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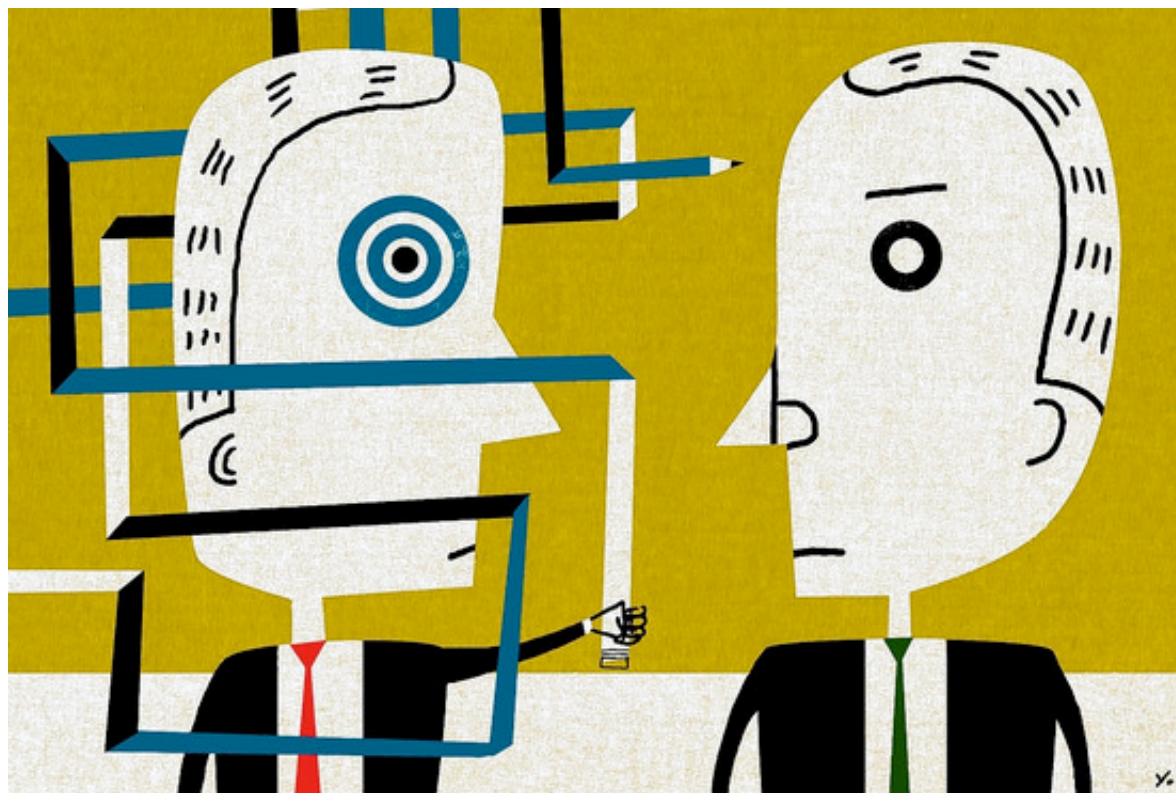
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Students Struggle for Words

Business Schools Put More Emphasis on Writing Amid Employer Complaints

By DIANA MIDDLETON



James Yang

Alex Stavros, a second-year student at the Stanford

Graduate School of Business, had been pitching an eco-tourism luxury resort idea to potential investors for months, but wasn't getting any bites.

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He noticed that investors lost interest after the first few minutes of his presentation, and were slow to reply to emails. So Mr. Stavros enlisted the help of one of Stanford's writing coaches for six weeks to help streamline his pitch. After the instruction, his pitch was whittled down to 64 words from 113, and he dropped three unnecessary bullet points.

"During my consulting career, each slide was a quantitative data dump with numbers and graphs, which I thought proved I had done the work," he says. "Now, my presentations are simpler, but more effective."

While M.B.A. students' quantitative skills are prized by employers, their writing and presentation skills have been a perennial complaint. Employers and writing coaches say business-school graduates tend to ramble, use pretentious vocabulary or pen too-casual emails.

