

## **Introduction**

I was teaching both college composition and business writing. Very frequently, I saw English majors struggling while trying to transfer what they learned in freshman writing into business writing. Smooth transition did not take place as expected. Puzzled long enough, I found my answer in another class of mine, journalistic English, believing that journalistic writing may help my students to write more efficiently not only for the technical writing course but for their life-long careers.

To understand this gap between college composition and business writing, three phenomena need to be considered: 1. the predominance and importance of writing at work; 2. problems with literacy at workplace; 3. college composition as a contributor to workplace writing problems.

### **The Predominance and Importance of Writing**

It is arguable that most research of workplace literacy conducted on L1 writers can not be generalized to L2 writers. However, persuasive studies have yielded promising results, showing that native speakers and non-native speakers of English (NS and NNS, henceforth) at work are alike. In his business management class, Curry (1996) observed that both NS and NNS need to learn analytic and communication language skills to be successful in the university as well as at work. An experience L2 technical writing teacher, Rainey (1990) also noted that NNS have more problems in oral contexts but they are competitively fluent writers in business setting. What NNS need is excessive time, practice, and patience (Leki, 1992). Featheringill, Fuller, and Vogt (1996) argued that it is misunderstanding to underestimate L2 writers as, in their study, ESL/EFL students all passed objective grammar and punctuation tests like L1 writers and that these two groups showed no statistically differences—some cannot write and all fear writing. Efforts to exclude L2 writers do not seem to help if ultimately my goal is to help Taiwanese writers achieve the professional standard of English technical writing. Workplace writing has its own uniqueness and demands equal practice from L1 and L2 writers.

Elbow (1991), arguing for teaching non-academic discourse in freshman writing courses, notes that “life is long and college is short” (p. 136). After university, the writing most students need to do for most of their lives is for their jobs. The question next is “what kind of writing do people do once they enter workplace settings?”

Surveys conducted between two decades ago and now simply tell the same thing: Writing occupies significant amount of work time, and workplace discourse demands a wide variety of writing far different from college composition. Business executives in Stine and Skarzenski’s (1979) survey ranked memos and letters as the most common writing conducted at work. Barnum and Fischer’s (1984) survey of engineering technologists indicated that even in the field of engineering, writing was considered “very important” by 91% of the respondents. Sixty front-line supervisors in a Midwest steel manufacturing plant in Mabrito’s (1997) study give the most up-to-date overview of current workplace literacy. Seventy percent of the participants reported that they spent near 1/4 of per work week on writing mostly line-ups (memos) and internal letters.

Other surveys also suggested that the higher the job position the greater amount of writing is done (Hartwood, 1982). Some working adults also admitted that ineffective writing can slow down their rise through managerial ranks and, at last, cost their jobs permanently (Aldrich, 1982). Inefficient writing affects the other side of literacy—the prominence of reading at work. Diehl and Mikulecky’s (1988) interviews with 107 subjects from 100 types of occupations showed that reading at work seems to be a ubiquitous activity as 99% of the interviewees reported doing some reading each day, taking around 113 minutes weekly.

Workplace document writing can be sometimes very influential and critical. Keil’s (1998) composition students discovered in dealing with social workers’ reports: “Some texts generated by social workers involve matters of life and death—client histories and resulting care plans, advance directives such as powers of attorney and living wills, and child custody motions” (p. 170).

## **Problems with Workplace Writing**

Complaints about poor literacy affecting periodicity never cease. Featheringill et al. (1996) noted that 47% of American adults cannot write a business letter. Their reports from business managers also indicated that deficient literacy leads to accidents in the workplace. Moss (1995) surveyed 2,200 CEOs and was answered by 207. The respondents ranked reading (94%) and grammar skills (93%) to be “really important,” followed by organization skills and revising skills (both 81%). One respondent commented, “Our experience with college grads concerning communication has been poor. They cannot write, they cannot speak and generally have poor communication skills” (p. 74). If compared with Stine and Skarzenski’s survey (1979) in which wordiness and grammar were once considered the top two troublesome writing problems, college graduates nowadays have not improved too much at all.

Aldrich’s (1982) survey of 254 top- and mid-level managers found that managers as writers do not know what the value of planning is to both the process and product of their writing. Consequently, “these professionally trained people produce disorganized and ineffective writing” (p. 284). Tebeaux’s (1990) interviews with 45 English majors entering MBA programs offered some insights. It is the lack of relevant instruction to writing in non-academic environments that creates problems for students who become employees.

### **College Composition as a Contributor to Workplace Problems**

If workplace writing is the main kind of writing people do after colleges, where do they learn how to write? Mostly our graduates gained their knowledge from freshman composition. Eighty-seven percent of the writers at work in Tebeaux’s (1988) study said that they only learn how to write in their freshman writing class. Yet these techniques are counterproductive to the type of writing done at work, according to Tebeaux.

Dickson and Olson (1992), arriving at a similar conclusion, believed that writing skills taught in first-year composition does not transfer in practical ways and seem inapplicable to business writing. Moreover, with its tendency to value

creativity over grammatical and stylistic correctness, college writing may be the main reason why employees are now producing unclear, confusing and wordy workplace writing.

Tebeaux (1988) identified several main workplace writing problems that reflect college writing instruction. They involved “lack of”:

1. Clear organization for revealing organization and content.
2. Deductive presentation that gives the reader the information first.
3. Reader analysis about the topic being discussed.

### **Journalism as a Bridge between College Composition and Business Writing—A Proposal**

Research shows that journalistic writing meets the general needs of students better than college composition. Stull (1983) claimed that the journalistic what-why-who-where-when-how writing model is a thorough, analytic approach that will bring about correctly, clearly, concisely, and correctly efficient business communication. Pauly (1983), in the same volume of ABCA Bulletin, asserted that, if taking journalism writing classes, students not only gain a better grasp of the techniques of writing but leave such courses with more self-confident sense of what they can do.

