between the two ideas other than general statements regarding grandmother's health, remains essentially two simple sentences joined by a semi-colon. Though not incorrect, example c is somewhat boring.

Incorrect Coordination:

- d. Grandmother lost her sight but her hearing improved.
- e. Grandmother lost her sight, her hearing improved.

Example d is an example of a run-on sentence: you cannot join two sentences, or independent clauses, with a coordinating conjunction but not a comma. Similarly, example e is an example of a comma splice, for you cannot join two sentences with a comma but not a coordinating conjunction.

Now join the following pairs of sentences employing coordination.

1. The football game ended. Thousands of people remained in the stands.
2. It snowed all night. In the morning my car was buried under a meter of snow.
3. Bob had five scholarship offers. He chose to attend Harvard.
4. I went to the bank to cash a check. I forgot it was Sunday.
5. Kenji is taller than Atsuhiko. Shumpei is the tallest of the three men.

Subordination gives unequal emphasis to two or more ideas, expressing relations of cause, effect, time, place, comparison and contrast between the main idea and another idea, or ideas, placing conditions on it. The minor idea (**subordinate clause**) placing conditions on the major idea is never a complete sentence because it does not express a complete thought; as such, a subordinate clause is termed a dependent clause while the main idea, which must always be a complete sentence, is termed an independent clause.

Subordinate clauses may begin with one of the following words, which may be used to identify dependent clauses that cannot stand as sentences:

after	although	as	because	before
if	since	unless	until	though
when	where	which	while	whether

For example, the following subordinate clauses are often mistakenly thought to be sentences when, in fact, they are not:

- a. **Because it was raining.**
Did something happen because it was raining? What? This is an incomplete thought.
- b. **When I got home.**
What happened when he/she got home? This is also an incomplete thought.
- c. **If you get the chance.**

Are you supposed to do something if you get the chance?
What?

So, as you can see from these examples, subordinate clauses place conditions on the main idea to follow, for instance:

- a. **Because it was raining, the baseball game was canceled.**
- b. **When I got home, I realized I had left my keys at work.**
- c. **If you get the chance, would you mail this letter for me?**

In each case, the **bold-faced** subordinate (or dependent) clause places conditions on the **underlined** independent clause, otherwise termed a simple sentence. Notice that the subordinate clause placing conditions on the independent clause is separated from it by a comma (,). When the subordinate clause precedes the independent clause, it must be separated from it to show that one idea is placing conditions on the other idea; conversely, when you wish to add the subordinate clause on to the independent clause, you simply add it to the existing sentence.

- a. **The baseball game was canceled because it was raining.**
- b. **I realized I had left my keys at work when I got home.**
- c. **Would you mail this letter for me if you get the chance?**

Further, if you add one of the words from the list above (after, as, although, etc.) to a simple sentence, or independent clause, it becomes a dependent clause because it will no longer express a complete thought. Consider the following clauses:

- a. (After) I went to the store.
- b. (Because) I was hungry.
- c. (Whenever) Koji saw Mariko.

In each of the examples above, the addition of the word in parenthesis changes the meaning of the sentence from expressing a complete thought to expressing an incomplete thought requiring more information.

- a. After I went to the store, I went to a movie.
- b. Because I was hungry, I made a sandwich.

c. Whenever Koji saw Mariko, he thought of the science project they had worked on together.

When you decide to use subordination to join to complete sentences, you must decide which of the two sentences you want to emphasize and which sentence you want to make conditional. To return to grandmother's condition, you would have to make a decision regarding what you were trying to emphasize. "If your purpose were to stress your grandmother's acute hearing rather than her blindness, you would subordinate the idea concerning her blindness.

As she lost her sight, Grandmother's hearing sharpened.

To focus on her growing blindness, you would subordinate the idea concerning her hearing.

Though her hearing sharpened, Grandmother gradually lost her sight(Hacker 73)."

Now join the following pairs of sentences using subordination.

1. The football game ended. Thousands of people remained in the stands.
2. It snowed all night. In the morning my car was buried under a meter of snow.
3. Bob had five scholarship offers. He chose to attend Harvard.
4. I went to the bank to cash a check. I forgot it was Sunday.
5. Kenji is taller than Atsuhiko. Shumpei is the tallest of the three men.

APPENDIX D:10 RULES FOR CONCISE WRITING

1. Always choose the specific, concrete noun over the ambiguous: take the time to find the exact word for what you mean.
2. Make each verb count; verbs are the heart and soul of a sentence. An otherwise weak sentence can be bolstered by a strong, interesting verb; conversely, it is impossible for a sentence to be strong without an effective, accurate verb.
3. Except when writing scientific reports and the like, always choose the active voice over the passive.
4. Whenever possible, employ coordination and subordination to reduce clauses to phrases and phrases to single words.
5. Cut empty or inflated phrases.
6. Eliminate redundancies and the unnecessary repetition of words or phrases.
7. Use figures of speech with care; avoid clichés.
8. Avoid using pretentious or sexist language, euphemisms, jargon, and obsolete, slang or nonstandard English words.
9. Avoid expletives (there is, there are, there was, there were) wherever possible, for such constructions serve only to put off getting the sentence started and can cause confusion regarding the subject and main verb.
10. Always consult a dictionary rather than a thesaurus. A dictionary not only will provide a myriad of information about any word but also can act as a thesaurus if used properly. A good dictionary is a priceless investment.

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