

BUSINESS, B-SCHOOLS FIGHT BAD WRITING

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CHICAGO -- Like a dark and stormy night, bad writing has long shadowed the business world – from bureaucratese to mangled memos to the cliché-thick murk of corporatespeak.

But in an era of nonstop e-mail and instant and text messaging, written communication skills within companies may be getting even worse as quality is compromised by the perceived need for speed.

Wary of the trend, not just businesses but business schools across the country are working harder to eschew obfuscation. Some have added or expanded writing programs in recent years; others use corporations' faux pas as case studies in hopes their students will learn to avoid them.

"It happens every day that businesses send bad messages," said Jim O'Rourke, a management professor at Notre Dame and director of the university's Fanning Center for Business Communication. "They send messages they don't intend."

Sometimes the message is just a case of execrable writing.

Dianna Booher, a communication training consultant for Fortune 500 clients, submits the following example from a company manager: "It is my job to ensure proper process deployment activities take place to support process institutionalization and sustainment. Business process management is the core deliverable of my role, which requires that I identify process competency gaps and fill those gaps."

Translation: I'm the training director.

In the words of former SEC Chairman Arthur Levitt, who led a campaign in the 1990s requiring "plain English" in corporate and mutual-fund prospectuses: "The prose trips off the tongue like

peanut butter."

But it's no longer just the inability to string clear, coherent thoughts together that poses the biggest risk. Rather, it may be clicking the "Send" button too hastily.

Business students got a prime example this year when [RadioShack](#) told about 400 workers by e-mail that they were being laid off immediately. "The work force reduction notification is currently in progress," the company told employees at its headquarters in Fort Worth, Texas, in August. "Unfortunately your position is one that has been eliminated."

An even more memorable case of bad corporate communication, involving an infamous memo sent by [Cerner Corp.](#) CEO Neal Patterson in 2001, is still providing learning material five years later.

Upset that the company's parking lot was less than full by 8 a.m. and emptied out around 5, Patterson sent out an angry e-mail berating employees for laziness and promising to fire managers in two weeks if they didn't shape up. He shut down the employee gym and said "hell will freeze over" before he would allow more benefits.

The e-mail was leaked and posted on the Internet, prompting the company's stock to plunge 22 percent in three days, although it recovered strongly and Patterson remains at the helm of the medical software designer today.

"Frequently e-mails are fired off with never a second thought – no proofreading," said O'Rourke. "And certainly the grammar of instant messaging and text messaging has intruded as well."

The Notre Dame center focuses on teaching students to say what they need to say in fewer

words, write at an appropriate conversational level, and organize it in a way that makes sense for the reader. It offers courses in management writing for MBA candidates and business writing for undergraduates.

“They have to focus on the needs of the reader,” O’Rourke said. “Otherwise, she won’t pay attention, she won’t do what you want, she won’t retain what you said.”

Plenty of experts share the belief that IM (instant messaging) creates or at least contributes to bad writing.

Tom Clark, an Xavier University business professor who also teaches writing skills at [Procter & Gamble Co.](#), says short communication is becoming the norm as more people derive their habits from instant-response communications media. That may be good news for those who abhor reading long documents but it’s not so great for quality writing reflective of long-term thinking, he observes.

“Young people are wrapped up in the speed with which they communicate rather than seeing writing as a reflection of their best selves,” he said.

Paula Hill-Strasser, an adjunct business professor at Southern Methodist University’s Cox School of Business, says even the brightest students seem to struggle more with writing than they used to. She suspects the lapses – such as constant use of “they” as a pronoun and writing paragraphs that run three-quarters of a page – are linked to young people’s increased multi-tasking and electronic distractions.

“For whatever reason, we are finding the business writing skill-set to be missing,” she said.

Trying to address the shortfall, SMU requires business students to write more company profiles and case studies than before.

But some experts say IM has gotten a bad rap in the office and defend it as a valuable business communications tool.

“The problem isn’t due to IM,” said Beth Hewett, a consultant on online and traditional writing programs. “Instead, I think that laziness and lack of understanding of formal business conventions are more responsible.”

Business students at Miami (Ohio) University’s Farmer School of Business work on rhetoric and are reminded to tailor their writing style to the purpose. They are told that conciseness and understanding one’s audience are more important than ever.

“People have been complaining about the quality of student writing since Plato,” said Kate Ronald, an English professor who runs the school’s Howe Writing Initiative. “But I think businesses are paying more attention to it. Businesses today are doing so much more writing, and doing it so much more publicly – because so much of the discourse is discussed on the screen rather than on paper.”

Some companies, Procter & Gamble notably among them, are working to correct bad writing habits with their own in-house writing courses.

But there still isn’t much of a market overall for business writing classes, according to Peter Handal, CEO of Dale Carnegie Training.

“I think that would suggest that people are just so happy to get the communications going that they aren’t spending the time on how to communicate,” he said.

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