Research indicates that "rule-based" writing and writing pedagogy may be inadequate and irrelevant for management practice. As an alternative, this article introduces the notion of "choice-based" writing, an approach which examines the range of writing options available in any given managerial context. Two questions are addressed: (1) What is choice-based writing? and (2) What is choice-based writing instruction? Discussion of the second question centers on a particular writing choice of a select group of managers in a specific communication context — namely, field managers' use of narrative for Dealer Contact Reports. Analysis illustrates the benefits of a choice-based approach that recognizes contextual complexities and explores writing choices managers find functional.

Choice-Based Writing in Managerial Contexts:

The Case of the Dealer Contact Report

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With the plain English movement came "pressure to provide rules-of-thumb that are both easy to apply and effective in making writing more comprehensible" (Huckin, Curtin, & Graham, 1986, p. 174). In business communication classrooms and textbooks, these rules-of-thumb sometimes materialize in discussions of the "seven Cs": We are instructed to write complete, concise, considerate, concrete, clear, courteous, and correct business memoranda, letters, proposals, and reports; we are to prefer active voice, avoid deadly verbs, and remove "which" and "that." While such maxims contribute to our pedagogy, if not our own writing, recent studies suggest they are inadequate and may be irrelevant for much managerial writing.

Researchers from Carnegie Mellon's Communications Design Center are among those who take the maxims of the plain English movement to task.[1] Huckin and Hutz's 1987 technical report titled *Existential "there"* provides an example. Although in highly-regarded writing handbooks the use of "there" is considered "wordy" and "weak" and is said to cause overuse of passive voice and abstract nominalizations, Huckin and Hutz demonstrate that good writers use "there" frequently and that "there-constructions" serve a number of useful purposes, including presenting new information, introducing topics, and summarizing. The simplified rules of the plain English movement, they conclude, "usually lack a solid empirical base of support . . . [because] they fail to depict how language is actually used by good writers" (p. 2).

In the business communication field, there are also those who believe the rules of the plain style limit a writer's choices. In a 1987 *Journal of Business Communication* article titled "Business Prose and the Nature of the Plain Style," Mendelson asks (p. 3): "Must working English always capitulate to the demand for buttoned-down brevity?" Mendelson calls for an expanded version of the plain style that includes a repertoire of syntactic and figurative possibilities. Such possibilities, Mendelson argues, add life and persuasiveness to one's writing. "What we need to recognize," Mendelson writes, "is that the pure plainness of the skeletal style also leads to the phenomenon of the absent writer, or what Walker Gibson called 'the rhetoric of hollow men' " (p. 15).

In addition to presenting the complexity of language inadequately, writing pedagogy which centers on writing rules may be irrelevant to actual management practice. Brown and Herndl's 1986 study of training and technical managers strongly suggests that capable professionals often resist changes said to enhance document effectiveness. The seven managers Brown and Herndl studied continued to employ superfluous nominalizations and narrative structures which they understood as "verbose" and "muddy" — forms which they could recognize and eliminate. And although told by their supervisors that such forms were unacceptable in reports, recommendations and proposals, these managers stubbornly continued to use them.

PURPOSE

Increasingly, Management Communication specialists express a concern that traditional approaches to business writing insufficiently address the communication complexities facing managers. Among them is Shubert, who in the February 1989 issue of *Management Communication Quarterly* suggested the need to rethink and broaden "the 'skills' focus that still dominates so many of our Management Communication courses" (p. 405) so that students may come to understand written communication as a dynamic process. Over two decades ago Janis (1965) expressed a similar concern: "Anyone who is willing to make the comparison cannot fail to be impressed by the disparity between 'rules' that govern the style of business correspondence and the actual on-the-job performance in almost any large company" (p. 81). The rules of rhetoric, Janis concludes, "are unrealistic in many instances" (p. 88).

