

BCMU 301: Basic Written Business Communications

Instructors for 2013-2014:

Michael Dimeo
Lee Hochberg
Judith Kalitzki
Jack Whelan, Core Course Coordinator

GENERAL COURSE OBJECTIVES

Successful Business Communications requires both having good ideas and packaging them effectively for one's intended audience. Business Communications 301/2 is designed to teach students to work efficiently to generate lively, substantive content and to find the written or oral styles and forms best suited for delivering a message to a variety of business audiences.

At the heart of any business leader's job description one finds that he or she is an effective communicator. In ten weeks no student can master the written and oral communication skills that will be required of him or her in the business world. As with most performance skills, mastery comes with time and experience. But students' chances for early competency and eventual mastery are increased significantly if they have a strong foundation upon which they can build. BCMU at the Foster School is designed to provide that foundation for both written and oral communications.

COURSE OVERVIEW

The instructors for Business Communications at Foster come from varied backgrounds, and their approach to teaching the course is rooted in the practical experiences and competencies they have developed in the course of their careers. This is primarily a skills development course. While it is important to understand essential concepts that provide a framework for effective strategic communications, the course focuses primarily on helping students to improve their ability to write and speak effectively. We've outlined below the core competencies that any student taking BCMU 301/2 will be taught, but we refer you to pages at the end of this syllabus for the individual instructor's description of his or her courses to get a better sense of the particular approach each instructor takes.

Strategies

All courses focus on the importance of strategic thinking and adopting a methodical approach to the development of solutions for any business communication problem. We talk about the importance of issues identification and defining goals in terms of optimal audience responses. We stress the equal importance of being clear about what one needs to say as well as packaging it in relationship to the needs, concerns, questions, interests, and sensitivities of the people to whom we need to say it.

Style

We provide students with feedback about the effectiveness of their communication style for business purposes. Academic style is not business style, and students learn that works in one context may not work in another. We spend significant time talking about and working on developing effective, robust sentence style that gets the message across quickly and clearly in both oral and written communications. While grammar is not the main focus of this course, we do a certain amount of review to highlight areas where usage mistakes are most common.

Written Communications

We look at a wide variety of business communication tools from basic letters, memos, emails, charts, tables, and work plans to news releases, brochures, backgrounders, resumes, cover letters, and other sales and marketing tools. We focus on the importance of attractive design, the use of graphic elements, as well as effective sequencing of content to achieve the desired audience response.

Oral Communications

Students are given the opportunity to participate in a variety of oral interpersonal situations from mock job interviews, to informal elevator pitches and coffee shop meetings to more formal individual or group presentations. Most instructors videotape student presentations to give students the opportunity to see themselves as others see them, and to give the instructor the opportunity to reinforce what they do well and suggest steps they can take to improve in their delivery style, the packaging of verbal content, and the development and effective use visual aids.

READINGS

This is a skills development course that is driven primarily by the classroom experience. Readings play an important but secondary role in supplementing the concepts and techniques taught in each instructor's class. In addition to the coursepaks prepared by each instructor the books that one can expect to find on individual instructor's readings are Usage books such as P.T. O'Connor's *Woe Is I*, Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*, or Lynne Truss's *Eats Shoots and Leaves*. Instructors also work with such practical desk references such as *The Gregg Reference Manual*, and the *Little Brown Handbook for Writers*, and Garr Reynold's *Presentation Zen*.

GRADING

Students will be tested on the conceptual material presented in class, but most of your grade will be weighted on performance in written and oral presentation performance opportunities.

INDIVIDUAL INSTRUCTORS' COURSE DESCRIPTION

BCMU 301 Course Description— Lee Hochberg

The objective of Business Communications 301 is to improve written and oral communication skills. Students learn appropriate style for written and oral reports in a business setting; refine techniques that make reports, emails, and other communications clear, concise, and effective; learn how to improve oral presentations with effective visuals; build confidence speaking before a group.

The class starts with basic writing review. Early in the quarter, the students assume the role of a new hire to a restaurant chain, charged with advising the restaurant owner on business strategy in these lean economic times. They write an informative report on problems facing the industry and possible solutions, and a persuasive report advising the owner how to proceed in these times. Later, they learn how to incorporate graphic elements into the report.

Meanwhile, they work on their oral presentation skills on various assignments. They practice voice control, enunciation, posture, eye contact and connection with audience, poise. Last quarter, a Microsoft product planner worked with them on PowerPoint skills.

During the second half of the quarter, students work as a group on the final presentation. This project combines business and public affairs; students prepare oral and written persuasive presentations on one of five controversial public issues. (Last quarter they included competing views on how to rebuild Seattle's Alaska Way Viaduct, competing views on the City of Seattle's proposed tax on plastic grocery bags, competing views on proposed state funding of financial aid for undocumented college students, and competing views on the City of Seattle's new requirement that restaurants provide nutritional information on customer menus.)