Meanwhile, the Graduate Management Admission Council, which administers the Graduate Management Admission Test, says average essay scores on the GMAT fell to 4.4 out of 6 in 2010, from 4.7 out of 6 in 2007.

Writing quality is difficult to measure and it's unclear why it may be slipping. According to a GMAC spokesman, the drop in test scores may be partly attributable to an influx of international applicants taking the exam. In the 2009-2010 testing year, 136,918 international students took the GMAT, up 35% from 2007, GMAC says.

Sharon Washington, executive director of the National Writing Project in Berkeley, Calif., says U.S. high schools and undergraduate programs have de-emphasized writing instruction. "The good news about texting is that at least people are writing more," Ms. Washington says.

At employers' urging, many schools are taking steps to try to improve their students' writing. The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania plans to double its communication coursework to 12 classes starting in 2012. Last fall, all first-year students competed in a mandatory writing competition, which asked students to write short pieces in response to prompts. It will become a fixture in the new curriculum.

The University of Rochester's Simon Graduate School of Business hired two writing coaches last fall after employers complained about graduates' writing skills, says dean Mark Zupan.

And Northeastern University's College of Business Administration also ramped up its focus on writing instruction last fall: Many students' papers are now double-graded by the professor and the writing coach.

Former Securities and Exchange Commission chairman [Arthur Levitt](#), long an advocate of "plain English" in business and government, says business writing is usually incomprehensible to readers. "It lacks color and nuance, and it's not terribly interesting to read," he says.

M.B.A. students often have to unlearn bad behavior, such as using complicated words over simple ones, says Carter Daniel, business communication programs director at Rutgers Business School. Students might use the word "edifice" instead of "building," for example.

One of the shortest writing assignments at Northeastern is one of the most frequently bungled. For the Marketing and Customer Value class students must write, in fewer than 150 words, a compelling email convincing executives to implement a marketing and pricing strategy.

Students rarely get to the point, says Bruce Clark, writing coordinator for the M.B.A. program. "The first

sentence should begin with, 'The single most important issue here is.' You'd be amazed how few students do that," he says.

Writing affects students after they graduate, too. According to managers at packaged food company [General Mills Inc.](#), which hires roughly 50 M.B.A. graduates a year, business-school graduates are data-savvy but don't always communicate marketing research effectively.

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Most writing is taught by English departments, who require a certain number of words, have all writing assignments about novels, and reward flowery prose. Business writing has to be completely different; very direct and to the point. So even those people with "good writing skills" in high school and college will have to unlearn their style when they move into the business world.

—Jan Lystad

New M.B.A. hires "tend to talk about their analytical methods to show they are good at their jobs," says Angela Rassi, a marketing manager on General Mills' recruiting team. "What we really want to talk about are the implications of the research."

M.B.A. students are often challenged when they have to adapt their writing for multiple audiences, says Keisha Smith, global head of recruiting for investment bank [Morgan Stanley](#). Research associates are encouraged to develop their own voice when writing opinionated recommendations on stocks, but they sometimes have trouble presenting information in emails to clients. Some tend to write long emails when only a short list is needed, she says. At Morgan Stanley, managers look over new hires' emails before they're sent out to clients, she says.

Writing is also closely monitored at consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton Inc., where new hires fresh out of business school aren't permitted to work on a written proposal alone until they have perfected the craft, says Chris Carlson, senior associate for university recruiting. And while new M.B.A. hires exchange upwards of 200 emails a day, he still spots some that read like text messages. "They're not in complete sentences," he says.

At Rochester, the writing classes are not given grades. Students are given either a passing or failing mark. "I have mixed feelings about the fact that it's pass or fail," says Rochester student Jonathan Han. "On one hand, it eases the stress of having to do perfectly on every assignment, but it reduces the incentive to take it as seriously."

Not all students view writing coaching as important. When Cornell University's Johnson Graduate School of Management offered a choice of electives to its executive M.B.A. students, it offered a writing class, as well as an oral communication class. While students jumped at the speech class, not enough students signed up for the writing class for the school to offer it, says Douglas Stayman, associate dean for M.B.A. programs.

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