Mindful of the growing discontent with current approaches, this article presents an alternative to "rule-based" writing — an alternative which seeks to account for the impact of communication context.[2] We might call this alternative "choice-based" writing. The study addresses two questions: (1) What is choice-based writing? and (2) What is choice-based writing instruction? The notion of a choice-based approach to managerial writing, introduced by considering these questions, is illustrated by the case of the Dealer Contact Report. Analysis of 45 Dealer Contact Reports, written by automotive industry field managers from districts across the United States, demonstrates the inadequacy of company directives and pedagogical maxims that ignore or dismiss writing options managers find functional. This analysis also illustrates the value of an approach that prompts writers to deliberately choose, from the numerous lexical, grammatical, syntactical, and rhetorical possibilities, those features particularly suited to their communication context.

CONTRASTING EMPHASES OF RULE-BASED AND CHOICE-BASED WRITING

The characteristics of a choice-based approach to writing become clearer when contrasted with those of a rule-based approach. Rule-based writers focus on the rules of grammar and syntax, on readability formulas. Simply put, rule-based writers are concerned with what Elbow calls "get-it-right" writing (1981, p. 192); rule-based writers are primarily accountable to "the rules." We might say rule-based writers emphasize an objectivism: that is, they force documents to comply with writing maxims, propositions, or rules as they know them.

Choice-based writers, on the other hand, focus on available choices in a given context. They use what Elbow calls "a kind of cookbook strategy," choosing from among the different recipes those which most appropriately fit the communication context (p. 8). Simply put, choice-based writers are concerned with what Elbow characterizes as "get-the-results" writing (p. 192); they are primarily accountable to "the reader."[3] We might say choice-based writers emphasize a subjectivism; that is, they determine from the context those writing choices that best fit the situation. Table 1 overviews the contrasting foci of rule-based and choice-based approaches to writing.

TABLE 1

Rule-Based Focus	Choice-Based Focus
Grammar, Syntax, and Readability Formulas	Contextual Choices
Getting-it-Right	Getting-the-Results
Accountable to the Rules	Accountable to the Readers
Objective Approach	Subjective Approach

Like the translator, the choice-based writer recognizes the contextual basis of language as foundational. As Lakoff (1972) observes, "[T]here are areas of linguistic competence that cannot be described in any theory that does not allow an integration of information about the context in which the discourse takes place" (p. 909). The task of the translator, Lakoff concludes, is to "translate contextual and societal concepts . . . in addition to merely translating words and ideas and endings" (p. 911). As the translator employs knowledge of context to *interpret* a document, selecting those individual words, grammatical constructions, syntactical and organizational patterns that seem most accurately to *reflect* the writer's intended meaning, so the choice-based writer may employ knowledge of context to *compose* a document, selecting those individual words, grammatical constructions, syntactical and organizational patterns that seem most effectively to *achieve* his or her intended purpose.

Taking context into account, the choice-based writer believes in the centrality of the reader — that is, the idea that writers, like speakers, can know and write to their audiences (Nystrand, 1986, p. 105). Therefore, the choice-based writer could quibble with Zinsser (1985) when he says:

> Don't worry about whether the reader will "get it" . . . [or] whether the reader likes you, or likes what you are saying, or how you are saying it, or agrees with it, or feels an affinity for your sense of humor or your vision of life, don't give him a moment's worry. You are who you are, he is who he is, and either you will get along or you won't (pp. 26-27).[4]

On the contrary, the choice-based writer targets a particular audience. The choice-based writer has a sense of interaction, of reciprocity, of carefully fashioning a text that gets the desired response from the specific audience.

Fundamental to the choice-based approach is the idea that the characteristics of "good writing" fluctuate as the writing context changes. What may suit readers in one situation may be unsuitable for readers in another situation; therefore, the choice-based writer subordinates writing rules or company recommendations to the ever-changing demands of context, recognizing that "good writing" must ultimately meet the complicated demands of the language culture (Brown & Herndl, 1986, p. 23; see also Branham & Pearce, 1985). That "the rules" are superseded by contextual criteria may mean that "bad writing" by traditional standards is "good writing" in context.[5] Butenhoff seems to support this notion in a 1977 commentary, playfully titled "Bad Writing Can Be Good Business" (p. 12). For the choice-based writer, Butenhoff suggests, breaking the rules may stem less from ineptitude and more from a desire to communicate in a complex political and bureaucratic environment where other considerations, apart from correctness, clarity, conciseness and completeness, have tremendous significance. While "the rules" remain important, particularly as they provide direction, the choice-based writer is primarily concerned that a document function effectively in a particular communication context.