Dvorak, Lain, and Dickson’s (1990) book, *Journalism Kids Do Better*, perhaps provides the most convincing ideas on how journalism actually helps students. Dvorak et al. believe that journalistic writing shapes student-writers in 4 perspectives:

1. The mechanic view: Journalism, merely an extension of English composition, exists to provide reinforcement for the grammar and writing skills taught in other classes.
2. The vocational view: Journalism, by exposing students to career alternatives, offers possible career training.
3. The free-expression view: As college composition teachers are encouraging students to find their voices in writing, journalistic kind of publication is a place where students’ own voice are heard.
4. The integrated view: Good journalism, requiring clear thinking, reasoning,

and critical writing, teaches students an ability to communicate and a willingness, both of which are important parts in our goals of education.

Other researchers also align with Dvorak et al. For instance, Olson and Dickson (1995) state that journalism instruction offers an excellent method of teaching writing. They surveyed 300 journalism students who indicated that their first journalism class taught 9 skills better than their first English composition class. These skills include:

- Writing concisely, precisely, and clearly.
- Writing in an organized manner.
- Writing interestingly, meaningfully to an audience.
- Using correct spelling and grammar.
- Writing in details.

### **Rationales for the Proposal**

If I will be teaching college composition again, how could I help student-writers who are also workplace-writers-to-be? Below is a discussion of four ways journalism could fulfill various needs of both kinds of writers.

#### **1. Business writing techniques are grounded in the genre of journalism.**

Leki (1992) inferred that college composition has its limitations as she observed that student essays are a separate category unique among others. Russell (1995) questioned why college writing was added in the curricula of every American college. He argued that students' taking of a GWSI (i.e., general writing skills instruction) course is like taking a course of general ball using when they actually intend to improve their ping-pong, volleyball, or baseball. No one can teach ball-using skills unless one also teaches the ball games. Such a course will have problems of "content," "rigor," "unrealistic expectation," and "evaluating effectiveness." While no single genre can best represent the whole of public discourse, "journalism perhaps comes closest," according to Russell (p. 62). He sees journalism solve the problem of "content" by having vivid meanings and contexts, the problem of "rigor" by reconnecting subjects being described with describers, the problem of "unrealistic expectation" by having the public as readers, and the

problem of “effectiveness evaluation” by using the already existing journalistic evaluating system.

## **2. Business and journalism writings share similar writing styles**

English departments, both in the US and Taiwan, consist of most literature-based faculties. Shaughnessy (1977) pinpoints that what college writing teachers consciously or unconsciously promote is not simple because their judgments have been shaped “by years of exposure to belletristic literature, and their arrangement of words” (p. 196). Freshmen, upon finishing the composition course, left with an impression that English teachers preferred muddy prose to clear writing, and found more errors in clearly written essays than in complicated essays although the essays were the same except for style (Hake and William, 1981).

Pauly (1983) called journalism and business writing “a roundtable” because he believed that both types of writing share a clear goal—teaching students to produce a simple, concise style of expression. Student-writers should benefit from journalistic writing as its straight-talking style brings students closer to clear and concise writing, both highly advocated in business communication.

## **3. Business and journalism writings are both deductively organized**

Writing in traditional composition classes is typically inductive. The opening paragraph states the thesis, followed by three paragraphs elaborating on that thesis and the conclusion reiterating the thesis statement. According to Tebeaux (1988), workplace readers are too busy to read so that they prefer getting the “bottom line” first. The inverted pyramid style of journalism presents facts deductively and often serves the need for busy workplace readers. Hart (1996) called this organizational style, “user-centered communication,” with which writers at work use the 5-W’s-and-1-H approach to ensure the audience’s needs are met immediately. If students can be taught this kind of reader-centered organization in the course of journalistic writing first, they should find the adjustment from inductive college essays to deductive workplace writing a lot easier.

## **4. Business and journalism writings are realistic as they both include: 1) real purpose, 2) audience, 3) deadlines, 4) instant reward, and 5) collaboration**

Freshman writing instruction encourages writing about personal experience

since it is presumed to be accessible to the student. However, such inward-oriented, self-expressive writing goes completely against workplace writing, often outward-directed, objective toned.

Studies confirm the reality. Participants currently at work in six disciplines in Bataille's (1982) survey indicated that writing for people outside one's field is important, thus careful audience analysis is a priority. They also mentioned journalism training at the undergraduate level was helpful. Redish, Battison, and Gold (1985) suggested sending students out of the classroom to work on documents in non-academic settings as community-based projects enable students to see their writing in action, with real purpose, audience, and deadlines all happening within the same meaningful and realistic context.

Furthermore, much of the job-related writing involved collaborative writing. Co-authorship is what actually happens (Faigley and Miller, 1982; Lauerman, et al., 1985). Using journalistic skills to conduct an interview project gives students a chance to practice team-writing, which I have used successfully in the past. The quality of this kind of project turned out to be a lot more impressive than that of regular college writing routines: 5-paragraphed essays featuring a prescribed rhetorical mode. Diversity and flexibility were also found in the projects. Enjoyment was always rewarded when student-reporters saw their publication in print (Laurenty, 1998).

## **Conclusion**

In the highly mobile society with its rapidly improving technology, it is impossible to predict where my students will end up. The best I can do in a freshman composition class is to offer them an understanding of the process of writing guidelines for a genre that can be adapted to any writing task. Journalism comes closest as it offers quasi-job context for writing classes. Journalism deserves a space in the curricula of English departments because it has so much to give to students' present and future professional lives.

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