

# THE WRITING INSTRUCTOR'S TOOLKIT

A resource for users of  
*Foundations of Business Communication: An Integrative Approach*  
by Dona J. Young

## Welcome to the Writing Instructor's Toolkit

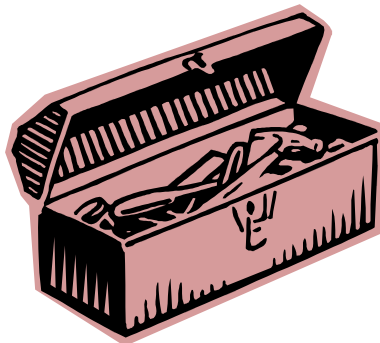
Welcome to the first edition of the *Writing Instructor's Toolkit*, a quarterly e-mailing for instructors using *Foundations of Business Communication, An Integrative Approach*. In these newsletters, you can expect information to assist you in implementing the *Foundations* approach in your classroom. You will find a review of relevant literature, discussion of communication and writing topics, learning activities that you can use in the classroom, and more.

This first newsletter gives you a variety of business writing and communications topics. The first article contains facts about the state of business writing in the corporate world today. The statistics may help your students understand how good writings skills can have a critical impact on their job search, thereby motivating them to develop their writing skills with more enthusiasm. The piece on micromessages is an insightful activity that you can introduce anywhere in the curriculum to help students focus on an often overlooked aspect of communication. You can use the short piece on being prepared for meetings as a lead-in to showing how everyone can improve on their note-taking skills. Finally, the

information on neologisms can provide your students with a bit of fun and information at the same time.

Here are some questions you can expect answered: *What kind of writing skills does business expect? How does a micromessage affect communication in the office? What are some good tips for note-taking?*

*Foundations of Business Communication* will have a companion text in Business English, which will be available in 2008. Watch this space for more information as this exciting project develops.



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## The Bottom Line: Businesses Pay Dearly for Poor Writing Skills

In a New York Times article entitled, *What America Can't Build: A Sentence*, corporations discuss their frustrations with workplace writing skills. Writing teachers may want to convey these outcomes to their students.

The National Commission on Writing surveyed human resources directors at 120 American corporations. They concluded that *one-third of employees in the nation's blue-chip companies wrote poorly*. Some of their greatest frustrations relate to e-mail. Poor writing skills “has companies tearing their hair out,” with companies spending \$3.1 billion a year on remedial training.

*Companies want to hire people who can write clearly*, and many employees and applicants fall short of that standard. According to the Commission, the problem shows up not only in e-mail but also in reports and other texts. However, e-mail offenses seem to be among the most grievous.

Unintelligible e-mail messages lead to requests for clarification, but the requests are often written as poorly as the original message. The result is confusion. Employees mistakenly use the same tone and language for business e-mail as they do with their personal e-mail—this includes using emoticons, nonstandard punctuation, jargon, abbreviations, all capital letters, and multiple exclamation points, to name a few issues.

Among the Commissions other findings:

- Writing is a “threshold skill” for both employment and promotion, particularly for salaried employees. Half the companies take writing into consideration when hiring professional employees.
- Employees who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion.
- 65 percent of salaried employees in large American companies have some writing responsibility.
- 80 percent or more of the companies in the service and finance, insurance, and real estate sectors assess writing during hiring.
- Half of all companies take writing abilities into account when making promotion decisions.
- More than half of all responding companies report that they frequently or almost always produce technical reports, formal reports, memos, and correspondence.
- Communication through e-mail and PowerPoint presentation is almost universal.
- More than 40 percent of responding firms offer or require training for salaried employees with writing deficiencies.

The corporations surveyed were in the mining, construction, manufacturing, transportation, finance, insurance, real estate and service industries, but not in wholesale, retail, agriculture, forestry or fishing, the commission said.

## Student Activities

### Explore

Read the statistics from the above article to your students or print it out and have them read it. Break your students into small groups of two or three and give them a few minutes to explore what this article means to them as individuals. What do they need to do to get ready for their job search and careers? Do they each have a plan for improving skills that may be lacking? Bring them back together as a class and ask each group to share any insights they may have gained.

## Student Activities, continued

### Practice

Use the handout below for a quick exercise. Break students into groups of two or three and have them to translate the e-mail messages into intelligible messages. (Most students will find that the message contained in question No. 3 is not translatable.)

Discuss the problems with the message, and then discuss what the response to such a message might be. This is a great way to emphasize the importance of writing clear and concise e-mail messages.