CONTRASTING OBJECTIVES OF RULE-BASED AND CHOICE-BASED WRITING

Writing instruction may emphasize either rules or choices. For example, rule-based writing pedagogy is frequently expressed in propositional statements and "should" directives. Writers are given instructions such as these:

- Be Brief
- Avoid Repetition
- Put Action in Your Verbs
- Use Specific Facts and Figures
- Focus on "You" Instead of "I"
- Choose Short, Familiar, Conversational Words

We might say rule-based instruction is fundamentally prescriptive, imposing a *modus operandi* upon the writer.

By contrast, choice-based writing pedagogy is expressed by way of explanation, inquiry, and diverse examples. Choice-based instruction, we might say, is fundamentally descriptive, interpretive, and interactive. To initiate a choice-based approach, one may replace imperative statements, so typically found in business communication textbooks and manuals, with descriptive statements, as illustrated in Table 2.

TABLE 2

Rule-Based Imperatives	Choice-Based Description
Be Brief	Being Brief
Avoid Repetitions	Avoiding Repetitions
Put Action in Your Verbs	Activating Your Verbs
Use Specific Facts and Figures	Using Specific Facts and Figures
Focus on "You" Instead of "I"	Focusing on the Reader
Choose Short, Familiar, Conversational Words	Choosing Short, Familiar, Conversational Words

In a writing directive, simply changing the imperative form of the verb shifts the focus from rules to choices, from propositions to possibilities.

Replacing imperative directives with descriptive directives is merely cosmetic, however. What does this shift of focus actually mean for writing instruction? To explore this question, consider the directive "Put action in your verbs." Writing experts regularly present active verbs as best, contending that active verbs result in more engaging prose and less awkward expression. Passive verbs have been called "impotent" by comparison.[6] "Use active verbs unless there is no comfortable way to get around using a passive verb," Zinsser writes in *On Writing Well* (p. 110). Other pedagogical sources introduce passive constructions as exceptions which allow the writer to employ a deliberate vagueness or to emphasize the object of the action. While effectively dramatizing the value of active constructions, such approaches depreciate the value of passives, suggesting a hierarchy in which active constructions reign supreme while passives are inferior and, except for unusual cases, should be avoided altogether.

By contrast, a choice-based perspective sees active and passive constructions as *alternatives*, each uniquely suited for a variety of situations. Choice-based pedagogy describes the value of passive constructions for some messages in some communication contexts and, in parallel fashion, describes the value of active constructions for other contexts. For example, students attending Michigan's Management Writing Series review writing guidelines from two MBA courses. In Statistics 562, Professor Allen Spivey expects students to use passive voice. His handout on criteria for writing case analyses states:

> Do avoid writing in a personal reportorial style. . . . Instead of saying, "we built a regression model. . . ," say "a regression model [with the following properties] was built . . ." (1987, p. 2).

On the other hand, Professor David Blair recommends Zinsser's *On Writing Well* as a student guide in Data Management 577 and, as we have seen, Zinsser stresses the need for active verbs.

Students may also discover the value of both passive and active constructions by examining actual managerial documents. For instance, at a major Michigan health center, managers deliberately use passive constructions to avoid direct association with recommendations which may have legal ramifications, while field managers at one of the big three automotive companies sometimes employ active constructions to accentuate their individual efforts on behalf of the company. Detailed discussions of real writing situations like these demonstrate the relative usefulness of passive and active constructions.

Another distinction between choice-based and rule-based writing pedagogy involves the use of writing samples. Rule-based pedagogy focuses on writing models and formulas. For example, the *Sales Manager's Model Letter Desk Book* offers prewritten documents for "almost every conceivable situation" including model letters that "motivate salespeople to act on your suggestions," "mold your sales team together during tough times," "lock in the sale," or "resolve difficult credit problems" (Fahner and Miller, 1988, pp. ix-xii).[7] Such models are said to save time, reduce effort, and ultimately bring results. Formulas for various document types, such as formats for good-news and bad-news messages, promise similar advantages.

