Writing Required in Graduate Courses in Business Administration

GRACE CANSECO and PATRICIA BYRD
Georgia State University

The increasing proportion of graduate students to undergraduate students in ESL academic preparation programs in the United States suggests that more information is needed about language use in graduate courses. This article reports on the characteristics of writing assignments found in syllabuses for graduate courses in business. First, the types of writing assignments and the vocabulary used to label those assignments are analyzed and discussed. Second, the use of *prompts* to guide the writing of the assignments is examined. Finally, implications are suggested for ESL writing courses for nonnative speakers who are planning to enter (or already attending) U.S. graduate degree programs in business.

Two trends are now coming together with profound implications for the curricula of university-based ESL programs in the United States. First, more institutions are deciding to move ESL into their academic programs and are offering credit for ESL (Byrd & Fox, 1988). The result is that ESL programs and their courses need to be reconsidered to be sure that they articulate effectively with the next level of courses beyond ESL.

Another trend has fewer undergraduates coming to the United States to study. In ESL programs as well as in degree programs in U.S. universities, the proportion of foreign graduate students to foreign undergraduate students is increasing (Kaplan, 1988; *NAFSA Newsletter,* 1989; Swales & Cukor-Avila, 1989; Zikopoulos, 1986, p. 1). Foreign students have a greater impact on U.S. graduate programs than they do on undergraduate programs: In 1985-1986, foreign students made up 8.7% of all graduate students in the United States (Zikopoulos, 1986, p. 1). In that same time period, foreign students made up 2.7% of the total U.S. student population. Compared with 1984-1985, the 1985-1986 foreign student enroll-ment at the bachelor's level dropped 5.7%, whereas at the graduate level it increased 8.0% (Zikopoulos, 1986, p. 1). This trend continued

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in 1987-1988 with undergraduate enrollment decreasing 3% and graduate enrollment growing by 7% *(NAFSA Newsletter,* 1989, p. 3).

The increasing numbers of graduate students and their relative importance to our academic institutions mean that we need to look carefully at how language is used in graduate education to be certain that we are providing appropriate preparation in ESL courses. The authors' experience has been that writing required of graduate students is significantly different from that required of undergraduates, especially in freshman and sophomore courses, but little research has been done in the area.

Most studies, such as Zemelman (1977), Johns (1981), Eblen (1983), Herrington (1985), and Faigley and Hansen (1985), have presented information on undergraduate writing. Horowitz (1986) sought information on both graduate and undergraduate courses in different disciplines at one institution; however, he received information about only one graduate course. West and Byrd (1982), whose findings are referred to later in this article, surveyed graduate engineering faculty about writing assignments.

THE STUDY

To find out more about the writing tasks assigned to graduate students in U.S. universities, we sought syllabuses from the graduate courses taught in the College of Business Administration at Georgia State University (GSU) in the winter quarter of 1988.

In U.S. universities, course syllabuses are the fundamental source of information for students enrolled in those courses. Syllabuses are part of the collection of official documents (such as the institution's catalog, admissions documents, and other official documents relating to admission, progress through the system, and graduation) that make up the contract between students and the institution (J. Marshall, personal communication, September 21, 1988). Typically, a syllabus is expected to contain the following information:

1. Name/number of course
2. Time/place of class meetings
3. Instructor's name/office number
4. Information about office hours of instructor
5. Prerequisites for the course
6. Course objectives and an outline of course content
7. Course description and rationale for course (sometimes the wording from the institution's catalog is given)

8. Explanation of grading system (or evaluation process) —test dates are often given

9. Required textbooks

10. Class schedule (topics for discussion, assignments, due dates, and so forth)

11. Rules of the institution/instructor (about attendance, plagiarism, cheating, and so forth)

Many instructors include a detailed class-by-class chart of reading assignments and lecture topics. Reading lists are also often included as part of the syllabus. Course syllabuses can be as short as 1 page but more often are 4 or 5 pages long (the longest that we received as part of this project was 15 pages).