Students are required to make email contact with political and business leaders involved in these issues, arrange and conduct in-person interviews with these leaders, draft memos on the content of these interviews, send thank-you notes to the leaders, prepare a written persuasive argument based on their research, and deliver an oral persuasive report.

We hope this combination of exercises prepares students to effectively write and interact within the workplace, and effectively communicate with business and political leaders outside the university as well.

BCMU 301/302 Course Description—Jack Whelan

Business Communications is both about having good ideas and packaging them effectively for one's intended audience. My course is designed to teach students to work quickly and effectively to generate lively substantive content and to find the written or oral styles and forms best suited for its delivery to different business audiences.

In my experience most students are naturally better oral communicators than they are writers, so my course is designed to help students, first, work on improving their writing skills, and then, second to use that as a foundation to think about organizing and scripting effective oral presentations.

Overview

In the first third of the course I focus on problem solving and developing a strategic approach toward the solution of business communications problems. Student exercises and homework are designed to be instructional and diagnostic. I provide students with feedback about the effectiveness of their communication style for business purposes. We spend significant time talking about and working on developing effective robust sentence style for both oral and written communications that gets the message across quickly and clearly. I emphasize the importance of developing an effective, proactive business communications style, and with the help of P.T. O'Connor's *Woe Is I* focus on helping students to identify and correct common usage mistakes.

In the second third of the course, we look at several different strategies for different situations, whether the purposes are primarily informative or persuasive, whether building or improving one's resume, preparing for interview, or putting together a small-group presentation. The goal here is to give students tools that will give them the versatility they will need to deal with the myriad communications challenges they will confront on the job.

The last third of the course the focus moves to preparation of two major projects due toward the end of the quarter: the Press Kit and the Business Plan. Both projects are designed to give students the opportunity to pull together everything they have learned both on the written and the oral presentations side of the course:

Press Kit: Using software such as Microsoft Word and Publisher or Adobe InDesign and Photoshop, students will assemble several written and graphic elements in a press kit that comprises several elements among which are a cover letter, press release, brochure, backgrounder, biographical profiles, invitations, catalogues, flyers, testimonial sheets, multi-page website, etc., and in some cases a video presentation on a DVD. This is a project most students enjoy because it draws on their creative and design abilities, and several students in previous classes have used their press kit as a portfolio item when interviewing for a job.

Business Plan: This is a group oral presentation of a business plan to prospective investors, similar to the kind of presentation many students prepare for case competitions. This, too, is a fun project for business students because it gives them the opportunity to imagine the company of their dreams and then to use their business competencies and common sense to think through the nuts and bolts involved in the start up of such a company. Some students have gone on from this class to use their experience of creating this business plan to start similar businesses after graduation. But even if it remains just an exercise, it is an excellent opportunity for student to hone their skills in developing effective visual aids and

Evaluation and Grades

BCMU 301/302 Course Description—Jack Whelan (continued)

Diagnostic Exercises. Exercises given in the first half of the class are designed to be diagnostic and instructive. Students are asked to submit and redo homework assignments until they reach a B+ level of competency. Students are also given extra-credit opportunities for voluntary exercises, such as volunteering for role plays or scheduling and reporting on an information interview they have scheduled with a manager in the field.

Writing Skills. Students need to prove that they have grasped the conceptual material presented in the class and demonstrate competency in skills taught. They have the opportunity to do that in a graded homework assignment, a two-hour midterm, and the composition and design of several documents assembled in a press kit.

Oral Presentation Skills. Students are required to demonstrate the strategic thinking skills taught in class in a group presentation of a start-up business plan to prospective investors. The presentation requires students to think through every aspect of a business operation from identifying the market need to the development of a market strategy, as well as operations, revenue and expenses projections, and short and long term financing. But the bottom line is putting it together in an effectively packaged, compelling pitch to investors for the capital they need to begin.

BCMU 301 Course Description—Jessica Stone

Standard Course Objectives

To share with students effective methods of employing strategic thinking in all of their business communications including written work such as job bids, year-end reports, letters of dismissal, corporate memos and so forth, as well as oral communication such as project presentations, oral bids, classic “elevator pitches” and verbal confrontation with employees or employers, etc. Approximately 80% of the material shared with students is standardized across all of the BCMU sections. The remaining 20% of the course material is left to the strengths and areas of interest of individual instructors. In addition to describing some of the standardized material presented (during lectures, readings etc.) I’ve given a brief description of the 20% unique to the sessions of BCMU I currently teach. I should mention, however, that “unique” may not be a completely accurate term because BCMU instructors meet several times a term to exchange ideas and discuss teaching methodologies and we frequently “borrow” from the best of each other’s 20%. Also, please note that I use the term “we” to represent myself in collaboration with students and my colleagues in the program. We work as a team; we learn from each other.