While models and formulas may provide direction for writers who have trouble getting started, they may also foster document clones rather than authentic memoranda, letters, proposals, and reports carefully crafted to meet the complex writer objectives and reader needs unique to any communication context. In this way, writing models and formulas may inhibit original thinking and completely miss the mark in actual management situations.

A choice-based approach favors actual documents over writing models or formulas. Consequently, choice-based writing instruction presents memoranda, letters, reports, proposals, and the like, written by specific writers for particular situations, as extended examples, document-centered cases, study problems or in some other mode (Hagge, 1988). A choice-based writing exercise might require students to analyze the unique features of documents written by managers in various functional areas — an accounting student might examine the organizational choices of accounting consultants for several proposals, or a finance student might compare pronoun use in annual reports from the big three automotive companies. Central to choice-based pedagogy is the discussion of real management documents and the complex communication situations from which they come.

Writing pedagogy that examines documents in context offers a number of advantages. Such an approach (1) introduces authentic writing problems facing managers, (2) illustrates the complexity of writing for particular communication situations, (3) stresses creative problem solving over mechanical application of "the rules," and (4) presents a variety of writing choices which may function effectively. By not supplying "correct answers" for writing problems, such an approach emphasizes, as Barzun suggests, that "language is *not* an algebra and that there is no single right answer to any given predicament with words" (1985, p. vii).

Centering instruction on the examination of real writing situations is difficult, if not overwhelming, because at present we know relatively little about managers' day-to-day writing decisions (Battison & Goswami, 1981; Odell & Goswami, 1982; Halpern, 1988).[8] Findings from ethnographic research by Knoblauch (1980), Murray (1985), Paradis, Dobrin and Miller (1985), Doheny-Farina (1986), Brown and Herndl (1986), and others, shed some light on "what's going on out there." The following analysis of Dealer Contact Reports provides additional information on the complex communication situations for which managers write. This analysis is particularly relevant to the discussion of choice-based writing for it dramatically illustrates the impact of contextual expectations and constraints on writers and suggests unorthodox yet functional writing choices that have been overlooked by the current emphasis on writing rules. Moreover, practitioners may use the analysis as an example to facilitate classroom discussion and as a framework for examining various other managerial documents.

MANAGERS' WRITING CHOICES FOR DEALER CONTACT REPORTS

Dealer Contact Reports are especially well suited for a study of writing choices because they are written by a particular group of managers to describe a select set of problems for a particular group of readers. Dealer

Contact Reports are widely used in the automotive industry, and company rules for writing them are clearly outlined. Moreover, because Dealer Contact Reports are written by entry-level managers, analyzing them tells us something about the kind of writing that is particularly relevant for MBA students entering the managerial workforce.

Research Method

The Dealer Contact Reports analyzed were writing samples submitted for a company training program by district and field managers all over the United States. The managers received no guidelines for selecting report samples; however, in several instances managers submitted what they felt were good and poor samples.

The 45 Dealer Contact Reports randomly selected for analysis represent hundreds of reports critiqued. They were written by field managers working in 15 states including Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Florida, Indiana, Nebraska, New York, South Dakota, and Texas. They represent field managers' interaction with a variety of dealers. All but four were written in either 1986 or 1987. None was composed before 1982 or after 1987.

Categories for document analysis were developed from company directives for Dealer Contact Reports and pedagogical recommendations for report writing.[9] The author designed and pre-tested forms for coding and tabulation. Using these forms, the author and four trained coders reviewed the reports for various organizational and developmental features. Two reviewers examined the reports for the presence of characteristics complying with company directives; two other reviewers identified the organizational and developmental features of the reports without knowledge of company directives. The author and coders discussed differing conclusions in detail.

In addition, as a management trainer, the author discussed the composition of Dealer Contact Reports with field managers in Omaha, Nebraska, and Indianapolis, Indiana, and with management trainees at the company's training institute. Groups consisted of 12 to 25 members. With each group, discussions centering on Dealer Contact Reports ranged from two to four hours long.

