

## Memo to Students: Writing Skills Matter

**B-schools face a challenge in teaching writing and communications skills to undergrads more comfortable with cell phones and IMs**

The thought of tackling a 15-page English paper scared David Rodriguez to pieces as an undergraduate finance major at the University of Miami. Proposals and memos for his business-focused communication sections were more applicable to his life, easier to get through, and more enjoyable. Luckily for him, at his current job in the Mortgage Capital Group at Lehman Brothers ([LEH](#)), Rodriguez has left long reports and literary analyses behind him.

While his writing skills may not have been up to par when he entered Miami, Rodriguez acknowledges that they improved by taking required courses common to many B-school curriculums. Business undergraduates are faced with a dual challenge once they enter college -- writing mature research papers for general courses and expressing themselves clearly, confidently, and concisely for a professional audience. In B-school courses, undergrads learn to write presentations, memos, notes, proposals, and reports for different business audiences.

SCARY NUMBERS. But too often, undergraduates enter -- and leave -- B-school without the basic knowledge needed to write effectively, which can hinder their academic and job success. Now, spurred by low test scores and recruiter demand, some schools are taking action.

Only 51% of all high school students who took the college entrance exam are prepared for college-level reading, according to a report released last month by the American College Testing Program (ACT). Essentially, anyone deemed "ready" has a 75% chance of earning a grade of C or higher and a 50% chance of getting a B or higher in reading-intensive college classes.

Intended business and management majors who took the ACT exam this year scored in the bottom third of test-takers -- lower than 14 majors, higher than seven, and tied with health sciences. They earned an average composite score of 20.4, slightly below the national average of 20.9.

TOP TRAIT. Skill sets are developed at an early age and built through years of pre-college schooling. Many students initially have reading and writing ability, but proficiency levels have the tendency to drop if these skills aren't used consistently. An absence of challenging reading materials and assignments in high school, students' increased use of text messaging and other forms of electronic communication, and teenagers' general apathy have all contributed to the national drop in skill use and aptitude. Reading and writing are highly correlated, says Richard Ferguson, CEO of ACT.

Strong writing skills are crucial for business majors looking to enter the corporate world. The ability to communicate topped the list of recruiting companies' desired traits this year among college candidates, according to the National Association of Colleges & Employers' 2006 Job Outlook.

Investment banks, consulting firms, and even technology companies stress the importance of writing when hiring candidates. Some new employees -- in areas such as finance, marketing, and consulting --

prepare multipage reports and presentations, while others use shorter formats. However, no one can doubt that even crafting an e-mail is an art form in today's business world.

**POOR FOUNDATION.** But are schools really preparing their students for the working world? Recruiters aren't so sure. Nikita Davis, recruiting manager for the Burson-Marsteller PR firm, which hires several business majors each year, says more than ever she finds that writing skills are weak and that undergrads don't understand the difference between formal and informal writing. She says more direction from professors is needed.

Educators are worried, too. "Students aren't ready for today's business environment," says Paula Hill Strasser, director of the Edwin L. Cox Business Leadership Center & Institute at Southern Methodist University. "They're lacking skills on how important the tone of the message is in the business world." SMU is working to fix that deficit in its students, and it's not an easy task. Many job applicants have inadequate knowledge of grammar, cannot write well, and lack presentation-making skills, according to the report.

Starting earlier might be the answer. "We need to get more rigorous, more complex reading into our high school social studies, science, and math courses, and so forth, so that students are actually experiencing those skills and then are prepared to use what's expected of them when they get to college," says ACT's Ferguson. Sometimes, those expectations cannot be met. It's no use wondering about what could have been done in high school for those who are already struggling in college.

**INTEGRATED APPROACH.** While a strict business curriculum can be beneficial in honing future career skills, some educators advocate a more liberal arts-based program. The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania combines business with arts and sciences, which gives students a broader world view and critical thinking- and problem-solving abilities. Improving writing and communication are a priority at Wharton, and a writing seminar is required of all undergrads.

Some program directors at colleges and universities stress that writing shouldn't be taught in isolation. At Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, all communication classes incorporate writing, speaking, listening, and teamwork, showing business majors that all facets are connected and necessary for successful interactions. Frequently, high schools and other B-schools teach writing as an independent form of communication, says Sue Vargo, director of business communication. "Here students aren't just writing for the sake of writing or speaking for the sake of speaking," she says.

At Kelley, undergrads must enroll in Business Presentations & Business Communication, which culminates in a formal report and presentation of a company-based case study. Several new options have been added recently, as the school places more emphasis on the area. Even information-systems classes require formal reports and presentations.

**ACQUIRED TALENT.** Placing students from the get-go into courses that rely heavily on writing is another tactic B-schools use. All Penn State freshmen take a seminar, with specific modules for Smeal College of Business students, on topics including diversity, leadership, and service. Among six writing assignments is a personal-reflection piece, designed to enhance creativity among students who may not be used to using their imaginations in this way. In contrast, the senior capstone, also writing-intensive, focuses more on analyzing business and financial statements.

Other schools present unique choices when it comes to business writing. In the McIntire School of Commerce at the University of Virginia's Advanced Managerial Communication course, professors cover communication with public investors and employers, media relations, briefings, and professional anecdotes. In the Business & Its Publics course at New York University's Leonard N. Stern School of Business, students learn about relationships between business and society, politics, philosophy, art, and life.

One professor's approach to business instruction is anything but conventional. Joe Hoyle, who teaches accounting at the University of Richmond, gives students an unorthodox assignment in his Intermediate II Accounting class -- writing a paper on their [favorite book](#), which doesn't have to be related to business.

In fact, in recent years, Hoyle has received papers on a large variety of works, including *The Giving Tree*, *Confessions of a Winning Poker Player*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Death of a Salesman*, and even popular online blogger Tucker Max's *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*. "Students will walk into class and say, 'I don't enjoy reading.' I say it's like the first time they had a beer. It tastes awful. But if you drink it enough, you'll like it," says Hoyle. "Reading, museums, and the theater are acquired tastes." In the process, students may acquire a fondness -- and talent -- for writing as well.

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