## Handout

**Instructions:** Rewrite the following e-mail message into clear and appropriate business communications.

1.

E-mails - that are received from Hans and I are not either getting open or not being responded to. I wanted to let everyone no that when Hans and I are sending out e-mails (example- who is to be picking up parcels) I am wanting for who ever the e-mail goes to to respond back to the e-mail. Its important that Jim and I knows that the person, intended, had read the e-mail. This gives an acknowledgment that the task is being completed. I am asking for a simple little 5 sec. Note that says "ok", "I got it", or Alright."

2.

hI CARINA i am sending u the assignmnet again. i had sent you the assignment earlier but i didnt get a respond. If u get this assgnment could u please respond . thanking u for ur cooperation.

3.

I updated the Status report for the four discrepancies Morrie forward us via e-mail (they in Barry file).. to make sure my logic was correct It seems we provide Murray with incorrect information ... However after verifying controls on JBL - JBL has the indicator as B ???? - I wanted to make sure with the recent changes - I processed today - before Murray make the changes again on the mainframe to 'C'.

## Micromessages in the Workplace

At a 2005 Business Communications conference, Barbara Davis and Bobbie Krapels reminded us of the importance of micromessages in the workplace. Though this topic has been around since the 1960s, many of us may not be familiar with it; the topic gives insight into understanding and dealing with mixed messages. Micromessages are the silent “subtle, semiconscious, universally understood behaviors that communicate to everyone what the speaker really thinks.”



The phrase “reading between the lines” aptly describes micromessages, which can either lead to microadvantages (positive results) or microinequities (negative results). The target of a microinequity feels the repercussions strongly, but others do not necessarily feel the slight or even understand it. That’s because the microinequity is difficult to verbalize and deal with professionally.

For example, let’s say that you have worked in an office for five years and human resources has just posted your dream job. As you return to your desk, your co-worker Pat pulls you aside to tell you that your boss recommended that Pat apply for the position. That was a week ago, and your boss has not said anything to you about it. Was there a micromessage to you? If so, what was the micromessage? Was it a microadvantage or microinequity?

Clearly, micromessages can be powerful and lead to serious communication issues.

Microinequities often relate to discrimination in the workplace because they often occur when people are perceived as being different on the basis of race, gender, or culture. Diversity consultant Stephen Young suggests the following four-step approach to dealing with microinequities using the acronym TALK: (2)

1. Talk to yourself and decide if the problem is really a misunderstanding.
2. Approach the person about the perceived inequality.
3. Listen to the person and let him or her explain the perceived problem.
4. Keep communication open.

Keep in mind that the person sending the micromessage is not necessarily aware of it. Regardless, being treated unfairly is a personal as well as professional issue. Most companies take diversity issues seriously because they have a negative impact on employee morale, the corporate culture, and the company’s bottom line.

## Student Activities

### Explore

After you discuss the above piece, break your students into teams of two or three participants. Each student should identify a situation which involved a micromessage. The group should discuss one micromessage at a time discuss whether it led to a microinequity or microadvantage. How did the student handle the situation? What would the student do differently if confronted with the same type of micromessage again?

You can find more information on micromessages in Chapters 6 and 8 in *Foundations of Business Communication*.

(Sources: Barbara Davis and Bobbie Krapels, “Micromessages in the Workplace,” Association for Business Communication, 2005 Spring Conference, Greensboro, NC and Management News, The DNA of Culture Change, <http://www.diversityjournal.com/pdf/micro2.pdf>.)

## Prepared for Meetings?

Also revealed in the Harris Interactive survey described above was information about what items employees typically bring with them to business meetings:

<b>Writing instruments:</b>	<b>81%</b>
<b>Ballpoint pen:</b>	<b>68%</b>
<b>Pens:</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Pencils:</b>	<b>31%</b>
<b>Highlighter:</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Felt pens:</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Markers:</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>Legal pads:</b>	<b>47%</b>
<b>Meeting agendas:</b>	<b>37%</b>
<b>File folder with documents:</b>	<b>35%</b>
<b>Notebook:</b>	<b>32%</b>
<b>Organizer/appointment book:</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Electronic device (PDA, laptop):</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>Stenographer's pad:</b>	<b>17%</b>



For a class activity, conduct an informal poll to see who brought what writing instrument to class, and what types of paper they use for taking notes. Ask students to discuss what they bring (or would bring) with them to a business meeting. Note from the figure above that 19% of the respondents did not bring any writing instrument with them to meeting.