Analysis of Dealer Contact Reports

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Dealer Contact Reports examined is the seeming disparity between the way managers write them and the way the company expects them to be written. One managerial writing choice of particular interest is the wide use of narrative. The following five questions provide a framework for discussing the role contextual factors played in managers' preference for this choice.[10]

1. What are Dealer Contact Reports?
2. What are the company directives for writing Dealer Contact Reports?
3. How do Dealer Contact Reports consistently comply with company directives?
4. How do Dealer Contact Reports consistently differ from company directives?
5. What contextual expectations and constraints may account for managers' choice of narrative?

What Are Dealer Contact Reports?

Dealer Contact Reports are written by field managers to describe management, capital, and facility problems at the car dealerships in their charge and to recommend specific actions to solve these problems; therefore, Dealer Contact Reports are "recommendation reports" (McNally & Schiff, 1986; Murphy & Hildebrandt, 1988). Sometimes field managers also use Dealer Contact Reports as "status reports" (McNally & Schiff, 1986) describing a dealer's progress toward recommended goals. Less frequently, Dealer Contact Reports commend a dealer for exceptional performance or describe an unusual situation which the field manager believes should be brought to the attention of the district manager.

The Dealer Contact Report becomes the company's record of its continuing relationship with dealers franchised to sell and service company products. It informs company officials of significant decisions between field managers and dealers. Consequently, Dealer Contact Reports provide a history of company relations with each dealer. In the most basic sense, Dealer Contact Reports record key conversations between field managers and dealers.

What Are the Company Directives for Writing Dealer Contact Reports?

A special manual for field managers discusses company directives for writing Dealer Contact Reports. According to the manual, Dealer Contact Reports usually focus on a single management, capital, or facility problem. The Report is to present the "facts of the case" as well as represent dealers' opinions and decisions about the topics discussed. These goals are to be met in the space of a single page, if possible.

Above all other directives, the company manual stresses the need for Dealer Contact Reports to follow a specific logical sequence of four topics: Problem, Recommendation, Action, and Timetable, or what we might call "the PRAT sequence." The PRAT sequence is somewhat like a "problem-solution" organizational pattern (Rasberry & Lemoine, 1986). PRAT begins with a description of a problem followed by recommendations and actions for solving that problem.

To highlight its importance, the PRAT sequence is described in big, bold type as shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3

PRAT Sequence for Dealer Contact Reports

1. **PROBLEM**	State what the problem is.
2. **RECOMMENDATION**	Suggest the steps needed to correct it.
3. **ACTIONS TAKEN OR TO BE TAKEN**	Obtain the dealer's statement of the specific action he intends to take. Do not seek a commitment or agreement.
4. **TIMETABLE**	Recommend a time frame for completion and evaluation.

The manual also includes before / after models, and as a reminder, the PRAT sequence is printed at the top of each Dealer Contact Report form.

How Do Dealer Contact Reports Consistently Comply with Company Directives?

The 45 Dealer Contact Reports analyzed comply with the company's written directives in the following ways: (1) Writers cover appropriate topics. The vast majority of the reports describe management, capital or facility problems at car dealerships. Other topics fall within the range of alternative subjects listed in the Dealer Contact Report manual. (2) Dealers' particular views are represented. In the reports examined, field managers attempt to report dealers' opinions about the issues at hand. Dealer quotations, prefaced with statements such as "Mr. Casper said. . . ," or "Bill Leggett told me. . . ," are typical. (3) Writers present the "facts of the case." As a rule, field managers include specific names, dates, statistics, percentages and dollar amounts, such as "The dealership delivered 27 vehicles in June and 25 in July," and "The dealership's overall QC-P value of 6.25 falls below the District average of 7.13." Sometimes attachments provide additional data. Reviewers analyzing the Dealer Contact Reports described 79 percent as primarily "factual."

How Do Dealer Contact Reports Consistently Differ from Company Directives?

Dealer Contact Reports also depart from the company's written directives. Only 36 percent focus on a single subject. Another 36 percent cover so many subjects that reviewers characterized them as "overviews." The fact that a significant number of reports cover more than one major idea may explain why almost 75 percent exceed one page.