Why Business Communication is a Vital Part of any Business School Curriculum

Regardless of the language in a typical standardized course description, Business Communication is much more than simply the study of constructing memos and learning to properly format letters. Humans use communication, in all its varied forms (written, spoken, and nonverbal), to achieve one major goal: to get what we want. We may want to be fed (a baby hollers at the top of his little lungs for food), we may want a promotion and a juicy raise (associates work 80 hour weeks for promotions) or we may want world peace (probably involves some hollering and a whole lot of over time). Regardless of our desires, we use communication to get what we want. Now, here’s the part where the study of communication (again in every form) becomes extremely valuable. Through the formal study of communication we can discover and understand which Communication Strategies are the most effective in insuring that we do, in fact, get what we want. And moreover, that we reach our goals in the most timely and cost efficient manner.

The Critical Element of Strategic Thinking in Business Communication

A savvy business person would not consider starting a business without first stating formal goals, evaluating the strategies available and selecting the best strategies for reaching those goals. The same is true for communication; a savvy communicator sets goals, examines available strategies and acts using the best strategies for the situation.

The most important goal of Business Communication 301 is to help students learn to think strategically as they plan and implement communication activities in the work place as well as in their day to day living. By the end of a full BCMU 301 course, students know how to analyze and employ the best communication strategies available for reaching their stated communication goals. To help students with this process the following pedagogical tools are employed:

Lectures, Readings, In-class Projects, Free-writes and Reading Out Loud, The Mentor Project, Analysis of Powerful Writing, Group Presentations (Informative and Persuasive)

Lectures

Lectures include topics such as how to correctly format written business communication, how to recommend and reprimand employees, how to diffuse a potential "crisis" in the workplace, how to deliver both good and bad news, how to terminate employees, how to conduct interviews (from both sides of the desk), how to over-come "writer's block" and "stage fright" and of course, the appropriate use of several major communication strategies such as correct use of tone, creating clarity and developing voice.

Readings

Excellent writers and speakers are also readers. In addition to reading and working with a grammar text, students are encouraged to read excellent communication: both written and verbal. This includes speeches, articles in top ranking business publications, business blogs and other relevant materials.

In-class Projects

Hands-on learning – immediately using what we've studied – helps to imprint material firmly in memory. Therefore, we use lecture material in immediate assignments during class (some written, others verbal). This calls on each member of the class to participate which serves a second purpose; to encourage and grow public speaking skills.

Free-writes and Reading Out-Loud

Free writing (some times called Timed writing) is an accepted, tried and true, method of helping to kick-start sluggish brains and turn on the flow of creativity that leads to clear, strategic thinking. Highly successful business people use this technique, prominent politicians use this technique, world leaders use this technique and we use this technique. Students are given a "Prompt" – a starting phrase – and then write for ten minutes without stopping. When the time is up, volunteers read their work out-loud. Again, this technique helps to get creativity and strategic thinking flowing and offers valuable public speaking practice in a safe and accepting environment.

The Mentor Project

This is a huge part of undergraduate education and something that may launch business careers. At the very least, it teaches students to conduct interviews, network and work within the business community. Each student finds a mentor, conducts a formal interview with that person, completes an assignment given by the mentor and accepts an evaluation provided by the mentor. There are several parts to this assignment and it is vital for students to keep pace with the class. This pacing teaches time management and self-discipline. Most students report finding this assignment the most difficult and the most rewarding of their junior/senior year.

Analysis of Powerful Writing

Both President Obama and Senator John McCain were asked (during the 2008 campaign) what character from literature inspired them most. Both of these intelligent, powerful men chose the protagonist in Ernest Hemingway's, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Both men noted that they learned strategy, courage, integrity and more from this protagonist. What makes powerful writing so powerful? Why do financial advisors read classic literature? Why do economists study prose? Why do presidential speech writers analyze poetry? The techniques, strategies, tactics of powerful writing can be applied to all forms of communication (from rap songs to the executive summary of a year-end financial report). Students study communication techniques leading to powerful writing; writing that they find moving – powerful – and then learn to apply those techniques to their own work.

Group Presentations – Informative and Persuasive

A well-organized business presentation is a delight to participate in and to observe. However things such as stage fright, poor presentation skills, weak group dynamics, lack of planning and lack of practice can destroy an otherwise fantastic presentation. We cover all these topics during class discussions and then, working in harmony with their team members, students present a dynamic and powerful presentation. This exercise will stay with students throughout their careers.

But wait, there's more...

In addition to the formal teaching techniques, students enjoy participating in the "BCMU Blooper Contest." On-going throughout the term – this project encourages students to look for errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, tone, voice and even clarity in public communication. These errors are recorded with cell phones (or simply cutting articles from magazines/newspapers etc.) and shared with the class on the final day of the session. The best "bloopers" receive wrapped prizes from the U.W. bookstores (books on writing or reference books).

Students also watch videos of major business and political speeches and analyze what worked and what didn't. When time permits, we view a popular video about a major U.S. writer (pop corn provided).

Again, Business Communication is much, much more than simply writing reports and memos. Business Communications 301 teaches students to write, speak and think strategically both within the workplace and in their day to day lives. This course is a critical step to the success of our future business leaders.