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**CHOICE-BASED WRITING IN MANAGERIAL CONTEXTS:
BREAKING THE COMPANY RULES**

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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 and Graham, 174). In Business Communication, these rules-of-thumb are sometimes found 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 have contributed to our pedagogy, if not our own writing, recent studies suggest they are inadequate and irrelevant for Management Communication.

Researchers from Carnegie Mellon's Communications Design Center are among those who take the maxims of the plain English movement to task. 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" which introduce subordinate clauses, clarify sentence structure. Removing these so-called "whiz constructions," or "whiz-deletion," leaves a sentence unclear or ambiguous, the authors conclude.[1]

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 9 pages from Guidelines, the authors broke the "whizconstruction rule" 11 times and only complied with the rule twice. Good writers, including the writers of Guidelines for Document Designers often ignore the rules, Huckin, Curtin and Graham conclude. Huckin and Hutz draw the same conclusion in a 1987 study titled the Existential "there."[2] The simplified rules of the plain English movement, they write, "usually lack a solid empirical base of support. In particular, [the rules] fail to depict how language is actually used by good writers" (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 Journal of Business Communication article titled "Business Prose and the Nature of the Plain Style," Mendelson asks: "Must working English always capitulate to the demand for button-down brevity?" (3) Mendelson calls for an expanded version of the plain style which includes a repertoire of syntactic and figurative possibilities. Such choices, he argues, add "life" and persuasiveness to one's writing (3). Mendelson concludes: "What we need to recognize 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'" (15).

In addition to inadequately presenting the complexity of language and the range of alternatives, there is some indication that writing pedagogy which centers around writing rules may be irrelevant to actual management practice. In a 1986 study of training and technical managers, Brown and Herndl discovered that "bright, able professionals were often quite resistant to adopt some style conventions believed to characterize effective professional writing" (11). The seven managers Brown and Herndl studied continued to use structures which they understood as "verbose" and "muddy"; structures which they could recognize and eliminate. And although told by their supervisors that such structures were unacceptable in reports, recommendations and proposals, these managers stubbornly continued to use them.[3]

PURPOSE OF THE PAPER

The purpose of this paper is to springboard a discussion of ways which writing and writing instruction might more adequately present the complexity of language and meet the needs of managers. I will suggest an alternative to rule-based writing pedagogy--an alternative which attempts to account for the impact of communication context on managerial writing. We could call this alternative "choice-based" writing and writing pedagogy. More specifically, I will consider two questions: 1) What is choice-based writing, and 2) What is choice-based writing instruction? To address the second question, I will briefly analyze a particular writing choice of a select group of managers in a specific communication context.

WHAT IS CHOICE-BASED WRITING?

To clarify what I mean by choice-based writing, let me contrast it with rule-based writing. Rule-based writers focus on the rules of grammar and syntax; on readability formulas. Simply put, rule-based writers are concerned with what Ewing (1979) and Elbow (1981) call "get-it-right" writing; 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 among the different recipes for those which most appropriately fit the communication context (8). Simply put, choice-based writers are concerned with what Elbow (192) characterizes as "get-the-results" writing; they are primarily accountable to "the reader." We might say choice-based writers emphasize a subjectivism: that is, they determine from the context those writing choices which may best fit the situation (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Contrasting Emphasis of Rule-based and Choice-based Writing

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

In 1972 Lakoff wrote, "There are areas of linguistic competence that cannot be described in any theory that does not allow for an integration of information about the context in which the discourse takes place" (909). The task of the translator, Lakoff concluded, is to "translate contextual and societal concepts . . . in addition to merely translating words and ideas" (911). Like the translator or the sociolinguist, the choice-based writer recognizes that language has a cultural basis. Brown and Herndl confirm this observation. They write:

> In our view of things, ostensible core conventions of 'good writing' go the way of standard dialects in social linguistics: the conventions shift and change, to be replaced by other conventions, all dictated by contextual criteria. What is 'good' is what meets the complex needs of language culture. This view troubles those of us who teach writing, of course . . . [because] it leaves us approving or at least accepting language which we find hard to read. . . . The core insight for teachers is that all language has a cultural basis. If we do not recognize and accommodate it, our teaching fights the culture—and always loses (23-24).[4]

In a 1977 commentary titled "Bad Writing Can Be Good Business," Butenhoff expands Brown and Herndl's idea. Butenhoff writes:

> All the vagueness, all those endless clauses . . . . are not just the result of ineptitude. Business writing is not exposition, but communication in a political and bureaucratic environment, and there are some important considerations other than clarity, precision, and grace (12).

Like Brown, Herndl, Butenhoff and others, the choice-based writer assumes that language has a contextual basis which must be recognized and accommodated.