Despite the company's emphasis, the PRAT organizational sequence is deliberately used in only 20 percent of the Dealer Contact Reports.[11] On the other hand, 56 percent of the reports are primarily narratives.[12] This extensive use of narrative is surprising for it departs markedly from PRAT. Moreover, narrative is not a widely accepted mode of business writing. Typically, narrative is associated with fiction and dismissed for business. "Avoid continuous narrative," writes John Morris in *Make Yourself Clear! Improving Business Communication* (1980, p. 17). "Leave [narrative] to the novelist; it is seldom appropriate for business writing (or speaking)" (p. 92). Characterized as wordy, rambling, polysyllabic, and cumbersome, narrative is said to encourage long documents which consume a reader's time. As Morris states, "Continuous narrative makes the reader's job difficult because it inadequately expresses the complex relationships between ideas and because it contains many conditional or qualifying clauses . . . [leaving the reader] to decide what is important and what is not" (p. 94).

What Contextual Expectations and Constraints May Account for Managers' Choice of Narrative?

Why did over half of the field managers choose narrative as their overall organizational scheme and fewer than one-fourth comply with the company's PRAT directive? What contextual constraints and expectations may account for the seeming disregard for company recommendations? Several suggestions are offered:

1. **PRAT is not known.** Initially, one might posit that field managers simply do not know that the company expects a PRAT format. However, interviews with field managers at district offices and at the company's

training institute suggest otherwise. At district offices, field managers readily repeat the PRAT format, and at the training institute many management trainees know PRAT.

2. **PRAT is not the norm.** If PRAT is known, it may not be used by present field managers because it was not used by the field managers before them. Given the well-documented desire, if not the necessity, of the new employee to conform, it is not surprising that a new field manager may model and adopt the language features of the group. In this case, use of narrative for Dealer Contact Reports may demonstrate a field manager's growth and progress, that is, signify that he or she is observing the written discourse in a particular communication context.

3. **PRAT is not fast or easy to use.** A number of field managers admit they prefer narrative because it is easier and faster to use than PRAT. In fact, in company writing seminars managers resisted PRAT because, as one participant put it, "I don't have time to use the outline." Field managers' preference for narrative is understandable considering the many hours they spend driving from dealership to dealership and the amount of paperwork they must complete, only a fraction of which is the Dealer Contact Report. This finding coincides with Brown and Herndl's report that corporate writers seem to employ narrative when they write under pressure because "eidetic memory organizes the text" (p. 21).

4. **PRAT does not document personal activity.** Discussions also indicate field managers prefer narrative because it documents their efforts on behalf of the company. Whereas PRAT highlights a particular problem or issue, narrative highlights personal activity. Unlike PRAT, a narrative records the details of a particular contact — its initiation, conclusion and key events. Field managers, typically with limited experience as professionals, may feel the need to document their efforts for their superiors much as they did for their professors.

5. **PRAT conflicts with company goals for the Dealer Contact Report.** In addition to these reasons, field managers find that in some respects PRAT actually conflicts with company goals for the Dealer Contact Report. As the report title indicates, Dealer Contact Reports describe a "contact." In writing them, field managers are instructed to recall the details of that contact and record the interaction accurately so that the report will stand up as a legal document if it ever becomes necessary. To insure accuracy, the manual suggests that if the Dealer Contact Report cannot be written immediately, the field manager should quickly summarize, outline, or record information to facilitate later

recall. Narrative is particularly suited for recording the details of dealer contacts as the company requires.

CONCLUSION

In the case of the Dealer Contact Report, managers could choose to employ the company's PRAT organizational sequence that highlights a particular dealership problem, or they could choose an unrecommended organizational approach such as narrative that highlights the details of a particular dealership contact. As we have seen, well over half chose narrative. At first glance, field managers who use narrative appear to be "breaking the rules." They do not seem to be doing what they are told to do. This observation might lead some to wonder if what we have here is a management problem. Indeed, the case of the Dealer Contact Report involves a complex management communication problem — district managers expressed discontent with field managers' written reports, and the company hired a trainer to teach effective report writing.