Because of indications that writing requirements change from one academic discipline to another (Shih, 1986), it seemed advisable to start with detailed studies of one academic area rather than looking immediately at writing across the institution. We decided to focus on the writing required in business, since approximately 18.9% of all foreign graduate students in the United States in the 1986-1987 academic year were studying in management and business (Zikopoulos, 1986, p. 1). This number continues to increase as business gradually nears engineering as the most popular major for foreign students in U.S. universities *(NAFSA Newsletter,* 1989, p. 3).

In the winter quarter of 1988, we requested copies of course syllabuses for the 133 sections of the 84 different graduate courses being taught in the six departments in GSU's College of Business Administration with the largest enrollments of foreign graduate students—accounting (AC), computer information systems (CIS), decision sciences (DSC), finance (FI), management (MGT), and marketing (MK). These syllabuses also included those from courses labeled Business Administration (BA); these are general business courses taught by faculty from the various departments in the college. Ultimately, we received a total of 55 course syllabuses from 48 different graduate courses. (Twelve of the syllabuses given to us were dated for previous terms, but we were led to understand that the information in such syllabuses was current. No syllabus was more than 1 year old at the time it was given to us.)

Types of Writing Assignments and Vocabulary Used to Describe Writing Tasks

These syllabuses were analyzed to find what writing assignments were listed and what requirements were given for the final written

products. *Writing assignment* was defined as any assignment that required students to produce a piece of written English to be given to the instructor. Thus, written tests were included, but oral reports were not. (Many students could be expected to prepare written versions of these oral presentations, but the writing was not collected by the instructor as part of the grading process for the course.)

Seven categories of writing assignments were found in the syllabuses: examinations, problems and assignments, projects, papers, case studies, reports, and a group of miscellaneous writing assignments. A single syllabus could require two or more writing tasks—for example, an examination along with a research paper.

By far the most frequently required type of writing was the examination: 52 of the courses required final examinations (see Table 1). Problems and assignments—written versions of problems

TABLE 1
Writing Assignments Given in Each Department

Type of writing assignment	AC ($n = 7$)	BA ($n = 18$)	CIS ($n = 11$)	DSC ($n = 6$)	FI ($n = 5$)	MGT ($n = 6$)	MK ($n = 2$)
Exams	7	18	11	5	4	6	1
Problems and assignments	1	8	5	4	1	2	1
Projects	5	3	3	4		4	1
Papers	2	3	3		1	1	
Case studies	2	7	1		1	1	
Reports	1	4	1	1	1	1	1
Miscellaneous	2	4	4	2	3	1	

Note: AC = accounting; BA = business administration; CIS = computer information systems; DSC = decision sciences; FI = finance; MGT= management; MK = marketing; n = number of syllabuses from each department.

in the textbook or other problems provided by the instructor—were the second most frequently required type of writing.

Projects were clearly more popular than papers or reports—20 syllabuses assigned projects, 10 assigned papers, and 10 assigned reports. Thirteen of the projects involved small-group or teamwork approaches to the assigned research and writing tasks, such as that described in the syllabus for MK 935, Research Seminar in Marketing:

> You will be expected to participate in an on-going research project and to report analysis of data back to the seminar. Quite likely, the source of these data will be surveys completed by faculty members in our department. You will probably be working in groups of two or three.

The goal here should be that of a complete research article which may be submitted to a journal or convention. You and your group members will also serve as "reviewers of papers prepared by others."

The 12 case studies in this analysis include only those that had to be presented in written form; case studies were also discussed in many classes without any writing being required. The category of miscellaneous encompasses a wide variety of writing tasks that were each listed on five or fewer syllabuses: outlines, surveys, business plans, audits, critiques, evaluations, Lotus forecast models, diaries, project proposals, and political polls.

That five instructors required outlines for papers or projects suggests that outlining is seen as a basic skill expected of graduate students. Further investigation of the use by graduate instructors of outlines—and their attitudes and expectations about that prewriting task—would be helpful in making decisions about teaching a skill that has fallen in some disfavor among ESL composition instructors.

