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Why Company Writing Programs Fail

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Don't Count on the Course

WHY WRITING TRAINING FAILS

The success of a writing program may not have as much to do with the program itself as with the program's goals, the students, and the instructors.

Edmond H. Weiss

What do writing programs and computer technology have in common? Companies tend to buy or develop writing programs the same way they acquire computer technology. Often, they are vague about their needs, blank on specifications, dependent on the self-interested opinions of vendors, and usually forced to settle for what they get.

The proper goal for a company writing program is to teach the participants to do their own jobs more effectively. Usually, the best strategy is just to teach a course in how to write something the participants genuinely want to write. So, a course for a systems analyst might be "How to Write a Functional Specification." A course for an engineer might be "How to Write a Credible Environmental Impact Statement," or "How to Write a Winning Proposal."

Even though teachers of business and technical writing agree on most things their courses can be strikingly different. And although every participant benefits at least a little from any competent writing course, there can be profound differences in the rate of return on their organization's training dollar. Put simply, there are three big mistakes that can sink a company's training program. Any one of them hurts; together they mean disaster. The mistakes are:

- the wrong goals
- the wrong students
- the wrong instructors

First, let's consider goals. The only people I know who truly want to be better writers are writers. In contrast, most of people I meet in the technical professions—engineers, analysts, scientists, programmers—would be just as happy if they never had to write anything again. So, any technical or professional writing seminar whose goal is produce "better writers" is misguided

and likely to fail.

The paradox of good writing is that, in every field but literature and entertainment, good writing is invisible to the reader. When business or technical writing calls attention to itself, it is bad. (The more noticeable it is, the worse; this is the easiest and best indicator.) Thus, systems analysts who write well are praised for their analysis, not their writing. Consulting engineers who write well are praised for the quality of their recommendations, not their writing. Project managers for their leadership, researchers for their insights, and so forth.

The same general principles that underly all effective communications underly these complicated documents as well. Each must be planned and outlined, adapted to the audience, edited for clarity and readability. The difference is the goal.

No participant can be indifferent toward these better goals. Anyone can be blasé about the need for better writing. But an analyst who cannot write a functional specification is a coder, a scientist who cannot publish is a lab technician, and an engineer who cannot write an effective proposal may soon be unemployed.

The Wrong Students

Company writing programs cannot work when the participants believe they are being punished. Seminars in which college educated professionals are forced to do penance for their poor writing are unpleasant and ineffective. (This is especially true when the participants are not convinced that they write any worse than the supervisors who "nominated" them.)

I have taught both kinds, many times. I have addressed the sullen assemblages of "bad" writers and watched them reduced to the status and style of high school freshman. But I have also addressed groups in which all the participants viewed the course as a fascinating opportunity—a way to learn skills that lead to more professional fun and even to more money.

Writing courses are not for the inarticulate—although those are just the people some companies send to them. Writing seminars are wasted on that group of college-educated

people who have reached their 30s without learning to construct a well-made, complex sentence. Or on people who, although they have advanced degrees in arcane subjects, are unacquainted with the mystery of the comma. Why? Because this large group (I estimate 30-40% of professional employees) has already devoted ten or twenty years to ignoring their writing. They are unlikely to change.

Most of the members of each learned profession want to be more effective and successful; that is, they want to write better. Each learned profession also contains large numbers, however, who are timid about the fundamentals of their language, and who are reticent, laconic, too professionally or psychologically insecure to write an engaging paragraph. Their real problem is lack of intellectual vigor, or confidence, or imagination, or even intelligence. And there is little a three-day writing course will do about that.

In contrast, people who understand the connection between communication and success will learn to write effectively. If the company offers an interesting writing program (not a remedial program for the uncommunicative), they will be the first to sign up. And, most important, what they learn will pay back the company for its investment.

The Wrong Instructors

To repeat, many companies depend on vendors and consultants to define their writing programs. And many of these providers are committed to the two mistakes discussed already: the wrong goals and the wrong students.

Teachers of technical and business writing tend to be generalists and dilettantes—moonlighting professors of literature; former high school English teachers displaced by the zero population movement; even failed journalists and novelists. Because these providers all want to be "good writers," they assume that everyone else should also want that. And, because they usually believe that everyone in their classes needs "remediation," they tend to treat the customers as naughty schoolchildren. (Note: The wrong goal and the wrong students.)

Too many of the teachers of company writing programs do not know enough about either their students or

their students' business. (And they rarely bother to learn.) Many instructors have never worked in a profit-seeking corporation; many have never written or edited a major report, manual, or proposal. (Some don't even write memos.) Some instructors have never even used word processing systems—although their clients use them all the time and although no contemporary course on professional writing can ignore the uses of word processing.

What, for example, can a college professor who works in near isolation and with complete academic freedom, know about corporate censorship? What English teacher knows what it takes to manage a team of two dozen amateur writers who must produce a life-or-death proposal before an inflexible deadline? What college composition course addresses the problems of cowardice, laziness, and shortsightedness—which happen to be the main barriers to improving the documentation of new computer applications?

Lacking a genuine appreciation for what the students do or what they need to succeed, the instructor plays it safe and becomes a didact. And, if the instructors' typical classes in their regular teaching assignments are groups of 19 and 20-year olds, the style and mood of the course can degenerate quickly into freshman comp.

