MICHIGAN
BUSINESS SCHOOL

Product Number wp04-001
Released Month December, 2003

From the Department of
LAW, HISTORY & COMMUNICATION

WORKING PAPER SERIES

A Framework for Task and Tone: Preparing New Entrants for Subordinate

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LEADING IN THOUGHT AND ACTION

A Framework for Task and Tone:

Preparing New Entrants for Subordinate Reporting

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Acknowledgements

The University of Michigan Business School and the Nanyang Business School (NBS) at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore supported this research We are particularly grateful to Prof. Soon Ang. Head, Division of Strategy, Management, & Organization at NBS. Special thanks are also due to Mrs. Pam Russell and Erin Brogan who helped prepare this manuscript, especially the visuals, and to our colleague Colin Clark who assisted us in obtaining demographic information on NBS students. Also helpful was early feedback from colleagues who attended our session at the Association for business communication International Conference in San Diego. Among these Professors Linda Beamer, Pat Cooley, Ronald Dulek, Penny Hirsch, Susan Katz, Jone Rymer, and Charlotte Thralls provided critical and constructive questions and suggestions.

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Abstract

This study presents a conceptual framework for tone in reporting to superiors in writing. It addresses challenges of organizational entry, the important role that writing plays, and needs identified by assessments of soon-to-be new hires graduating from Singapore and the Midwestern U.S. business schools. Their responses to reporting scenarios were scored holistically on overall effectiveness. Analyses of several sub-samples revealed four categories of concern: contribution, deference, ownership, and objectivity. These were associated with linguistic and rhetorical features that may help or hinder tone. Correlations between holistic scores on overall effectiveness and analytical scores using a tool developed from the analyses, suggest that the categories are distinct yet sufficiently related to each other be considered together, although contribution is more closely associated with the overall effectiveness and the other three categories are more tightly associated with each other. The finding that Singaporean respondents scored higher on deference than contribution, whereas the reverse was true for US respondents, suggests differences to discuss when the framework is used pedagogically and possibilities for cross-cultural research.

A Framework For Task and Tone:

Preparing New Entrants For Subordinate Reporting

Organizational entry is a time for new hires to learn behaviors, values, and beliefs associated with their job and organization. As Jablin (2001, p. 756) observes, it "is a time for learning what insiders consider to be 'normal' patterns of thinking and behaving” (see also Schein, 1968; Van Maanen, 1975). New hires, particularly those fresh out of school, may have learned little that explicitly equips them for the web of workplace reporting relationships and responsibilities.

We know that new hires enter the workplace with a set of beliefs about how people communicate in various occupations and work settings and with expectations formed in family relationships, school activities, and various early work experiences (e.g. Bowes & Goodnow, 1996). Contact with recruiting sources and subsequent organizational efforts to socialize employees provide additional information, as do formal orientation programs, employee handbooks, checklists of various kinds (e.g., Arthur, 1991; Jerris, 1993), videotapes introducing organizational traditions, customers, and products (Thralls, 1992), and mentoring or buddy systems (e.g., Davis, 1994).

We also know that the new entrants develop initial interpretation schemes and scripts for the new work environment, primarily through formal and informal communication including interactions with supervisors, coworkers, and management (Jablin, 2001, p. 756; see also Harris, 1994; Teboul, 1997). Composition research shows that individuals learn about their organization’s culture, job requirements, and expectations for communicating when they write, confer on writing, or discuss written deliverables such as proposals and reports (Ackerman, 1991, 1993; Haas & Witte, 2001; Penrose, 1992). For example, Couture and Rymer (1991) found that conversations with their superiors to plan, draft, and revise documents enabled subordinates to get clarity on job responsibilities and discover appropriate ways to do the job. These discussions about textual matters, which Couture and Rymer called "discourse interaction," played an important role in mentoring and organizational learning although this fact went largely unnoticed by the superiors involved.

Considering the learning process facing the new hires and research showing that writing plays a role in this process, we undertook to develop a framework to help soon-to-be new hires prepare for reporting in writing to superiors. We began by assessing this population; identifying difficulties related to tone that might impact their reporting in writing to superiors. Our research subjects were upper-level undergraduates in business programs in Singapore and U.S. universities, individuals with little or no organizational experience who belong to that massive population of recruits who are important for business operations around the world. Our research team also crossed institutions and cultures, as our intent was to develop a framework that could be applied across organizational and cultural contexts. We present the framework as a preliminary step toward helping new entrants observe and discuss features of writing that are known to be consequential for their reporting relationships and responsibilities.

Literature Review

Organizational literature presents several challenges for researchers who want to examine the preparedness of soon-to-be-new hires for subordinate reporting. One problem is deciding what to focus on given the many reporting activities that are known to be significant. This is complicated by the fact that existing studies by and large focus on categories of activities without exploring the means by which these activities are enacted. For example, studies of upward/downward influence have proposed a wide variety of tactics for maintaining subordinate-superior relationships, such as ingratiation, praising or flattering, and by presenting facts in a neutral way to influence others (e.g., Schermerhorn & Bond, 1994) without exploring how these might actually be communicated--How does one "praise" the boss? How are facts presented neutrally? Others have suggested some rhetorical strategies. For example, Tepper (1995) categorized tactics subordinates use to achieve relational stability with their superiors: (1) personal tactics--joking, sharing personal experiences; (2) direct tactics--expressing opinions, expectations, and perceptions of injustices; (3) regulative tactics--providing evidence of being a good employee, avoiding delivery of bad news or asking for direction, overlooking negative comments; and (4) formal contractual tactics--conveying conformity to role requirements and general communication conventions, such as clarifying responsibilities, sticking to agreements, sharing credit for success, accepting criticism, and showing respect (see also Falbe & Yukl, 1992; Schermerhorn & Bond, 1994; Waldron, 1991). Yet, as Morand observed, “while research on influence tactics presumes that patterns of language are important in the implementation of such tactics, the studies rely upon self-report or on abstract survey measures to define the tactics, neglecting the flow of verbalization as a possible data point” (2000, pp. 235-6).

Research on communication competence provides a similarly extensive repertoire of significant skills relevant to subordinate reporting, again with more attention to categories of activities and less to enactment. Needed skills include exchanging information, interviewing, networking, public speaking, advising, persuading, giving instructions and feedback, solving problems, writing, and listening (DiSalvo, 1980; DiSalvo & Larsen, 1987; DiSalvo, Larsen, & Seilor, 1976; Jablin, et al., 1994; Monge et al., 1982). Competency is further associated with individuals who understand and employ appropriate communication patterns (Cooley & Roach, 1984) and with broad personal abilities involving self and role responsibilities, self-monitoring, perspective taking, and displaying empathy (Sypher, 1984; associated Sypher & Sypher, 1983; Sypher & Zorn, 1986; Zorn & Violanti, 1996). Here too the communication activities relevant to new hires and reporting are extensive, but instrumentally unspecified.