Table 1 indicates that although an individual department might show a slight preference for a particular type of written work, students can expect many types of writing to be required in any department. Even the quantitatively oriented Department of Computer Information Systems included all possible categories.

It will not be surprising to members of the U.S. academic community that we found wide variety in the vocabulary used to describe the writing tasks. We think, however, that awareness of this diversity in vocabulary could be useful for ESL teachers in the preparation of instructional materials for nonnative-speaking graduate students. For example, the terminology for examinations included *final exam, exam, review exam, makeup exam, written examination, midterm exam, midterm examination, examination, test, objective test, class test, final test, final, midterm, take home exam,* and *quiz.* (The only uses of the term *make-up exam* were in policy statements to make it clear that no such tests would be given. *Quiz* was primarily used in business mathematics courses such as BA 605, Probability and Statistical Inference for Managers, and BA 601, Linear Algebra and Calculus for Managers.)

The use of the word *project* needs further clarification, since the products described in the syllabuses could in other contexts have been termed *papers.* In the syllabus for CIS 859, Information Systems and Competitive Strategy, the instructor used *paper* in the heading Requirements of the Paper but then used *project* immediately under that heading in the discussion of the product to be provided by the student writer. (In addition to plain *projects,* other terms used included *class project, term project, minor project,*

major project, regression project, library research project, and *research project.)*

The Use of Prompts

In addition to analyzing the types of writing assignments and terms used to describe them, we also looked for what Horowitz (1986) termed *prompts,* detailed explanations by the instructor of the content and organization expected in the written product. Since his sample was so small, Horowitz could only suggest that prompts seemed to be a characteristic of academic writing assignments. An example of our use of the term *prompt* is the statement from AC 803, Tax Research, shown in Figure 1. In this statement, the instructor gives explicit details about the writing assignment, focusing primarily on the form in which the writing must be presented, including documentation and information about the audience to be assumed for the written product.

FIGURE 1
An Example of a Prompt Specifying Format

A. All written assignments must be well organized, presented in an easy-to-read format, and neat. If your handwriting is not legible, type the written assignments. Moreover, pay particularly close attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation, and understandability. Communication is extremely important in this course.
B. Documentation is likewise very important. Unsupported statements or opinions are worthless to the reader who desires to verify your findings. Complete and specific documentation is mandatory. For example, do not write 864 when you actually want to direct the reader to 864(c)(4)(C). Also, your references should be to primary sources, except in rare, unusual situations.
C. Quoting should be kept to an absolute minimum!
D. Assume for each assignment that you have been given research to do on behalf of a client. The information you prepare will be used by your supervisor as he or she meets with the client or with a Revenue Agent.

Note: This statement, from AC 803, Tax Research, is only the beginning of a much longer prompt.

Figure 2 provides an example of a prompt that details the content of the writing assignment. In addition to two examinations, students are required to write an industry analysis paper. One would anticipate that most of the papers would have three sections, following the pattern established in the prompt: Section 1 would assess the level of technology usage between firms; Section 2 would compare technology usage in that industry to other industries; Section 3 would turn to a specific firm and describe (a) the firm itself, (b) its current situation, and (c) strategies selected from the

list in the syllabus. In all three sections, the writer would be expected to show familiarity with the current literature on the topic.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Industry Analysis Paper: Each course participant is required to conduct an analysis of a selected industry to assess:

1. The level of technology usage between firms.
2. The level of technology utilization for the industry as a whole in comparison to selected other industries.
3. The opportunity for a specific firm to deploy additional information technology to improve its competitive posture in the industry. Includes description of the firm, its current competitive posture, and specific strategies for dealing with customers, competitors or suppliers, or for developing new products.

The paper should demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of current capabilities of information technology and insight into trends and anticipated developments. Evaluation criteria also include writing style, structure of the paper, and use of meaningful illustrations. Grammar and spelling suitable for business are expected.