Even with training, capable field managers resisted PRAT, however. As we have seen, closer examination of the communication context indicates several possible reasons why a significant number of managers preferred narrative. Narrative is easy to write for managers on the move. It documents personal effort. More significantly, narrative provides details as the company requires. These details include dialogue from key conversations which might refresh memories or serve as evidence in court cases. Field managers found these goals more difficult to achieve with PRAT. This suggests managers' preference for narrative may stem from the inadequacy and irrelevancy of the "PRAT rule" rather than from field managers' refusal to follow orders. These field managers, much like the corporate managers Brown and Herndl (1986) studied, resisted writing directives which failed to meet the complex needs of their situation.

The analysis of Dealer Contact Reports contributes to the notion of choice-based writing in several ways. For one thing, it provides an extended example for classroom discussion. The case of the Dealer Contact Report generates lively conversation because it illustrates managers' choices when company expectations for document composition are contradictory, and it introduces narrative, an organizational approach not usually associated with business writing. Discussing actual documents, such as Dealer Contact Reports, may prompt writers to become more "choice-conscious."

The analysis of Dealer Contact Reports also suggests the popularity and possible value of narrative as a managerial writing tool and indicates that managers and MBA students may profit from instruction in narrative writing. Some pedagogical sources already suggest the usefulness of narrative for business memoranda (Himstreet & Baty, 1987), appraisals (Stout & Perkins, 1987), and reports (Andrews & Andrews, 1988). Since managers are using narrative, it would be beneficial to explore how it might be shaped to suit communication needs particular to management.

Discoveries about how managers write on-the-job are leading us away from rule-based writing or what Halpern calls "folklore and textbook incantations about what business and technical communications ought to be" (1988, p. 28). Examining real managerial documents will foster approaches which are mindful of the complex environments in which managers work. Ethnographic research, including recognized studies by Paradis, Dobrin and Miller (1985), Doheny-Farina (1986) and Brown and Herndl (1986), as well as works in progress by scholars like Huettman (1988), contribute to our knowledge about "what's going on out there." We also need studies that test the effectiveness of managers' writing choices. This research would examine the impact of writer choice on reader response, or as Weick suggests, "the effect of talk on action" (1983, p. 29). In addition, studies by McCloskey (1985) and Herrington (1985) provide research approaches for investigating what it means to write like a manager and how writing functions in organizations. Theoretical modelling following that of Shelby (1988) and Quinn (1988) is also necessary. Such studies challenge our presumptions and will eventually change our writing pedagogy.

To prompt discussion of new approaches for managerial writing, this study presents the concepts of choice-based and rule-based writing. These concepts are sharply drawn to dramatize differing writer foci. Perhaps the notion of writing choice may temper the emphasis on writing prescriptions, models and formulas which seem to have dominated business communication for a time. In actuality, a melding of the choice-based and rule-based approaches may prove most useful, for choice-based writing is not rule free. A choice-based writer's repertoire requires a facility with grammar, syntax, organizational patterns, formatting devices and company directives. Knowledge of the rules provides a foundation for informed choices. At the same time, choice-based writing does not *focus* on rules. Instead of reducing writing to the imposition of oversimplified maxims, choice-based writing aims to acknowledge and accommodate the cultural basis of language. Consequently, the choice-based writer regards writing prescriptions, models and formulas with healthy skepticism because they fail to account for the complexity of particular management situations.

To conclude, a parting comparison seems apt. Like the first-year foreign language student, the rule-based writer concentrates on learning the rules or how the language "ought to be." Like the second-year foreign language student, the choice-based writer understands that the rules are meant to be broken — for it is in the second year one encounters the many idioms.[13]