As the above examples suggest, enactment remains to be explored. "We are in dire need," wrote Giles, Mulac, Bradac, and Johnson, "of specifying the acoustic, nonverbal, sociolinguistic, and discourse features that make up convergent, divergent, and other communicative strategies in different social settings" (1987, p. 41; see also Bilbow, 1998). Observing reporting specifically, Morand noted: "Superior-subordinate communication scrutinizes interaction processes occurring only at higher levels of analysis" (2000, p. 235). This prompted two underlying questions:

- Why is it important to examine communications at a textual level in relationship to subordinate reporting in writing?
- What textual matters relevant to subordinate reporting are particularly problematic for soon-to-be new hires?

Why Examine Communications at a Textual Level?

There is little question that new hires can expect to write to and for superiors, perhaps increasingly so given downsizing resulting in fewer support staff, the shift from secretaries to administrative assistants whose duties are managerial not clerical, and the prevalence of email—e.g. "Please look over my presentation slides and send me an email if you spot any flaws in my logic." Even at the beginning of computerization of business, Faigley and Miller (1982) found that college graduates in technical and professional occupations wrote at least one full working day out of every five. Writing ability has also been associated with organizational performance. For example, among individuals with two- or four-year degrees, those in the top 20% of writing ability earned on average more than three times more than those whose writing fell into the worst 20% (Locker, 2000; see also Northey, 1990). Looking at the other side of the coin, Locker reported "inability to write is the main reason that Big Five accounting firms fire new hires" (2000, p. 5). Soon-to-be new hires with a repertoire of rhetorical and linguistic writing skills can expect to use and benefit greatly from those skills in the workplace.

More than individual writing skills, theoretical work on "organizational voice" and a stream of research called "writing to learn" suggest a connection between writing and a new entrant's organizational assimilation and participation. According to this research, new entrants benefit in all kinds of ways by knowing how to observe and discuss expectations for writing with supervisors.

Organizational voice.

Organizational voice is defined as "the integrated whole of an organization's linguistic and rhetorical patterns, genre use, media choices, and communication protocols for timing and distribution, all of which are formulated and reformulated situation-to-situation and over time" (Rogers, 2003, p. 11). It involves all levels of textual activity ranging from word choice and sentence construction to communication distribution systems and organizational requirements and expectations regarding them. More than this, organizational voice is "the particular configuration of mutually constructed and dynamic writing and speaking practices and products that enable, define, and re-define the individual roles and collective relationships, tasks, goals, and values of an organization" (p. 11).

The theory of organizational voice (Rogers, 2003) applies the historical notion of voice as a process of self-discovery through writing (as in "finding your voice") to organizational discovery and participation. To participate and thrive in an organization, the theory suggests, an individual must gain some facility with the speaking and writing practices of the organization. These practices comprise the unique textual life of the organization or the organization's voice that has evolved as individuals work together over time. For example, in one organization it may be acceptable to use general email for relational matters--e.g. "There's a silver Opel in the parking structure with the lights on" or "I'm sad to inform you that Mr. Lee's mother passed away on Friday." In another organization such information would be posted on an electronic or actual bulletin board and never sent as a global email. In one organization it may be expected that subordinates use honorifics when addressing the boss--"Thank you Mr. Tan"--whereas elsewhere subordinates may be on a first-name basis with their superiors. To assimilate and participate, the new entrant must come to understand and employ such practices, so the theory goes.

If we accept the notion that an organization's writing practices are in some ways unique and evolving as roles, tasks, goals, and values change, then it seems we must also accept the notion that there are many things about writing that soon-to-be new hires cannot expect to learn prior to organizational entry. But might it be possible to equip soon-to-be new entrants to observe and appropriate the idiosyncratic organizational writing practices that comprise their organization's voice? The theory of organizational voice suggested two challenges for our research:

- Might a conceptual framework be developed to prepare soon-to-be new entrants to observe organizational voice?
- Is it possible to construct a conceptual framework that is specific enough in terms of textual matters to be useful yet broad enough to be relevant across organizational contexts?

Writing to learn.

The stream of research sometimes called writing to learn posits that organizational expectations are learned on the job when individuals write together, confer on writing, or discuss written deliverables such as proposals and reports (Ackerman, 1991, 1993; Haas & Witte, 2001; Penrose, 1992). For example, in their study of writing practices at Exxon ITD, Paradis, Dobrin, and Miller (1985) recount how the prevalent practice of *document cycling* (the process of moving a piece of writing back and forth between writer and supervisor with attendant corrections from the supervisor and revisions from the writer) became a means for determining shared views and expected communicative practices. We also know that document review builds consensus and commitment (van der Geest & van Gemert, 1997) that writing demonstrates membership and facilitates relationships (Ice, 1991; Lipson, 1988; Winsor, 1990, 1999), and further that there is a connection between writing and employee evaluation and promotion decisions (Anderson, 1985; Couture & Rymer, 1991; Scudder & Guinan, 1989). In *The Dynamics of Writing Review: Opportunities for Growth and Change in the Workplace*, Katz (1998a, p. 3, see also 1998b) sums it up by arguing that new entrants learn organizational culture via writing:

> [W]riting review sessions provided opportunities for . . . newcomers to improve their ability to write appropriately for the organization. However, and perhaps more Importantly, writing review sessions also provided opportunities for them to learn about the culture of the organization, to express their resistance to aspects of the organization they found questionable, and to gain the authority necessary to change aspects of the organization they found unacceptable.

Writing activities then are organizational learning opportunities and, therefore, quite significant, particularly for the new hire.

In this stream of research, Couture and Rymer´s (1991) study focused on subordinate reporting specifically. Superior-subordinate discussions of writing, or what they termed *discourse interaction*, proved an effective means for a subordinate writer to get clarity on the nature of his/her tasks and to discover specific job requirements. One writer they interviewed said that he learned to depersonalize his writing (omitting "I" because it signaled an opinion instead of a professional judgment) as a result of discourse interaction with his manager, for example. Unfortunately, although subordinates in Couture and Rymer's study found discourse interactions greatly informative, managers viewed these discussions as necessary to "correct" writer mistakes rather as an important way to transmit organizational knowledge. Thus, for this research, the notion of writing to learn suggested additional challenges:

- Might a conceptual framework be developed to facilitate discourse interaction and, if so, what would it look like?
- What aspect(s) of writing would be significant to focus on in a framework intended to help new entrants to talk about writing for subordinate reporting?

In summary then, research on writing to learn and the theory of organizational voice attach greater significance to writing--not only does a new entrant need composition and editing skills, but also ability to observe and discuss writing. If we agree with Couture and Rymer (1991) and others that more needs to be done to equip soon-to-be new hires to observe and discuss textual matters in reporting to superiors, then what textual matters to focus on becomes a first question. Organizational voice involves all kinds of communication issues ranging from vocabulary to communication timing; issues in writing to learn are similarly broad. Given our collective experience with soon-to-be new hires in business school programs over many years, including needs analyses from writing assessments, and given research findings summarized below (Rogers & Lee-Wong, in press; Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam & Jablin, 1999), we were inclined to focus on textual matters related to "communicative tone."

What Textual Matters Are Problematic for Soon-to-be New Hires?

In this section we begin with definitions of tone and its relationship to politeness; then we review research showing the significance of tone for organizational relationships and obligations for subordinate reporting, including a recent study showing that soon-to-be hires need to receive training in tone beyond what is currently offered.

Definition of tone & relationship to politeness.