Examinations: 2 exams will be given

Grading: Examinations: 60%; Industry analysis paper 40%

Note: This prompt is a section from the syllabus for CIS 859, Information Systems and Competitive Strategy. The section is reproduced here in the same format used by the instructor in the syllabus.

In contrast to the prompts in Figures 1 and 2, many other syllabuses contained elaborate instructions for writing assignments. The instructor for BA 867, Computer Based Information Systems, included a section labeled Project Requirements, which went far beyond specifying the topics for the project by suggesting a lengthy sequence of prewriting and revision. Under Requirements of the Paper, the instructor provided an outline for the final product. This instructor's syllabus provides support for the idea that the process approach to writing can occur within the context of the preparation of a rigorously defined academic product—if *process* is taken to mean that the writer goes through a process of thinking, selection of evidence, writing, and revision.

Prompts were found in two places in the syllabuses: in instructions for carrying out writing assignments and in explanations for how the writing assignments would be graded. The instructions were usually labeled in a straightforward way, for example, Written Assignment Instructions. The prompts in the syllabuses we examined included two types of information: details about format—length, typing, number of pages, etc.—and discussion of content and organization.

In a few cases, only a student sophisticated in the ways of syllabuses would recognize that the details given in the grading section of a syllabus provided important information about the assigned writing task. For example, the syllabus for BA 608, Marketing Fundamentals, provided information about the content of the written project under the headings of (a) Grading and Weights and (b) Notes. The information given under a section called Adherence to Directions implies that the writers would have the freedom to choose a topic so long as it fit within the context of answering an instructor-supplied list of questions. That same section reveals that as in many other business courses, the students in BA 608, Marketing Fundamentals, were to work in teams to prepare a written product (which counted for 30% of the grade for the course).

In 24 of the 55 syllabuses that we analyzed, prompts were given that controlled many of the students' choices in the preparation of the writing assignments. (It was our understanding that instructors in other courses in the College of Business Administration provided prompts in handouts other than their course syllabuses; thus, the percentage of classes in which students received detailed information about writing assignments is even higher than that in our sample.) Our analysis of course syllabuses, therefore, supports Horowitz's (1986) insight that much of the writing required of students in U.S. universities (at least in the context of graduate courses in business) is highly structured and instructor controlled. His interpretation that the nature of academic writing precludes the process approach to teaching composition does not seem to follow directly from the characteristics of prompts but rather from his understanding of what the process approach involves.

What we have seen in these prompts is that a composition course that emphasizes selection, prewriting, writing, revision, and editing within the confines of academic formats (including learning to deal effectively with topics presented by instructors rather than selected by students) would be useful for students going into graduate courses in business. On the other hand, an extreme version of the process approach, in which writers must be free to select their own topic and invent their own organization of the final product, might not be as realistic a preparation for the U.S. academic world.

IMPLICATIONS

In sum, analysis of the syllabuses has led us to a number of observations about writing in graduate courses taught in the College of Business Administration at GSU:

1. Production of written products is a major part of the requirements for graduate students in business courses.

2. Graduate students in business are expected to write in a number of different formats.

3. Writing is often tightly controlled by instructors through the use of detailed instructions, or prompts, which can specify organization as well as the topic areas for the written products.

4. Students need to be able to interpret syllabuses to know what the exact requirements will be for their written work and to know when to ask for additional prompts.

5. Foreign students might need to learn the various terms that are used to name different types of written products—quiz in contrast to *exam,* for example.

6. Although one instructor required the writing of diaries, writing assignments are primarily based on some type of research activity rather than on personal experience.