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, 105). Therefore, the choice-based writer may disregard Zinsser 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 (26-27).

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, as Munter puts it, that "gets the desired response from the specific audience" (1987, 1). The choice-based writer is primarily concerned with the successful functioning of a document in a particular communication context.

WHAT IS CHOICE-BASED WRITING INSTRUCTION?

Writing instruction may also emphasize either rules or choices. Rule-based writing pedagogy is frequently expressed in propositional statements and "should" directives. Writers are instructed to:

Be Brief

Avoid Repetitions

Put Action in Your Verbs

Use Specific Facts and Figures

Focus on "You" Instead of "I"

Choose Short, Familiar, Conversational Words

Rule-based instruction we might say 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. Imperative statements, so typically found in business communication textbooks and manuals, are replaced with descriptive statements (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Contrasting Rule-based and Choice-based Writing Directives

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

Sometimes simply changing the imperative form of the verb to a participle in a writing directive, shifts the focus from rules to choices.

More significant, and more difficult, than merely replacing imperative directives with descriptive directives, is identifying the range of choices available to writers in various management contexts. I believe the study of actual management documents and the contexts from which they come is inherent to developing of choice-based writing pedagogy. If we are to speak of choice, we need some acquaintance with possible choices. As Odell and Goswami stated in a 1982 article in Research in the Teaching of English:

> [F]or the most part, research in composition has been done in academic settings where the writing task is assigned by a teacher or researcher in order to accomplish a pedagogical goal or provide data to answer a research question . . . . [W]e think researchers should continue to explore writing done in these settings. Yet we also feel that researchers need to examine . . . writing done in nonacademic 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, a basis that is quite different from that provided by school-sponsored writing (201-202).

As part of an effort to understand the nature of choice-based writing and choice-based writing instruction, we analyzed 66 Dealer Contact Reports, written by automotive industry field managers working in Districts across the United States including California, Texas, Nebraska, Indiana, Arkansas, Florida, Connecticut and New York.[5] Most striking about these reports is the disparity between the way field managers write them and the way the company expects them to be written. I believe this disparity tells us something about choices available in a specific context and in turn, tells us something about choice-based writing instruction.

Dealer Contact Reports are particularly well suited for a study of contextual writing choices because they are written by a specific 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 may tell us something about writing which is particularly relevant to our MBA students.

To share my discoveries about Dealer Contact Reports I will address four questions:

1) What is the Dealer Contact Report?
2) How do Dealer Contact Reports consistently comply with the company's written directives?
3) How do Dealer Contact Reports consistently differ from company directives?
4) What contextual expectations and constraints may account for the disparity between Dealer Contact Reports and company directives for writing them?

What is the Dealer Contact Report?

Dealer Contact Reports are written by field managers to describe management, capital and facility problems at the car dealerships in their charge. Less frequently, Dealer Contact Reports are written to commend a dealer for exceptional performance or to describe unusual situations which the field manager believes should be brought to the attention of the district manager. These situations may have potential legal implications.

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

The company writing manual clearly states that Dealer Contact Reports must follow the logical sequence of four topics (see Table 3):

TABLE 3
PRAT Organization for Dealer Contact Reports[6]

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 actions he intends to take. Do not seek a commitment or agreement.
4. TIMETABLE	Recommend a time frame for completion and evalution.

To stress its importance, the "PROBLEM, RECOMMENDATION, ACTION, TIMETABLE" or PRAT format is described in big, bold type, illustrated with before/after examples in the manual, and printed at the top of Dealer Contact Report forms.

How do Dealer Contact Reports consistently comply with the company's written directives?

The Dealer Contact Reports we examined complied with the company's written directives in the following ways: 1) Writers covered appropriate subjects. The vast majority of the Reports described management, capital or facility problems at car dealerships. Other Report topics fell within the range of subjects listed in the Dealer Contact Report manual. 2) Dealers' particular views were represented. In the documents examined, field managers attempted to report Dealers' opinions about the issues at hand. Dealer quotations, prefaced with statements such as "Mr. Jones said...", are typical. 3) Writers presented the facts-of-the-case. Reviewers described 90% of the Reports as primarily "factual."

How do Dealer Contact Reports consistently differ from company directives?

Dealer Contact Reports also departed from the company's written directives in a number of ways (see Table 4).

TABLE 4
Ways Dealer Contact Reports Depart From Company's Written Directives

Written Directives	Management Practice
PRAT Organization	71% Narrate
Limited to one page	65% over one page
Limited to one subject	Almost half covered more than one subject
Recommend	35% Recommend 61% Describe or Explain 12% Argue
Recommend in terms of dealer benefit	Dealer benefit in less than 30%

Of all these departures, the use of narrative rather than PRAT organization is most blatant. Despite the company's emphasis on PRAT, 71% of the field managers preferred narrative.