Communication tone has been defined as a property of a piece of communication as a whole that resides in the "*cumulative effect* of the grammatical, lexical, and rhetorical choices" that a communicator has made (Perlman, 1981, p. 214). *Cumulative effect* suggests that tone involves a *compilation of textual components* and their *impact as a whole on the sender-receiver relationship*. This relational aspect coincides with Locker (2000, p. 667), who defined tone as the "implied attitude of the author toward the reader and the subject" and with Shelby and Reinsch (1995, p. 306-7) who viewed tone as "receiver response to message characteristics." It further suggests that *tone envelopes politeness*, particularly Brown and Levinson's (1987) linguistic strategies for showing sensitivity to the "face" needs of the receiver by mitigating "Face Threatening Acts" (FTAs) such as requesting and critiquing (see also Goffman, 1967, p. 5; Gumperz, 1982). Brown and Levinson's strategies include a wide range of textual options for expressing respect for receiver's need that his/her wants and actions be regarded as desirable and for taking care so as not to impose on the receiver--e.g. using hedges, passive constructions, inclusives (e.g. “we” and “our”) and honorifics such as "Sir" or "Mr" (see also Brown & Gilman 1991; Fraser, 1990; Goffman, 1959; Ting-Toomey, 1994). Packaged together, such strategies may be interpreted as positive or negative in tone, depending on the situation, particularly the needs and relationship of the interactants. As Fraser and Nolen (1981, pp. 96-97) observed: “No sentence is inherently polite or impolite.” Indeed, he continued, “[i]t is not the expressions themselves but the conditions under which they are used that determine the judgment of politeness.”

An apt example of the situational relativity of tone is the rhetorical debate over direct versus indirect structure: Indirectness is touted as a means of politeness in conflicted situations and as the preferred rhetoric in some cultures (Searle, 1969, 1975). Yet, we also know that directness is not always perceived to be impolite, particularly if the proposition is in some way beneficial for the receiver --e.g. One boss may respond better if bad news is buffered by considerable explanation; another may demand directness (e.g., Leech, 1983; Suchan, 1998). Indeed, directness is appreciated in some surprising cultural contexts. For example, in her study of politeness and face in Chinese culture, Lee-Wong (2000) observed directness valued among intimates (see also Akar, 1998; Blum-Kulka, 1987; Hwang, 1990; Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Takahara, 1986; Wierzbicka, 1985; Yli-Jokipii, 1994).

Also dramatic is Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam and Jablin’s (1999) finding that in Thai organizations, competent employees needed to know how to seek, process and give information, including bad news, and needed to propose new ideas, despite the cultural dictates of *kreng jai* (or “extreme reluctance to impose on anyone or disturb his/her personal equilibrium by direct criticism, challenge or confrontation”). As Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam and Jablin put it, “subordinates are expected to provide their bosses with *all* the information that they need to perform their jobs and maintain face." They (1999, p. 411, 413) conclude: "Subordinates need to walk a fairly high and narrow wire; they must avoid conflict and maintain harmony in their relationships with their supervisors while at the same time they are forthright and complete in sharing information with them." Clearly, subordinate reporting in relationship to tone is both complex and downright tricky.

While acknowledging that tone is situationally dependent and dynamic in its textual manifestation, the researcher seeking to build a conceptual framework for tone can take some comfort in the fact that some patterns of language have relevance across contexts (e.g., David & Baker, 1994; Morand, 1996a, 1996b; Nickerson, 1994). Focusing on subordinate reporting specifically is Morand's (2000, p. 244) analysis of students' laboratory role plays of situations requiring the communication of "directives" (FTAs) to individuals of higher and lower organizational status. He found that "speakers share common linguistic reference points in formulating and anchoring judgments of politeness" and further that polite language is "a finite menu of weighted tactics that users choose from, liberally or sparingly, as circumstances require." Shelby and Reinsch's (1995) empirical analyses showed that politeness strategies, such as "positive emphasis" and "you attitude" (stating things positively from the perspective of the receiver) and buffering bad news (e.g., explaining reasons the insurance claim was denied), accomplish the desired outcomes with business receivers (see also Limaye, 2001; Locker, 1982, 1999). Linguistic and rhetorical strategies relevant to subordinate reporting--clarifying responsibilities, presenting information, proposing new ideas, and reporting bad news--remain to be harvested from scholarship on linguistic politeness explored within the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and anthropology, however (Brown & Gilman, 1991; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 1990; Goffman, 1959, 1967, 1983; Lakoff, 1974; Ting-Toomey, 1994). Managing communicative tone is complicated for anybody, but even more so for soon-to-be new hires anticipating reporting to superiors perhaps.

Direct evidence shows that soon-to-be new hires are ill equipped to manage tone for subordinate reporting. Rogers and Lee-Wong (2003) conducted a series of analyses (1) of upper-level undergraduates' responses to reporting scenarios and (2) of MBA students' email interactions with their domestically located faculty supervisors over the course of their seven-week international company projects and found these groups of soon-to-be new hires greatly challenged by the complexity of tone in reporting to superiors. This population evidenced limited knowledge of politeness strategies and even less understanding of how to package these strategies in writing to superiors. Negotiating tensions between relational demands and individual responsibilities proved particularly problematic. The fact that Rogers and Lee-Wong's research population was drawn from business schools where communication training is provided, suggests that more attention to tone is needed. This coincided with our research team's collective experience with large cohorts of soon-to-be-new hires over many years along with the analyses to identify communication needs that we conducted in conjunction with this research (as described in the Method section).

Requirements for a Framework

The literature described above suggested a number of requirements and goals for developing a framework to help soon-to-be new hires observe and talk about issues of tone for reporting in writing to superiors. First, the framework needed to be transferable across organizations and superior-subordinate dyads--organizational voice theory posits that organizations have unique communication requirements and reporting relationships vary. Second, it was desirable not only to identify categories of concern--what soon-to-be new hires know and need to know about reporting to superiors in writing--but also to associate such concerns with linguistic and rhetorical alternatives for addressing them. New entrants needed more than a list of general tactics if they were to engage in discourse interaction. Identifying textual alternatives known from research to have high utility and importance for reporting was an important goal. As a whole, we envisioned a framework consisting of several issues that are relevant across reporting contexts and examples of actual textual alternatives or options for addressing these issues, depending upon situational needs and expectations. Third, we also intended this research to explore the tension between tasks calling for individual action that might be face threatening and the need to establish and maintain good relationships with superiors (Rogers & Lee-Wong, 2004; Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam & Jablin, 1999). Our overall goal was to produce a decision-making framework highlighting issues related to tone in subordinate reporting that soon-to-be new hires find difficult and that are relevant across organizational contexts, and further to provide a repertoire of textual alternatives for addressing those issues.

Method

We began by investigating the linguistic and rhetorical competencies of Singaporean and US graduating business school students using two performance assessments reporting situations involving face-threatening acts. The research process began with holistic scoring of these assessments on overall effectiveness and needs analysis by teams of evaluators. Then our immediate research team analyzed several sub-samples to construct a preliminary framework with categories of concern. Finally we scored a sub-sample analytically using a tool based on the framework, testing its validity and the uniqueness of the categories.

