

Defining and Assessing Written Communication Skills of MIS Students

Nabil Alghalith
Truman State University

The paper focuses on the development of a rubric for the assessment of written communication skills, which is mainly used for assurance of learning. The objectives are (1) to defined skill set formed a basis for common expectations related to written communication skills. (2) to use the Written Communication Rubric to measure student progress toward achieving these skills, (3) to help refine the instrument and the assessment process, (4) to identify areas of concern in written communication, and (5) to enhance the culture of assessment in the School of Business.

INTRODUCTION

School of Business Mission

We graduate prospective leaders who are ethical, broadly educated problem-solvers, effective team players, clear writers and articulate speakers.

We cultivate a community of learners by emphasizing

- A rigorous, broad academic experience
- Effective communication skills
- Highly selective admission of students primarily from the Midwest
- Teaching, while valuing applied and instructional scholarship and service

School of Business Objectives

In support of the School of Business's mission, the objectives of the business programs naturally involve students, curriculum, faculty and resources. Assessing the outcomes of objectives is necessary for accountability and continuous improvement.

Students are the focus of our educational institution. The student objectives of the business degree programs are:

- to attract and retain students with superior academic qualifications and demographic diversity comparable to the university's student population;
- to prepare students for business and professional positions in the public and private sectors;
- to graduate students qualified for admission to select professional or graduate programs;
- to prepare students for future leadership and service opportunities; and
- to assist in making career and educational decisions.

A curriculum provides the framework for educating young women and men to contribute to a global society in which diversity, changing technology and difficult ethical decisions are prevalent. The curriculum objectives of the business degree programs are:

- to offer business degrees that build upon a liberal arts and sciences foundation including calculus, statistics and foreign language. Specifically, the business programs will further develop written and oral communication, computer, quantitative, and critical thinking skills;
- to develop fundamental business knowledge in the areas of accounting, legal environment of business, organizational behavior, finance, marketing, production, information systems, economics and statistics which are integrated with the completion of a senior capstone course;
- to provide opportunities for students to study in the specialized areas of accounting, finance, management and marketing; and
- to increase study abroad and other institutional opportunities for business and accounting students.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the project are:

1. To defined skill set formed a basis for common expectations related to written communication skills.
2. To use The Written Communication Rubric to measure student progress toward achieving these skills.
3. To help refine the instrument and the assessment process.
4. To identify areas of concern in written communications.
5. To enhance the culture of assessment in the School of Business.

Writing Competencies

Quite often, a program's mission and learning objectives are so broad and lack precision that they are difficult to assess. For example, our school of business adopted a mission statement that included graduating clear writers as one of its goals. To make the goal assessable, the competencies that clear writers demonstrate had to be identified and described in measurable levels of performance. We identified three broad writing competencies:

1. Uses an organization pattern appropriate to the assignment,
2. Provides content and use of language appropriate to the audience and assignment, and;
3. Enhances readability by mechanical correctness, clarity, and use of language.

Descriptions of three levels of performance for each competency were developed. The levels were identified as novice/needs improvement, proficient, and advanced (See Appendix 1).

Using the organization competency as an example, novice-level performance exhibits a lack of skill. The purpose of the writing is not well defined; transitions and logical flow are weak or absent; and the conclusion is missing or incomplete. Proficient performance is characterized by a clear statement of purpose, seamless transitions and logic, and a satisfying conclusion. An advanced organizational pattern exhibits insightful or creative purpose, strong connections among ideas, and an enlightening, memorable conclusion. The two other written communication competencies have descriptive traits with similar hallmarks. In summary, novice performance is marked by an absence of skill, proficient performance is denoted by terms like adequate or proficient, and advanced performance is characterized by adjectives like creative, enlightening, innovative, original, and professional.

Limitations of Course-Embedded Assessments

If the course-embedded assessments come from courses taught by a small number of faculty members, these instructors may perceive that their teaching effectiveness is being evaluated. Such a perception may lead to resistance to the use of course-embedded methods. Recall that the literature suggests that direct assessment of writing should occur in a context specific situation like a class assignment. However, it is also possible that the assignments used for the course-embedded assessments may not prompt students to demonstrate each of the writing competencies. This has certainly been an issue with the research competency at the authors' institution.

The results from the course-embedded writing assessment can certainly provide a broad-brush perspective about the achievement of learning goals related to writing. For those faculty members who like "crunching" numbers, the lack of statistical analyses may lessen the credibility of the results. Qualitative assessments may be viewed as less precise or informative. Although the assessment results may signal the need for curricular or pedagogical changes, the information does not explicitly tell the faculty which changes to make or how to make needed changes to the curriculum. While responding to the signals from the assessment outcomes, faculty members draw upon professional experiences, the scholarship of teaching and learning, and other sources to develop and revise the curriculum and pedagogical approaches

RECOMMENDATIONS

Business graduates must possess and demonstrate proficient written communication skills, therefore, it is important that business schools take student learning seriously and be held accountable for developing of skills assessment plan.

The rubric should be fully explained and expectations should be communicated with students before the assignment of projects. Identify assessable learning objectives. Close the loop, collecting data from a course-embedded assessment method is not sufficient. The data must be converted to information that can guide decision-making and lead to action. Prior to using the course-embedded assessment rubrics, faculty members must be trained to appropriately rate student writing. Select assessment points. Many factors play into the decision about where and when to assess student writing.