If your students need a review, go over the following piece on note-taking. Guide students to understand that arriving at a meeting or a class without adequate supplies can lead to poor results.

For more on planning and preparing for business meetings, see Section C in Chapter 6 of *Foundations of Business Communication*, an Integrative Approach, pages 205-210.

## Tips on Taking Notes

A recent survey on note-taking conducted by Harris Interactive for office supplies manufacturer Mead Westvaco revealed the following about Americans' note-taking habits:

- Legal pads are the most popular bound product for business notes.
- Notebooks, memo pads, and loose sheets are used most often for personal notes.
- Employees do 60 percent of their business note-taking at their desks; most use legal pads for notes, while electronic devices (computers, PDAs) are second.
- The average business note-taker uses several different products for note-taking: 72 percent of legal pad users report using them for half of their business note-taking.
- 80 percent of business note-takers use one notebook or pad for multiple projects/topics



Note-taking is a skill to be mastered through practice and discipline. Effective notes can be as invaluable a tool in scholastic settings as they are in the business world.

## Student Activities

### Explore

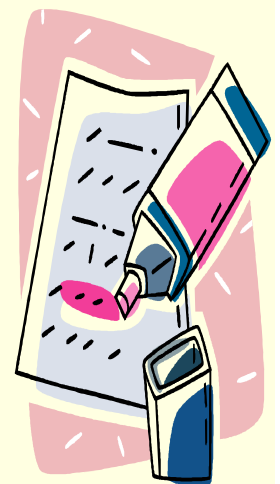
Brainstorm with your class to develop a list of helpful note-taking tips. (A list of sample responses appear below). Discuss with your students whether or not they feel taking notes helps them in their studies.

### Practice

Do a 5- to 10-minute focused writing exercise on the topic of taking notes. Ask students to describe the methods they use for taking notes and for reviewing notes.

### NOTE-TAKING TIPS

- ✦ Have two pens and a notebook or legal pad for taking notes.
- ✦ Begin a new page of notes for each meeting or session.
- ✦ Write the date and the topic at the top of every page.
- ✦ Write additional notes directly on handouts.
- ✦ Don't try to take down every word the speaker says. Focus on recording main points, key ideas or concepts, and important details.
- ✦ Ask questions if permitted.
- ✦ Note the content of visual aids such as posters, transparencies, and slide shows.
- ✦ Read your notes within 24 hours, highlighting major points.
- ✦ Type your notes.



## Lesson: Two Column Note-Taking System



The two column note-taking system, also known as the Pauk method (named for its developer, Walter Pauk, director of the Cornell Reading Center), calls for note-takers to review their notes immediately after a lecture or meeting and to pull out key words.

The process is described below:

1. Record your notes on the right-hand side of your page, leaving a 2½-3-inch margin on the left side of the page.
2. Record notes in paragraph form rather than outline form.
3. Paraphrase what is said, recording main ideas, facts, details, and examples. Use any abbreviations and symbols you are comfortable with to save time and to allow yourself more time to focus on the lecture.
4. When reviewing your notes, refine them:
  - Check to ensure you have all the dates, terms, names, and details you will need to master the information.
  - If you find you are missing information, now is the time to plug the holes. Fill in any information that you missed during lecture
  - Use highlight or underline as you read to mark key words and paragraphs.
  - Look for patterns in the information that might help you recall key facts.

Of course, in a business environment, notes are not being taken for the purpose of studying for a test, so business note-takers might stop at Step 4 and file their notes in the appropriate drawer for later reference. For students or anyone else who needs to internalize the information in the notes they take:

5. Use the left side of the page for the following:
  - Copy key words highlighted on the right-hand side of the page.
  - Write short phrases that will help you recall important ideas or facts from the material on the right-hand side of the page.
  - Write questions that are answered by the material on the right-hand side of the page.
6. Review notes by reciting information on left-hand side of the page and by reviewing key words.
7. Use the questions on the left-hand side of page as study questions. Cover the right side and read out loud the questions you created and answer the questions.
8. Set the notes aside, reflect a moment, and write a quick paragraph about the material.
9. **OPTIONAL, BUT POTENTIALLY HELPFUL:** Compare notes with another student, preferably someone with good study habits.

## Neologisms or What Makes a New Word New?

"Yesterday's neologisms, like yesterday's jargon, are often today's essential vocabulary."