The wide use of narrative rather than PRAT may account for the fact that almost half of the Dealer Contact Reports examined covered more than one subject, and over half offered descriptions or explanations rather than recommendations.

What contextual expectations and constraints may account for the disparity between Dealer Contact Reports and company directives for writing them?

Why did the majority choose narrative rather than PRAT? I suggest a number of reasons:

1) **PRAT is not known.** One could suggest that field managers simply do not know that the company expects a PRAT format. My experiences with field managers at District Offices and the company's Marketing Institute suggest otherwise. At District Offices, field managers readily repeat the PRAT format. Even at the Marketing Institute, where relatively "new hires" are trained for field management positions, there is wide acquaintance with 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 hire to conform, it is not surprising that a new field manager may model and adapt the language features of the group. In this case, use of narration in Dealer Contact Reports may demonstrate a field manager's growth and progress; specifically a sign that s/he is gaining control of the written discourse in a particular communication context (Brown and Herndl, 24).

3) **PRAT is not fast or easy to use.** Brown and Herndl write:

> The narrative is the first structure for extending text that children acquire and the only one that many basic writers handle with ease. It probably has its source in visual memory: remember the sequence of events and verbalize them as you do it. Corporate writers favor it when they dictate or write under pressure: eidetic memory organizes the text (21).

For field managers who must spend many hours driving from dealership to dealership; who must quickly record the content of conversations while they are fresh and accurate; who must complete a great deal of paperwork, only a fraction of which is the composition of Dealer Contact Reports; preference for the ease of narrative is understandable.

4) **PRAT does not document personal activity.** Whereas PRAT highlights a particular problem or issue, narrative highlights personal activity. Unlike PRAT, a narrative style documents all the steps in the process—the contact, conversations and actions used to identify a problem and its solution. Given this fact, narrative may meet the field managers' need to gain recognition for personal effort.

5) **PRAT counters company goals for the Dealer Contact Report.** As the title indicates, Dealer Contact Reports are to describe a "contact." In writing the Report, field managers are instructed to recall "the details of the contact" (The Dealer Contact Report: Writing an Effective FD1692, 3).

Moreover, since the report records what happened during a dealer/field manager meeting, it has a legal nature and may be used as evidence in a court case to substantiate what took place. Therefore, field managers must write Dealer Contact Reports which "accurately reflect what was said both by the dealer and by themselves" (The Dealer Contact Report: Writing an Effective FD1692, 1). To insure the accuracy of the reports, the Dealer Contact Report Manual suggests that if the document cannot be written immediately, the field manager is to write a summary, outline, or make a recording to facilitate later recall of the details. Field managers may find narrative is better suited than PRAT in light of these considerations.

CONCLUSION

Analysis of Dealer Contact Reports and other management documents exposes some of the writing choices managers have and use in given contexts. Such analysis reveals some of the difficulties involved in writing documents which meet company goals, especially when a company's written rules for document composition seem to circumvent those goals. Comparative analysis of a company's published directives for document composition and of actual documents exposes some of the writing choices available in a particular management situation. Examining these choices may contribute to a choice-based approach to writing and writing pedagogy which may ultimately help managers decipher mixed messages and consequently write more effectively.

Analyzing numerous examples of the same document, such as a Dealer Contact Report, provides information which is not readily gained by examining many different documents. This study of 66 Dealer Contact Reports, for instance, suggests the popularity and possible value of narration as an organizational writing strategy and indicates that managers may profit from instruction in narrative writing. Such an analysis also demonstrates the impact of context on document composition and the role of contextual analysis in the writing process. Moreover, what scholars learn from examining actual management documents may eventually contribute to writing approaches which are fundamentally choice-based rather than rule-based.

Centered around explanation and inquiry, particularly the investigation of management documents in context, a choice-based approach to writing and writing pedagogy accounts for the complexity of writing for particular contexts. Rather than reducing writing to the imposition of oversimplified maxims, choice-based writing and writing instruction acknowledges and accommodates the cultural basis of language, regarding formulas for effective writing with healthy skepticism. As with a 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.

NOTES

1. To illustrate, the authors of Guidelines for Document Designers provide the following samples: "The director wants the report which was written by the Home Office," and "The director wants the report written by the Home Office" (Huckin, Curtin and Graham, 176). According to Guidelines, the second sample is less clear because of the "whiz-deletion."

2. 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 Huntz 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.

3. Specifically, the managers who Brown and Herndl studied were instructed to eliminate superfluous nominalizations and narrative structures.

4. Emphasis added.

5. Two reviewers evaluated each Dealer Contact Report.

6. Table 3 is from the company's writing manual titled "The Dealer Contact Report: Writing an Effective FD-1692" (2).

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