NOTES

1. In a 1986 study titled "Prescriptive Linguistics and Plain English: The Case of 'Whiz-Deletions,' " Huckin, Curtin, and Graham illustrate the ineffectiveness and oversimplicity of one maxim presented in *Guidelines for Document Designers* (a state of-the-art handbook published by the American Institutes for Research). The authors of *Guidelines* contend that "whiz-constructions," or the words "which is," "who were," and "that are," used to introduce subordinate clauses, clarify sentence structure. Removing these so-called "whiz-constructions," i.e., a whiz-deletion, leaves a sentence unclear or ambiguous, the authors of *Guidelines* conclude. To illustrate, the authors of *Guidelines for Document Designers* provide the following sample: "The director wants the report which was written by the Home Office," contrasted with "The director wants the report written by the Home Office" (p. 39). According to *Guidelines*, the second is less clear because of the "whiz-deletion." Taking issue with this idea, Huckin, Curtin, and Graham raise doubt about the necessity of whiz-constructions by showing the many whiz-deletions in a variety of randomly chosen examples of good writing. They further show that the authors of *Guidelines for Document Designers* ignore their own maxim — in a random sample of nine pages from Guidelines, the authors broke the "whiz-construction rule" 11 times and complied with the rule only twice. Good writers, including the writers of *Guidelines for Document Designers*, often ignore the rules, Huckin, Curtin and Graham conclude.

2. The term "context" is used variously in communication-relevant literature (Harrington & Rogers, 1988). For this study, context means both the sociopolitical and historical conditions as well as the specific situation surrounding the writer.

3. Ewing's book titled *Writing For Results in Business, Government, the Sciences and the Professions* (1979) suggests the same.

4. At the same time, Zinsser's point is well taken — his comments encourage novice writers to set aside inhibiting fears and concentrate on finding

their own voice. As Zinsser expresses it, "Think of the . . . [writing] process as a creative act — the expressing of who you are. Relax and say what you want to say . . . . [Y]ou only need to be true to yourself . . ." (p. 27).

5. The discussion of Dealer Contact Reports which follows clarifies this notion.

6. Sigband and Bell, 1986, pp. 280, 197; Janis, 1978, p. 69.

7. See also Booher, D. (1984). *Send Me a Memo: A Handbook of Model Memos.*

8. Odell and Goswami stress the need for such study in a 1982 article in *Research in the Teaching of English.* They write: "[R]esearchers need to examine writing done in non-academic settings, especially the writing adults do as a regular part of their daily work . . . . [W]e know relatively little about the nature and functions of this writing. Indeed, we tend to speak of business writing . . . as though it were a single entity. We have limited information . . . about the types of stylistic and substantive choices writers make or the reasons that govern a writer's choosing one alternative in preference to another. This lack seems rather serious since information about these tasks, choices, and reasoning might very well influence the teaching of composition. Furthermore, this sort of information provides a basis for testing theoretical assumptions" (pp. 201-202).

9. Pedagogical sources consulted to originate categories included these: Golen, Steven P., C. Glenn Pearce, & Ross Figgins (1985), *Report Writing for Business and Industry*, New York: Wiley; Lesikar, Raymond V., & Mary P. Lyons (1986), *Report Writing for Business* (7th ed.), Homewood, IL: Irwin; Murphy, Herta A., & Herbert W. Hildebrandt (1988), *Effective Business Communications* (5th ed.), New York: McGraw Hill; Varner, Iris I. (1987), *Contemporary Business Report Writing*, Chicago: The Dryden Press.

10. The author reported results from a preliminary analysis of Dealer Contact Reports in "Choice-Based Writing in Managerial Contexts: Breaking the Company Rules" (1988) as University of Michigan School of Business Working Paper #569. The author presented a follow-up study titled "The Impact of Context on Managerial Writing: Managers Choose Narrative for Dealer Contact Reports" (1988) at the Association for Business Communication Conference in Indianapolis, October 1988. This follow-up study was subsequently published in the conference proceedings.

11. The 45 reports analyzed fall into four categories in the extent to which they employ PRAT. These categories are: (1) No PRAT, (2) No Obvious PRAT, (3) Aware of PRAT, and (4) Obvious PRAT. In 18 percent of the reports, writers seem "Aware of PRAT" but do not use it deliberately. In these reports some PRAT elements appear while others do not. In 22 percent, "No Obvious PRAT" was apparent—reviewers had literally to hunt for elements resembling PRAT. The largest group of reports, 40 percent, included "No PRAT." These reports contained no hint of the PRAT sequence. Typically, field managers do not employ the PRAT sequence.

12. The author discusses other non-PRAT methods of organization in "The Impact of Context on Managerial Writing: Managers Choose Narrative for Dealer Contact Reports" (1988). Narrative is by far the most popular of the non-PRAT approaches.

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