REFERENCES

Alghalith, N., Blum, M., & Weber, S, (2004), Defining and Assessing Team Skills of Business and Accountancy Students. *Journal of College Teaching and Learning*, 1(11).

Arter, J. & McTighe, J. (2001). *Scoring rubrics in the classroom: Using performance criteria for assessing and improving student performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

English, D., Manton, E., & Walker, J. (2007). Human resource manager's perception of selected communication competencies. *Education*, 127(3), 410-418.

Swanson, J. & Swanson, N. (1990). The value of business communications as perceived by business administration graduates. *Journal of Education for Business*, 65, 168-171.

APPENDIX 1: WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS RUBRIC

Writer uses organization pattern appropriate to the assignment.				
1	1.5	2	2.5	3
Provides ill-defined purpose, illogical organization, inadequate transitions, and a conclusion that leaves readers hanging.		Expresses clear purpose, logical organization, appropriate transitions, and a conclusion that satisfies readers.		Conveys insightful purpose, organization that captures and maintains readers' interest, and an enlightening conclusion.

Depth of content.				
1	1.5	2	2.5	3
Makes no connections between main points, demonstrating only superficial understanding of topic. Readers gain little from paper.		Moves beyond surface understanding and makes connections among ideas. Appropriately applies course concepts.		Makes interdisciplinary or cross-functional connections or otherwise demonstrates original thought. Readers gain new insights.

Audience Awareness.				
1	1.5	2	2.5	3
Uses content, language, tone, or style that is inappropriate for intended readers.		Uses content, language, tone, and style that are appropriate for intended readers.		Conveys a strong sense of the intended readers through the use of appropriate content, disciplinary language, tone, and style.

For Research Papers and Reports

Citation and/or plagiarism				
1	1.5	2	2.5	3
Does not cite sources; plagiarizes the work of others		Appropriately cites sources.		Evaluates sources for bias and reliability.

Evidence of Research.				
1	1.5	2	2.5	3
Arguments are unsupported by current research.		Objectively advances arguments, providing both sides of issues, and supports arguments with sound, current evidence.		Discusses future implications or extends research findings.

Mechanical correctness.				
1	1.5	2	2.5	3
Displays many distracting errors in grammar, sentence structure, and/or spelling. Demonstrates little or no proofreading.		Displays a few minor errors in grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and/or spelling. Demonstrates proofreading.		Displays a virtually error-free paper, with an overall professional, polished appearance. Demonstrates careful proofreading.

Clarity, Conciseness, and Style.				
1	1.5	2	2.5	3
Uses overly-long sentences, redundant or vague words, or wordy phrases, making content difficult to understand. Demonstrates little or no editing and revising.		Presents information clearly and concisely. If appropriate, uses graphs and charts to help readers understand. Demonstrates editing and revising.		Enhances readability by use of language, and sentence structure and /or creative visual aids, resulting in heightening readers' interest and understanding.

Comments: _____

APPENDIX 1 cont.
WRITING COMPETENCY DESCRIPTORS

	Level	
Uses an organization pattern appropriate to the assignment.	1 (Novice/Needs Improvement)	Purpose is ill-defined. Organization is illogical or inconsistent and/or lacks adequate transitions among ideas. Conclusion does not summarize purpose and main points/reader left hanging
	2 (Proficient)	Expresses a clear, coherent statement of purpose, and how objective(s) will be achieved. Organized in a coherent, logical manner and provides adequate transitions among ideas. Contains a conclusion appropriate to the assignment. Writing is seamless and well integrated
	3 (Advanced)	Insightful, creatively presented purpose captures and maintains reader's interest. Organization contributes to full development of purpose. Provides an enlightening conclusion that exceeds requirements of the assignment
Provides content and use of language appropriate to audience and assignment.	1 (Novice/Needs Improvement)	Writer's sense of audience is unfocused, wavers or uses language or writing style inappropriate for intended audience. Inconsistent development of important issues and main points. Writer demonstrates superficial understanding of topic. Writing does not make connections among ideas. Appropriate citation of sources, content is free of plagiarism
	2 (Proficient)	Content, tone and language appropriate to audience and assignment. Moves beyond surface understanding and makes connections among ideas. Supports arguments with sound, current evidence and appropriately cites references. Demonstrates understanding of course concepts and appropriately applies them. Objectively advances arguments, providing both sides of the issues as appropriate to the assignment
	3 (Advanced)	Writer conveys a strong sense of audience through use of disciplinary language. Innovatively or expertly advances arguments with evidence of research findings and discusses future implications. Makes interdisciplinary or cross-functional connections that suggest the discovery of new information or new ways of understanding existing information. Writer demonstrates creativity and original thought.
Enhances readability by mechanical correctness, clarity, conciseness, and use of language	1 (Novice/Needs Improvement)	Writing contains errors in grammar, sentence structure, punctuation or spelling. Writer uses redundant words, vague words, or wordy phrases. Sentence structure makes reading difficult to understand.
	2 (Proficient)	Writer uses correct grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling. Overall, writing is clear and concise. Writer uses a format appropriate to the assignment. Content is appropriately supported by use of graphs and charts.
	3 (Advanced)	Readability is enhanced by choice of language and varying sentence structure. The overall document is polished and professional.