The best test of instructors is whether they genuinely respect their clients, whether they believe their clients' problems are worth solving. Effective writing, you see, is mainly the diligent, persistent application of easily-learned techniques. So, the instructor's first responsibility is to give students a reason to be diligent and persistent.

And the reason is that good writing leads to high quality work. Not high quality writing. High quality work. □

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Seminars, Courses & Speeches

Business/Professional Communication

How to Sell in Writing (Proposals & Business Cases)

The most important business writing is the *advocacy document*, the pitch for funds or approval.

- Analyzing your audience and Win Strategy
- Presenting the “case” with logic and persuasiveness
- Using business graphics to demonstrate and prove

How to Write *Globally*

International business requires sensitivity to the language, culture, and expectations of the international business partner.

- Editing for clarity and readability
- Screening for figurative and idiomatic confusion
- Designing accessible layouts and appropriate feedback paths

Final Draft: The *Especially* Clear Sentence

Good writing is *rewriting*; only revision can assure clarity, correct tone, freedom from errors, and readability.

- Emphasis and making your point
- Twenty flaws in first-draft sentences
- Style-checking software: Can you trust it?

The Art of the Pitch

A well-made presentation is a small five-act play, where each element contributes to effectiveness.

- Strategic planning and design
- Managing stage fright
- Using PowerPoint™ and other presentation tools
- Handling questions and objections
- Creating useful handouts

The Art of Effective E-Mail

To use e-mail well, the writer must exploit its strengths and adapt to its limitations.

- Attention-getting subject lines
- E-mail style and grammar
- Discipline and etiquette for e-mailers
- To attach or to embed ...

Technical Communication

A Writing System for Technical Professionals

Technical professionals cannot achieve their professional goals unless they write their correspondence, reports, and documentation with power and precision.

- Creating documents as engineered information products
- Eliminating common errors and time-wasters
- Writing for *nontechnical* readers

Preparing English Tech Documents for International Readers

Although customers and clients around the world read English quite well, it is still necessary to edit international technical information for the E2 reader.

- Making documents *culture-free* and *culture-fair*
- Correcting problems of style, idiom, and syntax
- Using controlled English
- Adapting to local sensitivities and cultures

Effective Quality Manuals/ Usable Procedure & User's Manuals

A manual is a device that supports people in their work; when well designed, it teaches procedures, enforces standards, and saves money.

- Documenting ISO 9000 and other quality standards
- Replacing unreadable and unmaintainable prose with scripts, tables, and diagrams
- Testing for usability and enforceability
- Designing modular, maintainable publications
- Storyboarding and project management

The Craft of User Requirements & Functional Specs

Those who use information technology and those who create or acquire it must communicate their needs and expectations clearly, especially at the beginning of the design cycle.

- How **User:Developer** communication fails
- Beyond the Waterfall Model
- Tools and processes for functional specification

Organizational Communication

Meetings that Work

Meetings should be energizing and productive—never boring or a perceived waste of time.

- Objectives and agendas: staying on message
- Two warring cultures: ratification vs. exploration
- Roles and games played by participants
- Secrets of master facilitators
- Cultural variables in international meetings

There's Only Now: Managing the Professional's Time

Despite the array of electronic time management tools, too many professionals feel overworked, stressed, and never quite on top of their work.

- Attitudes about time
- Five immutable rules of time management
- Time management traps and how to avoid them
- Products and tools and how to choose/adapt them
- Getting long-term goals and projects into your short-term calendar

Raising Culture Consciousness

An urgent need for international business professionals is to learn, and adapt to, the culture of the communities or countries where they wish to do business.

- Dimensions of difference
- Context and communication
- Individualism versus collectivism
- Timing and pacing (the hidden dimension)

Turning Words into Money: Business Plans & Cases

Projects need funding, capital; even the best ideas can fail for lack of a convincing business plan/case.

- What impresses funding sources
- Missions, visions, and goals
- The logic of the 'business case'
- Clear, persuasive language and graphics
- Presentations for executives and sponsors

Speeches/Short Programs for Professional Gatherings and Meetings

How to Sell an Idea

Why won't people follow your advice? There are eight barriers that keep us from accepting new plans and approaches... and specific techniques to overcome them.

The Secret of Professional Fulfillment

The key to mental health and productivity—on the job or at home—is *equilibrium*: keeping all of life's eight competing values in balance. The tendency is to neglect some while pursuing others, a practice that leads to anxiety and alienation.

Re-Inventing the Memo

Do you have trouble getting your point across to co-workers? A memo is NOT a work of literature, but, rather, an engineered product, designed for clarity, power, and speed. Twelve tactics increase the chance that a memo (or an e-mail) will be read.

The Odor of Mendacity—Why People Don't Believe You Anymore...

In school, we learn ways to "improve" the truth by puffing up our writing with words that inflate, obscure, and disguise. Business and professional speech and writing are filled with these bad language habits, which make us sound as though we are hedging and evading—even when we have nothing to hide.

Does Grammar Count in the Era of E-Mail?

Is e-mail the end of 'correct' communication? Do spelling, punctuation, and grammar matter anymore? Only as much as the recipient of the message matters. All professionals should care about the image they communicate, even in their informal messages.

Business Basics for Technical Professionals

The most important technical question is "How's Business?" Technical professionals must learn to pitch improvements and changes in their departments through business-savvy business cases: proposals aimed at one's own management. Business cases must show how the new procedures or technology will either make or save money, and within an acceptable number of months.