7. Writing is frequently a mode of testing. Of the 55 courses described in the syllabuses, 52 required examinations; frequently courses had many different written tests, including quizzes, midterm examinations, and final examinations. West and Byrd (1982) found that the most frequently assigned writing in graduate courses in engineering was the examination. Since examinations are such a major part of the work required for graduate courses in both business and engineering, investigation is needed into the types of writing required for success in taking examinations in graduate courses in various disciplines in U.S. universities. Such investigation should include questioning graduate faculty about difficulties that nonnative speakers seem to be having with examinations—and about their relative success on examinations in contrast to other writing tasks.

8. Writing is considered an important communication skill by many graduate instructors in business. For example, the reading list on the syllabus for TX 803, Federal Tax Research, included this entry in a section on Writing Skills: " 'How to Write More Effectively,' *Practical Accountant* (December 1984, 99-105)." The syllabus for BA 822, Applied Decision Science, gave as a goal for the course the development of "reporting and presentation skills, demonstrating an ability clearly and effectively to communicate the results of your undoubtedly brilliant work. These include preparation of effective text, tables and graphics." This same syllabus included the following comment:

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This report is a formal document and will be evaluated as such. You are to take and to assert a position persuasively. Organization, spelling, grammar, conciseness, and presentation quality all count in the instructor's evaluation of your work. The report is limited to a maximum of ten pages. If you can cover the ground in fewer pages, your prowess will be held in high regard.

9. Group work is an important feature of many courses in business. Reid (1987) documents the preference of most students from most cultures (including the U.S.) for individual work. The syllabuses analyzed for this project indicate that foreign students will need to learn to work productively in small groups, not just for their ESL classes; but also to succeed in graduate courses in business administration. Not only must most students learn to overcome personal preferences for individual study; they may also need to become accustomed to the American approach to group work, with its emphasis on task completion rather than development of personal relationships (Stewart, 1972).

CONCLUSION

Spack (1988) challenges the idea that ESL courses should be developed to prepare students for particular writing tasks based on the requirements of their fields of study or of courses that they might be required to take during their academic study. Rather, she argues that general writing tasks can be taught in ESL (and English) classes to prepare students and that they can adapt these general skills to the more particular demands of their course work. This argument is perhaps reasonable for ESL courses that are preparing students to enter freshman English sequences. That is, ESL courses do not need to do the work of the English composition course. Nonnative-speaking graduate students, on the other hand, cannot expect to have much, if any, additional training in writing—some might take a technical writing course, but few are required to do so.

Thus, it appears that ESL courses might have different responsibilities toward their graduate students than toward their undergraduate students. Graduate students, for example, would benefit from instruction that focuses on interpreting and responding to topics provided by instructors. In addition, successful performance in many graduate courses will be based on accurate analysis of syllabuses (and other handouts from instructors) so that students understand both the general nature of the course and the specific requirements for various writing tasks. Finally, the syllabuses from graduate business courses demonstrate some of the limitations of the personal essay as a model for academic writing:

Foreign graduate students must learn to write impersonal expository prose that is based on selection and presentation of appropriate (and often numerical) evidence.

The exact nature of these different responsibilities to different types of students needs further research and discussion. One area particularly deserving of attention is the characteristics of prompts (and any other control by the instructor of the written products of students) in undergraduate courses as well as in other graduate disciplines. From the findings of such research, ESL academic preparation courses and programs can make principled decisions about curricular issues.
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THE AUTHORS

Grace Canseco, who is currently teaching ESL in the Department of Applied Linguistics and ESL at Georgia State University, taught EFL in Mexico for 8 years. She is developing materials for use in advanced writing courses for nonnative English-speaking graduate students at U.S. universities.

Patricia Byrd, Chair of the Department of Applied Linguistics and ESL at Georgia State University, has recently published *Improving the Grammar of Written English: The Handbook* and *Improving the Grammar* of *Written English: The Editing Process* (with Beverly Benson; Wadsworth, 1989) and *The Foreign Teaching Assistant's Manual* (with Janet C. Constantinides & Martha C. Pennington; Collier Macmillan, 1989). Canseco and Byrds research focuses on the nature of academic discourse in U.S. universities and on the characteristics and needs of the advanced ESL learner.

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