A collaborative endeavor involving faculty at two business schools with sizable undergraduate populations (one in Singapore, the other in the US), this research evolved. One analysis led to the next in a step-by-step process involving collecting and evaluating samples, identifying categories of concern related to tone, categorizing those traits, and associating those categories with linguistic and rhetorical alternatives. Below we describe the research sites and population, the research team, and finally the process itself including our various analyses.

Research Sites and Population

Both research site schools train large populations of business undergraduates. The US school has approximately 660 Bachelor of Business Administration students (42% women and 26% minorities) with a GPA of 3.6 to 4.0 upon admission to the program. The Asian school is the second largest of the three universities in Singapore and one of the largest business schools in the world with a student population of 4,113 undergraduates at the time of this study, divided between two majors, Business (1,805) and Accountancy (2,308). The majority of these students are locally born ethnic Chinese, who comprise 76.8% of the population of Singapore. The remainder is composed of Malays (13.9%), Indians (7.9%), and various other ethnic groups (1.4%).

English is the language of instruction at both sites; indeed, all the participants in this study had facility with English sufficient to be admitted to university. In Singapore, however, English is one of four official languages: English, Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil. While an increasing number of students speak English as their first language in Singapore, it should be noted that the first language for some students remains their mother tongue. Yet, by and large, students in Singapore are comfortable speaking, reading, and writing in English, and government initiatives, such as Singapore's "Speak Good English Campaign," reinforce the need for high-level English competency for all. Moreover, all the Singaporean participants in this study had fulfilled an advanced English requirement, e.g. the Qualifying English Test (QET) and, in some cases, additional coursework in English.

Research Team

Our research team for this study consisted of five university professors with academic experience ranging from 3 to 20 years and involving management and business communication instruction throughout Asia, the European Union, and the United States at all educational levels (undergraduate, MBA, Executive MBA, Executive Education). Among us, we also had experience designing and delivering programs for companies representing major industries ranging from manufacturing to financial services. For example, prior to joining the faculty at the Singaporean school, one of us worked for a decade in training and development for a petroleum multinational; another has designed and delivered programs for major manufacturing, transportation, and financial organizations, including Asian conglomerates. We also hold MBA and Ph.D. degrees covering rhetoric, composition, linguistics, and management and our cultural backgrounds are Chinese Malaysian, Singaporean, and U.S.

Re-enforcing the Need

The impetus to develop a framework for tone came from several activities at the site schools: (1) the Research Think Tank (RTT), (2) post-assessment debriefings, and (3) efforts to revise the business communication course required for undergraduates at both institutions. A collaborative activity between the site schools, the RTT consisted of five Singaporean and two faculty from the U.S. (including the directors of the communication assessments at each school). Formed to systematically study use of assessment for business education in the US and Asia to prepare undergraduates for the global workplace, RTT members assumed assignments, met regularly over an eight-month period, and compared notes from research, interviewing faculty and evaluators involved with assessments, student consultations, and business communication teaching at both site schools as well as several sister schools, including Singaporean polytechnics, Korean universities, and peer US institutions.

Meanwhile, the faculty at the site schools were sharing assessment procedures, developing assessment prompts, revising assessment protocols together, and comparing scoring results and notes from post-assessment debriefings. (At both site schools, undergraduates take pre- and post-assessments that are scored holistically on overall effectiveness, using criteria shown in Appendix A, and on analytic tools). At the same time and in conjunction with the above, faculty at both schools were revising their undergraduate communication core courses, including considering assessment issues related to students' coursework since assessment results are used to help students set goals for improving their communication skills. One strong conclusion across all these working groups was the need for some sort of evaluative instrument or teaching tool for tone, an instrument that would complement the existing holistic and analytical tools.

It should be noted that tone issues had received some coverage in the existing tools used at these schools. For example, one of the four criteria used for the holistic assessments at both schools, namely "Audience Analysis," specifies that for a strong response "The writer . . . uses appropriate tone" (Appendix A). Although less explicitly, tone issues are also implied in the Task Fulfillment Tool (Rogers & Rymer, 2001; See also 1995, 1996), one of the analytical tools used for student consultations and classes at each school. The Task Tool evaluates the degree to which the writing completes an assignment or task, thereby fulfilling a social need involving reader expectations. Despite this, instructors and researchers at both schools expressed a need to unpack the audience and task issues related to tone. Coupled with research suggesting a need in this area, we were compelled to work on tone.

Data Collection and Holistic Assessment

We began by collecting a large corpus of written responses from upper-level undergraduates in conjunction with the assessments at the Singaporean and US schools using the research-based assessment procedures for prompt writing and piloting, assessment administration, and evaluation (e.g., Rogers & Rymer, 2001; Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2001; Witte & Flach, 1994; Purves, Gorman, & Takala, 1988; Diederich, 1974; Faigley, Cherry, Joliffe, & Skinner, 1985; Lloyd-Jones, 1977; Diederich, French, & Carlton, 1961). A chronology of this process and our research goals at each stage follows below.

Prompt development: Scenarios involving issues of tone.

Both schools regularly use case-based performance assessments involving prompts that present students with scenarios they are likely to face in the workplace. Typically these scenarios require them to write arguments to support or oppose some workplace change or procedure, such as a plan to eliminate a company-training program, a program new hires are known to want and appreciate. In addition, these assessment scenarios usually involve writing to a superior, such as the supervisor proposing cutting costs by eliminating the program. These scenarios confront the student-writer with some challenges involving tone, but less directly than we wanted for this study.

To examine tone more specifically, faculty at the two sites worked together to develop two scenarios involving face-threatening acts: one scenario involved critiquing the major argument the supervisor had prepared for his upcoming sales presentation; the other required providing counter-arguments to the superior's proposal to cut the company's educational benefit program making it more difficult for new entrants to obtain advanced degrees. So as not to over complicate matters, the scenarios specified that the superior requested these tasks--critique on one hand and counter-argument on the other.

Administering the prompts.

We administered these scenarios in controlled environments with assessment monitors and timing limitations--respondents were given 90 minutes to produce a written response, suggestive of the time pressures in a work environment. Responses to the first scenario, totaling 965, were collected from upper-level business school undergraduates at both schools: 636 students at the Singaporean site, 329 at the US site. Responses to the second scenario were collected from 628 of the Singaporean students who had participated in the first scenario. This was given after these Singaporean students had taken a business communication course and was intended to reveal communication problems that may not have been sufficiently addressed in the course. All together we collected 1,593 responses to two scenarios.

Holistic scoring on overall effectiveness.

All 1,593 responses were scored holistically on overall effectiveness by evaluators who regularly score the assessments at both sites (12 in Asia and six in the US), including the authors. While culturally diverse, evaluators at both sites had similar backgrounds as communication professors, trainers and consultants, professional editors, and technical writers. The protocol for holistic scoring at both sites was developed in the early 1980s for assessment programs at New York University Stern School of Business and the University of Michigan Business School based on that used by Educational Testing Service (ETS) involving scoring criteria (Appendix), evaluator norming, and blind scoring to achieve inter-rater reliability (ETS, 2001; see also Faigley et al., 1985; Lloyd-Jones, 1977; Purves, Gorman, & Takala, 1988; Williamson & Huot, 1993; Witte & Flach, 1994). Across the two sites, the percentage of agreement among evaluators was 86% and above.

