

A Practical Approach to Teach Graduate Students to Write Persuasively for Business Decision Making

Lan Wu, lan.wu@csueastbay.edu*¹
Sweety Law, sweety.law@csueastbay.edu

Abstract

Effective writing skills are central in both business education and students' future professional assignments. Despite the importance of writing skills, our students do not write as well as we think they should (Kellogg & Raulerson 2007). In this paper, we introduce a practical approach to teach graduate students to write persuasively in a business decision context.

Two observations motivated this research. First, both authors teach marketing classes at the MBA level that require case study analyses involving decision making. More often than not, students ramble on about details or numbers in the cases without making clear decisions or providing convincing rationale for their decisions. Secondly, we teach on a university campus where students have to pass a Writing Skills Test (WST) in order to receive their degrees. The WST, 90 minutes long, consists of a persuasive essay that requires students to think and write critically. The pass rate for our graduate students is dismal, less than 50 percent. To solve these problems, we designed a writing workshop, aiming to help our graduate students persuasively express their business ideas. The workshop has been conducted twice in the winter and spring 2016 quarters.

The workshop was 1.5 day long with a week interval between the two dates. Most of the instructions were completed on the first day and we left students homework for the next three days; on the second day morning we provided constructive feedback on homework and also gave students an in-class timed writing assignment. During the workshop, we employed a variety of writing instruction practices, such as paired collaborative writing, student inquiry activity for writing, and providing models of good writing (Graham, 2010). By the end of the workshop, graduate students should be able to complete an 800-word persuasive essay in 90 minutes.

The following are a few important takeaways from the workshop. First, the area where our students need most help is how to structure a persuasive essay, especially under time pressure. We recommend a 7-paragraph structure: paragraph 1 explicitly

¹ Both authors contributed equally to this project.

states the thesis statement (with three reasons); paragraph 2 and 3 elaborate on reason 1 (the strongest reason); paragraph 4 and 5 elaborate on reason 2 and 3; paragraph 6 provides a counterargument; and paragraph 7 concludes the essay.

Second, to develop a clear thesis statement, students first need to explicitly express their view on the decision (e.g., expand or NOT expand the product line). Students often try to find a middle ground in writing when they are hesitant about their decision making, which causes undue confusion to the readers and therefore should be avoided. In addition, to help students finish the essay under time pressure, we recommended students use the explanatory thesis statements (vs. the analytical or argumentative thesis statements).

Finally, students have misconceptions about the counterargument process. They are well aware that business decisions have pros and cons and can easily come up with possible arguments against the thesis or some aspect of the reasoning. However, more importantly, writers should return to their thesis and reason about the proposed counterargument by refuting it or suggesting that it is relatively less important (Harvard College Writing Center, n.d.).

In total, 30 business graduate students attended the workshop with 14 showing up on both days. Pre- and post-workshop questionnaires, measuring students' perceptions about their writing ability and skills, were administered to the 14 students. Interestingly, students' perceptions on their writing hardly changed, except for one item, "I can write a well-organized and sequenced paper with effective introduction, body, and conclusion". After the workshop, students realized that they needed more training and practice on how to structure a persuasive essay.

Based on the post-workshop survey results, students' general evaluation of the workshop is overwhelmingly positive (mean= 5; on a 5-point scale, 1= "not helpful at all" and 5= "very helpful"). Responses to qualitative questions at the end of the questionnaire were consistent with the quantitative findings. For instance, "I thoroughly enjoyed the workshop" and "it is a pity that such a great effort does not have adequate advertisement among needy students". In summary, our graduate students need more instruction to write persuasively for business decision contexts. Through this project, we share our observations and a practical approach to solve the problem.

References

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: Graduate students need more instruction to write persuasively for business decision contexts. Through this project, we share our observations and a practical approach to solve the problem.

Author Information:

Lan Wu is an Associate Professor of Marketing at California State University, East Bay.

Sweety Law is a Professor of Marketing at California State University, East Bay.

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