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Courses Help Non-Wordsmiths Excel in Business World

By BOB YOUNG
 Special Advertising Sections Writer

Professional writers aren't the only ones expected to craft clear, concise prose in the workplace. In many other positions, employees need to create e-mails, memos, reports and other written materials, and a lack of business-writing skills can impede their climb up the company ladder.

Business-writing courses can help put them on track.

Shirley Maxey, director of the Center for Management Communications at the Marshall School of Business at USC who has taught writing seminars for several companies, recently encountered such an employee at a Seattle public accounting firm.

Maxey was hired to lead a seminar at the firm and came in a day early to work with an employee who needed special attention.

"She was considered a rising star with great potential," Maxey said. "The only problem was that she had terrible writing habits, mainly with her e-mails. Her e-mails were long and wordy — a confusing stream of consciousness. [They were] incredibly disorganized and filled with personal asides."

After working one-on-one with Maxey and attending her regular three-day seminar, the employee improved considerably and started moving up in the company.

"Six months later, I heard she had been promoted to management," Maxey said. "Aside from interpersonal skills, I believe good writing ability is the most important skill you can have in the workplace."

Virtually anyone can benefit from taking business-writing courses, but those who work in technical or scientific



fields, or other careers that normally don't emphasize literary polish, often gain the most, according to Judy Shane, a business-writing instructor with UCLA Extension and a consultant who has taught workshops for several large corporations.

"Everyone can benefit on the job from improving their writing skills — from CEOs to customer service reps," she said. "But those who write least might need it most. I teach writing to graduate engineering students at UCLA — people who think in terms of abstract concepts and numbers — and they find that it greatly improves their performance."

After all, Shane asked, if you can't write a clear, concise e-mail or project summary, how will you communicate your technical expertise and skills?

Steven Cole, who is currently taking Shane's class, agreed. A pricing and proposal manager for air combat systems at Northrop Grumman in Los Angeles, Cole noticed that his job performance began to improve after the first class.

"The majority — about 80% — of my job responsibilities require me to work with numbers," he said. "I have to write short, intelligent paragraphs when presenting those numbers to upper management. Since the document will be reviewed by many different people, I need to make sure the information is clear and consistent."

Cole said he felt he needed help, so he enrolled at UCLA Extension, and his writing began to "tighten up" immediately.

"We reviewed methods for shortening and focusing each sentence," he said. "We also discussed the advantages of having sample or boilerplate letters that we can use as a starting point for sales letters, claim letters, acknowledgment letters, requests for information and response letters."

If English is second language

Another group that benefits greatly from business-writing classes are those who speak English as a second language.

Clare Tian, a physician from China who practices in downtown L.A., sees Shane's class as a ticket to a new position as a public policy health advocate.

"I became involved with the Children's Health Initiative, a program that aids the under-served population, and it requires a lot of project writing," she said. "I came here two years ago from China, and I have been working hard to improve my writing and communicating skills. My business-writing classes at UCLA had an immediate impact on my writing — mainly with organizing and



editing.”

Tian has taken six courses at UCLA Extension, which offers several business-writing classes.

Cal State Long Beach and Cal State Fullerton extensions also offer them on a rotating basis, while such local universities as USC and Azusa Pacific stress writing skills throughout their business programs.

The Center for Management Communications at USC was created to promote effective writing within the myriad programs in the Marshall School of Business.

Instructors utilize a variety of techniques and tools to teach business writing.

Maxey encourages her students to analyze their audiences, clarifying what they need to communicate and how they are going to do it before they write a single word.

“Who will be reading the document? What do they want and need to know? That’s what you need to ask yourself,” Maxey tells her students. “That will determine everything else. You must know the purpose of the document and then begin to organize the information in the most effective and concise way.”

Creating a ‘mind map’

Shane teaches a method that begins with a “mind map,” a diagram that the writer uses to identify a potential document’s central topic and then the facts and points that support the topic.

It’s a simple outline that provides a blueprint for the document, whether it’s a short e-mail to a client or a annual report to stockholders, she said.

“I tell them to think exactly what they need to accomplish with the document, then take a piece of paper and draw a circle in the middle,” Shane said. “Inside the circle they write the main subject of what they intend to write about. Then they draw lines radiating from the center to list important topics that support the subject.”

Each aspect of the main subject can have smaller sub-topics, which branch out like tree limbs, making an easy-to-follow map for the writer.

Then it’s time to write the first draft. This is followed by editing, checking grammar and spelling, and eliminating unnecessary words and sentences.

A daily newspaper is a good place to examine effectively organized writing, Maxey said. She often brings a copy of the Wall Street Journal or USA Today to her classes at USC to illustrate her points.

“Good business writing is very much like good journalism,” she said. “You put the big message up front, then you get into the most important supporting information, working down to the least important details. Newspapers teach writers to use clear sentences, to be as brief as possible, and use words everyone can understand.”

Watch out for e-mail

Rules and formats do differ, depending on the type of business writing. E-mail — the most informal office writing form — poses special challenges, Shane said.

“E-mail must be as concise as possible — more so than any other form,” she said. “Get immediately to the point and try to keep it to one paragraph. Use a separate paragraph for each point, and be very careful what you say. Always keep in mind that what you write in a company e-mail is kept in the system.”

Shane insists that her students run spell checks and grammar checks on their business e-mails, even copying the mail to a Word format simply to use its word-processor check functions.

“Keep in mind that co-workers will make a snap decision on whether to read your e-mail based on the subject line alone, so give that a lot of thought,” Maxey said. “You can’t take e-mail lightly. The woman I tutored [at the accounting firm] is a perfect example. She thought, ‘Well, this is just an e-mail.’”

“For her, learning to write effective e-mails was the main thing that won her a promotion to manager.”

Bob Young is a freelance writer based in Glendale.



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