Identifying and Testing Categories of Concern

To build the framework, we conducted three different analyses on several sub-samples drawn from the corpus of student responses, reviewing the entire corpus as needed to check our conclusions, particularly in the later stages of framework development. Analytical methods began with trait identification to discover categories of concern for this population and ended with scoring using an analytical tool we developed and refined from these trait categories (Appendix B). This analytical scoring allowed us to test the inter-relationships and validity of the categories as detailed below (Lloyd-Jones, 1977; Purves, Gorman, & Takala, 1988; Rogers & Rymer, 2001).

At all stages we used individual, blind analyses, and note taking (listing, categorizing, and finding textual examples of relevant traits) followed by meetings to compare notes and reach consensus as outlined. In this we followed Bhawuk and Triandis (1996), Lucy (1996), and more recently Thatcher (2001, p. 464) who argued that, "to establish valid cross-cultural comparisons, researchers need to start by recognizing similarities based on shared contexts and then considering differences within the framework of these similarities."

Teaching sample re-enforces need.

Our first sample consisted of responses to both scenarios that could be used in consultations and classroom discussions with students at each site. At each site, immediately after completing holistic scoring of the responses to each scenario, four of us and several other evaluators divided the responses into piles of high, middle, and low holistic scores. We read through the responses in these piles to find samples at each scoring level that could be used to illustrate the holistic criteria and tone issues identified via faculty analyses of needs. We eventually agreed on a small set of samples that could be used for teaching and consultations (10 for the first scenario, six for the second).

While this sample was not selected to teach tone per se, closer review re-enforced the conclusion that students at both sites needed more instruction in this area. Tone remained a problem even in responses to the second scenario, which was written by our Singaporean population after they had taken the business communication course. This was the case in spite of the fact that this scenario may have been less challenging in terms of tone--the superior asked for counter arguments rather than a critique of his argument as was required for scenario one. Review of these teaching samples also revealed that even responses receiving high holistic scores on overall effectiveness evidenced difficulties with tone. This suggested that even the best writers among these soon-to-be new hires possessed a rather limited repertoire of linguistic and rhetorical strategies for reporting as seen in their unprofessional pronoun usage, confrontational verbs, and the lack of hedging.

Outlier sample & trait identification exercise.

During the process of selecting teaching samples, we concluded that sub-samples for developing a framework for tone should be drawn from scenario one for which we had responses from both populations that were written prior to business communication instruction. Such samples would allow us to identify categories of concern related to tone for training in both contexts. Responses to the second scenario would be used as validating data as needed.

Thus, to identify categories of tone that were significant for the Singaporean and US respondents, we randomly pulled 20 responses to the first scenario from the high and low scoring piles, creating an outlier sample consisting of 10 Singaporean and 10 US responses, each set consisting of five high- and five low-scoring responses on overall effectiveness. Using a “trait identification procedure” (e.g., Rogers & Rymer, 2001), members of the research team independently followed these four steps:

1. Read each response quickly and awarded an overall score on tone (six being high and one low, as is standard for writing assessments).
2. Read each response several times closely to answer the following questions:
   - What major weaknesses and strengths would you discuss with this student to help him/her better understand key issues of tone?
   - What examples of textual traits or textual features would you use to illustrate these strengths and weaknesses?
3. Clustered and prioritized the strengths and weaknesses in terms of importance for the population and subordinate reporting responsibilities.
4. Listed key categories of concern related to tone, based on findings from the analysis.

It should be noted that in an effort to make our analyses random, before copying the responses used for this analysis we covered the holistic scores. Each of us also shuffled the outlier sample (like a deck of cards) so that our individual readings were in no particular order.

Although our independent analyses of the outlier sample were completed over a period of several weeks and although we were not concerned about inter-rater reliability as would be required for assessment, our percentage of agreement on tone scores was 85%. This suggested some agreement among us about effectiveness of tone in the responses generally. As for categories of concern, we had all listed "deference" and had many of the same textual examples from the responses. Two additional categories were also identified, "ownership" and "objectivity," although agreement on what to call these required several meetings where we revisited politeness literature and discussed specific examples, including examples from the large corpus.

A fourth category, which we eventually labeled "contribution”, was hotly debated. Half of the team associated "poor tone" with a respondent's failure to critique the superior's argument as requested. Some respondents ignored this task altogether and instead suggested additional data that might be added to the argument. "Isn't it the height of arrogance to disregard your superior's request altogether?" one of us argued. "If I ignore the request, isn't this an affront to the superior?"

All members of the research team agreed that "contribution" might not "reside in the cumulative effective of the grammatical, lexical, and rhetorical choices" (Perlman, 1981, p. 214) in contrast to deference, ownership, and objectivity, which clearly recalled linguistic strategies for politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987). At the same time, all of us agreed that task fulfillment had some relationship to tone. Undoubtedly, we were influenced by our familiarity with the Task Fulfillment Tool (Rogers & Rymer, 2001) and to some degree the directive to look at things from the reader's point of view (Locker, 2000; Shelby & Reinsch, 1995). Moreover, we agreed there was some precedent for associating issues of tone and issues of task, recalling studies by Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam and Jablin (1999) and Rogers and Lee-Wong (in press), studies that identify tensions facing subordinates who need to provide information that may be face threatening to the superior. To build on this literature, we agreed to explore this category further.

During the above process, we drafted definitions and agreed on rhetorical and linguistic features from the responses that might hinder or help the positive achievement of each category, drawing on the various examples we had each identified as well as the larger corpus. Uncovering the holistic scores on overall effectiveness during this latter phase of the analysis helped us to classify particular textual examples as hindering or helping.

Testing the categories.

To develop and test our tentative categories, we organized them with definitions and examples into an analytical tool with a six point scoring scale (following that used by ETS). We used this analytical tool (Appendix B) to score a new outlier sample consisting of 100 responses, 50 each from the corpus of Asian responses and US. Each set of 50 consisted of the 25 highest and the 25 lowest scoring responses from the holistic evaluation of overall effectiveness. Correlating the high/low holistic scores on overall effectiveness with the high/low analytical scores from applying our tool would help us ascertain the validity of the framework, telling us something about the relationship of the four categories to each other and to holistic scoring.

Here too it was important that our independent, blind analytical scoring be followed by consensus-reaching since one goal of this research was to develop a framework for tone that could be applied across two cultural contexts, Singapore and the US. Thus, for this analytical scoring of the four tone categories, we met in Singapore and employed the traditional procedures—blind scoring with at least two evaluators for each response with procedural attention to inter-rater reliability followed by discussions of significant differences, which turned out to be fewer than we imagined. Our scoring agreement was 84% across all four categories. Results, including the final framework are presented in the Results section.

Results

We present the results in three sections: the first section describes findings from testing the framework; the second examines what these findings suggest regarding the validity and function of the framework; the third section presents the framework itself.

Results from Testing the Framework

Correlations of holistic scores and analytical scores on the tool based on the framework produced three areas of interest in regard to the way the framework operated as a whole: (1) the means of each category individually and their similarities and relationship to the medians; (2) the differences in the stem leaf analysis of each category; and (3) the relationship of the categories to each other.

Means and medians.