– Academic Instincts, 2001

A **neologism** is a recently created word or phrase. Neologisms can apply to new concepts or they can reshape the meanings of existing words and phrases to give them new cultural context.

Because these words are new, they are often easily attributable to a specific source, though they have not yet made it into the pages of the dictionary. The word *neologism* was coined around 1800; for some time in the early 19th Century, the word "neologism" was itself a neologism until it became an accepted term.

Neologisms can be divided into three categories, unstable, diffused, and stable:

- Unstable:** Extremely new, being proposed, or being used only by a very small subculture.
- Diffused:** Having reached a significant audience, but not yet having gained acceptance.
- Stable:** Having gained recognizable and probably lasting acceptance.

Neologisms tend to occur more often in cultures which are rapidly changing, and also in situations where there is easy and fast propagation of information. They are often created by combining existing words (*lightsaber, soccer moms*) or by giving words new and unique suffixes (*posterized*) and prefixes (*prequel, pro-choice, pro-life*). Neologisms can also be created through abbreviation (*e-marketing*) or acronym (*radar, laser*), by intentionally rhyming with existing words or simply through playing with sounds (*phishing, badonkadonk*). Neologisms can also be phrases (*jump the shark*) and the product of purely humorous speculation.

Readers of the Washington Post Annual Neologism contest (2006) provided some humorous, newly coined terms of their own:

1. **coffee**, *n.*: the person upon whom one coughs.
2. **flabbergasted**, *adj.*: appalled over how much weight you have gained.
3. **abdicate**, *v.*: to give up all hope of ever having a flat stomach.
4. **gargoyle**, *n.*: olive-flavored mouthwash.
5. **balderdash**, *n.*: a rapidly receding hairline.
6. **frisbeetarianism**, *n.*: the belief that, when you die, your Soul flies up onto the roof and gets stuck there.

Neologisms either become accepted parts of the language or they disappear from common usage. Whether a neologism continues as part of the language depends on many factors, probably the most important of which is acceptance by the public. Acceptance by linguistic experts and incorporation into dictionaries also plays a part, as does whether the phenomenon described by a neologism remains current, thus continuing to need a descriptor. When a word or phrase is no longer "new," it is no longer a neologism. Neologisms may take decades to become "old," though; cultural acceptance probably plays a more important role than time in this regard. On the next page is a list of recent neologisms.

## Recent Neologisms

**anthropocene**, *n.* the present geological period, characterized by humanity's effects on global climate and ecology.

**critter label**, *n.* a wine label that includes a depiction of an animal. **critter-labeled** *adj.*

**more cowbell**, *idiom.* something extra that will take a project or endeavor to a higher level.

**gamer shame**, *n.* feelings of embarrassment or guilt caused by an obsession with computer games.

**megadiversity**, *n.* a large number and wide range of species; exceptional biological diversity. **megadiverse**, *adj*

**office spouse**, *n.* a co-worker with whom one has a very close but nonromantic relationship. Also: **workplace spouse**.

**season creep**, *n.* earlier spring weather and other gradual seasonal shifts, particularly those caused by global climate change.

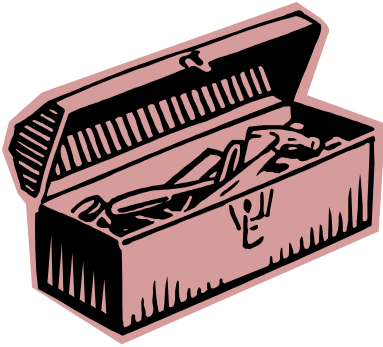
**social jet lag**, *n.* tiredness and disorientation caused by forcing one's body to sleep at unnatural times because of work commitments. Also: **social jet-lag**, **social jetlag**

**spime**, *n.* a theoretical object that can be tracked precisely in space and time over the lifetime of the object. [Blend of *space* and *time*.]

**unbreed**, *n.* a dog of uncertain pedigree; a mutt.

[Sources: Wordspy.com at [www.wordspy.com/waw/garber-marjorie.asp](http://www.wordspy.com/waw/garber-marjorie.asp), accessed April 28, 2006]

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Send a question directly to Dona by clicking "Ask the Author" on the Web site at <http://www.mhhe.com/djyoung>



"American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. Although many models of effective ways to teach writing exist, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years. Writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom. Of the three 'Rs,' writing is clearly the most neglected."

-- *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution. National Commission on Writing*

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COMMUNICATION

An Integrative  
Approach

Dona J. Young