Simple means and medians of the analytical scores on the four framework categories as well as the holistic scores on overall effectiveness provided an initial overview of the relationships between the categories. Each of the four categories of the framework was evaluated on a scale of one to six, with one to three representing various degrees of problems and four to six indicating increasing effectiveness in the category under consideration. The holistic evaluation had been done on a scale of one to three with one low and three high. On this scale, any number below two presented various degrees of problems and two and above indicated increasing overall effectiveness as seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Means and Medians of Scores on Framework Categories and Holistic Overall Effectiveness

Variable	M	SD	Mdn
Categories	**6 pt**	**Scale**	
Contribution	2.76500	1.55124	2.50000
Deference	2.86000	0.98237	3.00000
Ownership	3.34000	1.00725	3.50000
Objectivity	3.43500	0.91468	3.50000
Holistic	**3 pt**	**Scale**	
Holistic	1.78875	0.52184	1.87500
	3.5775 (6 pt scale)	*1.04368 (6 pt scale)*	*3.7500 (6 pt scale)*

Comparison of these data suggests that the framework categories' scores reflect the holistic scores**.** All the tool categories had means and medians below the effectiveness level of four, and this level of competence was repeated in the holistic mean, which was below the effectiveness level of two. These general data, therefore, imply some relationship between overall effectiveness and the categories, a difference that is more pronounced in the Spearman correlations discussed later.

Stem leaf analysis.

The stem leaf analysis, created by visualizing the actual number of responses scoring at each level (SAS statistical system, univariate procedure), suggests that among the four framework categories, contribution differs from deference, ownership, and objectivity as seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Number of Responses at Each Scoring Level in Each of the Framework Categories

Score	Contribution	Deference	Ownership	Objectivity
6.0	x			
5.8				
5.6				
5.4	xx		x	
5.2				
5.0	xxxxxxxxxxxx	xx		xxxxxxx
4.8				
4.6				
4.4	xxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxx
4.2				
4.0	xxxxx		xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
3.8				
3.6				
3.4	xxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	
3.2				
3.0	xxxxxxx		xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
2.8				
2.6				
2.4	xxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxx
2.2				
2.0	xxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxx
1.8				
1.6				
1.4	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxxxxx	xxx
1.2				
1.0	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	xxxxxx	x	x

The contribution category shows more scores falling in the top and the bottom areas with a dip in-between, whereas the other three categories show scores generally bulging in the middle with fewer at the top and bottom.

Relationship of categories to each other.

Complementing the stem leaf analysis and means and mediums, the relationships between categories became clearer via the Spearman correlations. The two points of interest are (1) the contribution category was positively correlated with the holistic scores and (2) the deference, ownership, and objectivity categories were positively correlated with each other but less so with the holistic scores. Reviewing the means for the correlated categories shows a general relationship, but using the Spearman Correlation Coefficients model we get a 'p' value of

<0.0001 for the contribution and holistic scores. We also get a 'p' value of <0.0001 for the deference, ownership, and objectivity scores, as seen in Table 3. This suggests the means/medians data give too positive a picture of the relationship between the holistic scores and the analytical scores on the framework categories.

Table 3

Spearman Correlation Coefficients of Scores on Framework Categories and Holistic Overall Effectiveness

	Contribution	Deference	Ownership	Objectivity	Holistic
Contribution	1.00000	0.19338	0.10740	0.25455	0.58348
		0.0539	0.2875	0.0106	<.0001
Deference	.019338	1.00000	0.46583	0.51138	0.20084
	0.0539		<.0001	<.0001	0.0451
Ownership	0.10740	0.46583	1.00000	0.62597	0.11963
	0.2875	<.0001		<.0001	0.2358
Objectivity	0.25455	0.51138	0.62597	1.00000	0.26382
	0.0106	<.0001	<.0001		0.0080
Holistic	0.58348	0.20084	0.11963	0.26382	1.00000
	<.0001	0.1451	0.2358	0.0080	

Asian and US differences: Evaluators and respondents.

It is also noteworthy that the Asian and US respondents' holistic scores were almost identical in the two environments, as seen in Table 4. Scoring with the analytical tool based on the framework, however, picked up differences in the contribution and deference categories as seen in Table 5.

Table 4

Asian and US Respondent Holistic Overall Effectiveness Scores ***(3 point scale)***

Respondents	No.	M	SD	Min. score	Max score
Asian	50	1.785	.06309	1	3
US	50	1.7925	.03901	1	2.25

Table 5

*Asian and US Respondent Scores on Contribution and Deference****(6 point scale)***

Variable	Sample	No.	M	P value
Contribution	NBS	50	2.43	
Contribution	UMBS	50	3.1	0.0301
Difference			-0.67	
Deference	NBS	50	3.24	
Deference	UMBS	50	2.48	<.0001
Difference			0.76	

These analytical data show that the US respondents were slightly more successful at contribution than their Asian counterparts, whereas the Asian respondents scored significantly higher on deference than US respondents.

Interpreting the Findings

Three points of interest emerged from these data and contributed to our final version of the framework: (1) contribution was differentiated from the other three categories; (2) deference, ownership, and objectivity worked as a set of categories, and (3) the analytical tools based on the framework revealed differences between the Singaporean and US populations which were not as apparent from the holistic and analytical assessments used at these sites.

Contribution differentiated from other three categories.

The fact that contribution differed from the other three categories was not surprising; recall that it had been a point of dissention within our group. We understand that success in contribution resides to a great degree in the substance or content of the communication rather than in the arrangement and volume of particular linguistic and rhetorical features. Content scoring high on contribution would point out the flaw in the superior's argument and explain how the argument might be fixed. If this information was missing, then the score for contribution was low. Some degree of success in critiquing the argument was noted, such as offering suggestions without identifying the flaw explicitly, or identifying only one aspect the flaw. But generally, as the stem leaf chart confirms, degrees of success were less detectable for contribution than for the other categories, at least for situations like those in our primary scenario. As the stem leaf chart suggests, incremental success may be observed for deference, ownership, and objectivity. This too makes sense since these categories involve social or interpersonal issues and the use of various politeness strategies involving numerous linguistic and rhetorical alternatives that can be packaged in any number of ways.

In the correlative data, contribution also split from the other three categories. Contribution correlated positively with the holistic scores while the other categories were generally consistent with one another but not as strongly correlated with the holistic scores. This difference may be explained by reviewing the focus of the holistic evaluation. First, remember that our holistic scoring was of overall effectiveness with a strong emphasis on audience analysis, including whether or not the respondent completed the assigned task. This is also the essence of the contribution category; therefore, the positive correlation between the holistic and contribution scores was not unexpected. Contribution focuses on the writing as a deliverable providing the information requested or not; deference, ownership, and objectivity emphasize the subordinate to superior relationship involving the cumulative effect from using a variety of linguistic and rhetorical features with more or less sophistication. Ability to show deference means that the communicator will not make the superior look unintelligent in describing the flaw in his argument, for example.

Although the above suggests the similarities between the deference, ownership, and objectivity categories, there are clear differences between them as well. The linguistic choices used to express each of these categories vary--e.g. "we" and "our" pronouns fall into the ownership category whereas verb constructions such as "there are" and passives are associated with objectivity. It was not particularly surprising then to discover that some responses show strength in one category but not the other two. For example, a response that uses many inclusives (e.g., "we" and "our" pronouns) but few signals of deference or objectivity (e.g., hedges such as "might" or "perhaps") might be interpreted as overwhelmingly arrogant. The presence and absence of such linguistic and rhetorical options can seem subtle and difficult for the untrained observer to pick out of the text without some guidance, such as a framework and textual examples.

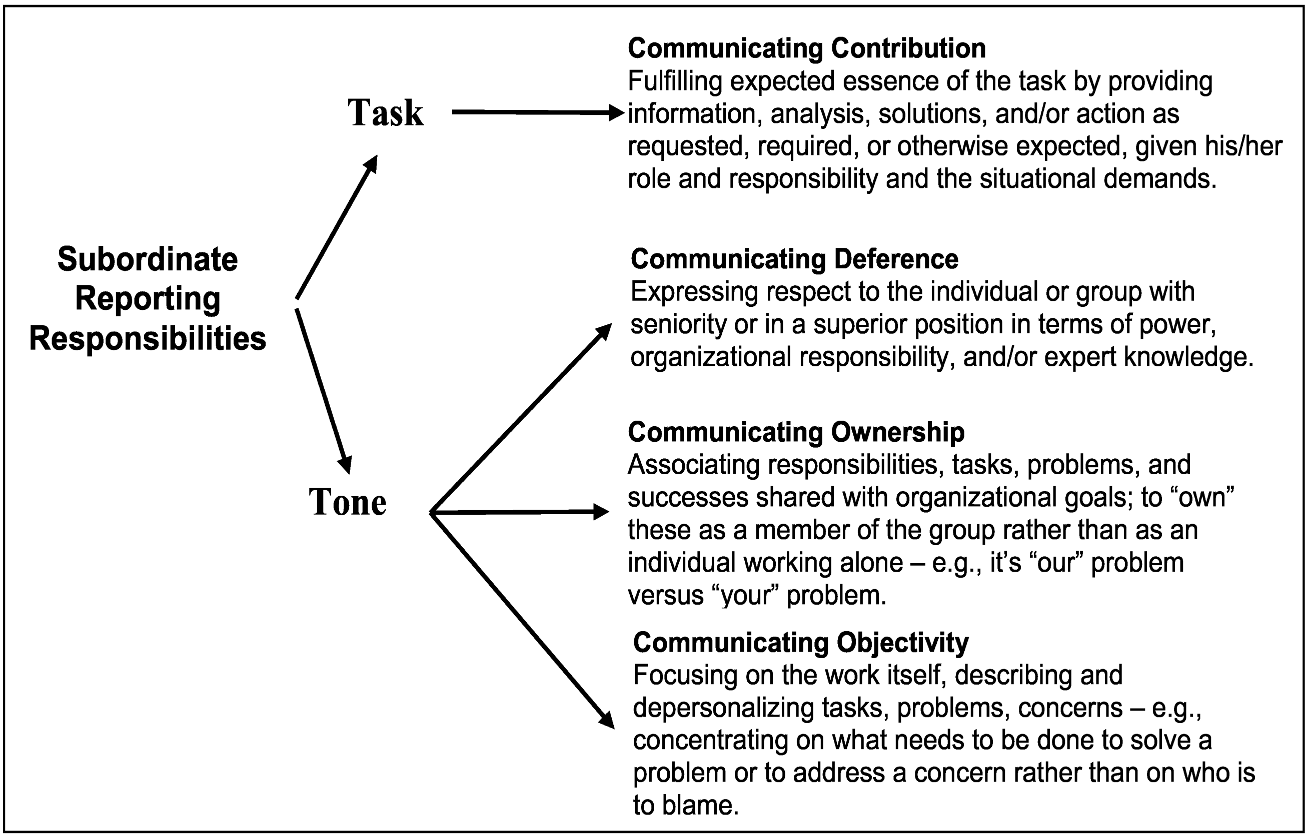
These findings suggest that the framework covers two distinct but inter-related aspects of subordinate reporting: (1) contribution, or the extent to which the substance of the report provides the information requested, or completes the assigned task; and (2) deference, ownership, and objectivity, or the social or relational awareness demonstrated by the cumulative effect of the linguistic and rhetorical components. The fact that deference, ownership, and objectivity vary incrementally and involve cumulative effects of diverse textual features suggests that they are more directly tied to tone as it is generally understood; whereas, the relationship of contribution to tone remains undetermined.

Results also suggest that the framework is valid and can be reliably employed by evaluators across cultural contexts. Validity is established by the high degree of correlation between the scores on the framework categories and the holistic scores on overall effectiveness. Consistency in scoring and consensus across our Asian and US research team suggest that the goal of building a framework that could be applied across cultures, as specified by Bhawuk and Triandis (1996), Lucy (1996) and Thatcher (2001), was achieved.

Framework for Tone in Subordinate Reporting

The resulting framework shown in the Figure highlights two aspects of subordinate reporting, task and tone. The single category under task, called contribution, examines whether the communication itself provides what was requested; meanwhile, the categories of deference, ownership, and objectivity involve the subordinate's obligation to manage the reporting relationship. Success in contribution means that the individual communicates something the superior requested or needs. Perhaps more than the word "task," the category here called "contribution" implies the existence of a receiver; that the writer has some sort of obligation to provide something a reader has requested or needs. Success in deference, ownership, and objectivity means the individual communicates in a way that shows some understanding of the superior's personal position or expertise.

Figure 1. Communication Framework for



Clearly, none of these categories is new: deference, ownership, and objectivity are all suggested in politeness literature; contribution appears in work on task (Rogers & Rymer, 2001). Rather, this study identified these task and tone categories as problematic for soon-to-be new hires and, more than this, brought these categories together in a framework targeted on a recurring event of some consequence for this population, namely subordinate reporting. It is also noteworthy that our results justified keeping the task and tone categories together: although different, contribution was also shown to be related to the other three categories. As a result, the framework suggests that task and tone have something to do with each other, and that relational concerns are inherent to reporting the information needed or requested.

Another feature of the framework is that it associates communication activities with textual choices. Whereas all four categories are broad universals and likely to be relevant across contexts, the associated lists of textual examples are suggestive of the linguistic and rhetorical alternatives a subordinate may choose depending upon the particulars of the reporting situation.

Moreover, as shown in Table 6, some textual alternatives may help and others may hinder the positive achievement of these categories. Textual alternatives that may help were drawn from responses that scored high on overall effectiveness; choices listed as hindering, from responses with low effectiveness scores. Thus, the framework does not prescribe solutions, but rather suggests the type and range of linguistic and rhetorical strategies from which to choose. All in all, the framework is intended to enhance a new entrant's powers of observation and management of reporting in writing to superiors.

Table 6

Decision-Making Framework for Subordinate Reporting

Contribution		**Deference**	
Degree to which communicator fulfills the expected essence of the task by providing information, analysis, solutions, and/or action as requested, required, or otherwise expected, given his/her the role and responsibility and the situational demands.		Degree to which communicator appropriately defers to the individual or group with seniority or in a superior position in terms of power, organizational responsibility, and/or expert knowledge.	
May Help	**May Hinder**	**May Help**	**May Hinder**

Providing sufficient context
• Suggesting what the communication provides, e.g.
  • "information relevant to or useful for"
  • "analysis required for XYZ"
• Focusing on information asked for or expected by the audience
• Identifying the problem, e.g.
  • "While the central figures are surely important statistics, they do not definitely demonstrate the reliability of our bearings"
  • "It is highly misleading to conclude from the given statistics that 99% of our customers are satisfied with our product …"
 	
Providing adequate specifics regarding requested response
• Identifying flaw in argument and suggesting how to fix it as the boss asked, e.g.
  • "Figures covering two years are probably not enough …"
  • "I suggest that we obtain figures that span a time period of about ten years"
  • "Daewoo would likely prefer results taken from an independent source"
	Insufficient discussion of tasks
	• Omitting information asked for or expected by audience, i.e. not identifying flaws in the argument
	
	Off-topic: Ignoring or not focusing on task
	• Suggesting how the presentation might be done, e.g.
	  • -"I recommend highlighting the benefits…"
	  • "You may wish to mention
	  • offshore advantages or use economic theory to prove that using IBI will make Daewoo better off in terms of both quality and cost"
	• Bringing in extraneous information, e.g.
	  • "One gap in your proposal involves competition"
	
	Superfluous or incorrect information
	• Providing information already known by reader (how to sell bearings, etc), e.g.
	  • "We must keep in mind that Daewoo is currently manufacturing their own bearings"
	• Including incorrect information, e.g. wrong analysis of flaw
		Hedges
		• "The data does not necessarily show…."
		• "Perhaps you can give figures for a period of 5-10 years…"
		• "... possibly ABC Motor France complaint rate data could support our claim..."
		
		Soft modals
		• "We may also want to emphasize
		• "It might work better to..."
		• "It might be inappropriate …"
		
		Qualification via limits of personal opinion
		• "The central selling point of the argument, as I understand it, is …"
		
		Conditional "if"
		
		• "It may be appropriate if we …"
		• "It may also reflect well if we …"
		
		Genuine questions (inquiry):
		• "Might we find some data on...?"
		• "Do we have...?"
		
		Reference to reader by name (positive/neutral statements)
		• "Mr Oberle's ideas … are brilliant"
		• "Another point Mr Oberle might want to consider …"
			Strong Modals, "must do this", "should be sure to"
			
			Absolute Verb "to be" (which may suggest inappropriate/unrecognized authority)
			• "This is a failure in logic."
			• "ABC is the only company…"
			
			Imperatives (telling versus suggesting what to do)
			• "Instead, focus on..."
			• "Do emphasize..."
			
			Challenging questions
			• "How can you state with certainty that...?"
			• "Did you leave them out intentionally?"
			
			Confrontational statements:
			• "You have not indicated …"
			• "You have not addressed …"
			
			Condescending, insincere, or instructional statement (i.e.., assuming superior role or communicating little or no recognition of the relationship)
			• "My advice to you is..."
			• "Thank you for the great honor.."
			• "Your outline … is a great start."
			
			Reference to reader by name (negative statements)
			• "In all honesty, Mr Oberle, you have not proven …"
			• "Mr Oberle, with this reasoning …"

Table 6 continued

Ownership		**Objectivity**	
Degree to which communicator relates responsibilities, tasks, problems, and successes to shared organizational goals; to "own" these as a member of the group rather than as an individual working alone – e.g. it's "our" problem versus "your" problem		Degree to which communicator focuses on the work itself, describing and depersonalizing tasks, problems, concerns, e.g. concentrating on what needs to be done to solve a problem or to address a concern rather than on who is to blame.	
May Help	**May Hinder**	**May Help**	**May Hinder**
Inclusive pronouns (with fewer "I + you" constructions) – "we", "our", "us" , e.g. • "I see we made a mistake..." rather than "you made a mistake" • "your argument" becomes "our argument" • "I have come up with a number of pointers below which might enhance our case, and also a number of possible questions that could potentially weaken our present stance" **Shared jargon, acronyms, or expressions** • "Did you file the *FD-1692* from your Farr Dealership visit?" • "Shall we target JBC, JBTC, or MCQ?" **Associating self references** • Using organizational names, labels in referencing self, e.g. • "As a long-time Honeyweller, I believe..." **Transitioning from "I" to inclusive "We" references** • I've had experience with such calculations, much like Rajiv who also understands such procedures. • The client asked me to . . . so we might want to respond by . . ."	**Separating self references** • Beginning and ending with "I" and "you" statements • "My support for your pitch..." • "...your numbers..." • "Good luck with your proposal." • "Hopefully, these suggestions will be of some benefit to you..." • "Thank you for the opportunity to critique and strengthen your argument...I have made some suggestions..." **High formality; Aloofness** • Latinate, literary, or many multi-syllable words: "utilize," "expedite," "formulate," "pursuant," "procure", "...for your perusal, sir." • Multiple sentences of more than 20 words **Flattery, particularly to a superior** • "I believe that your current argument is persuasive" • "In order to optimize your persuasive ability …" • "It is a great privilege to aid you in this sales presentation"	**Passives** e.g. "could be avoided", "could be included" **Removing pronouns, especially** "the needless you", • "Can we assume that …?" (Not "Do you file a complaint every time …?" • "Here are a few suggestions…" (Not "I have a few suggestions for you.") • "…, it is difficult to infer …" **Neutral words & transitions**, e.g. "an important point", "some suggestions", "the issue of" **Existential "there" and "it" as subject** • "…there are very few complaints…"; "It will be appropriate…" **Suggestion as a question or request**, e.g. "Why don't we use XYZ?"; "Is it possible …?" **Numbered list** to remove individuals and/or relationships, e.g. "Three suggestions follow …" **Outsider view** (playing devil's advocate, explaining via hypothetical situation or outside example), e.g. "ABC France [outside company] may not agree …", "what would motivate me …?"	**Judgmental words or statements rather than description/explanation** • "That's an excellent argument" • "Your point is a good one" • "I am impressed by the argument …" **Absolutes (e.g. "to be" or "It + to be")** • "It is necessary to …", • "Your pitch is …" **Non-neutral words** • "bogged down in logistics" • "hard sell", "non-sequitur argument" **Negative word choices & transitions** • "empty" , "dubious" , "poor" • "For starters" , "however" • "Furthermore" (i.e. transitions that suggest a long list of problems) **Fault-finding words connected with personal pronouns** • "There are a few faulty assumptions and a lack of definitions within your sales pitch that I believe weakens the overall argument" • "Your three points to support your case fail to properly conclude …"

Conclusion

Research shows that new hires enter the workplace with some understanding about how people communicate in diverse settings and that organizations provide various kinds of information and training to help new entrants understand reporting demands. This is not enough. According to the theory of organizational voice, new entrants can expect to encounter unique practices and ways of communicating they have not known before. Many of these practices--especially at a textual level involving reporting relationships--will not be explained in orientation materials or training; indeed, they may be taken for granted by experienced hands. We also know that superiors do not recognize the value of discussing writing with their new reports, although research on writing to learn shows that such discourse interactions can significantly help new hires understand what is expected of them. A new entrant will have much to learn on his or her own.

Learning an organization's voice was the challenge of this research. Targeting soon-to-be new hires, we developed a framework focusing on reporting to superiors in writing. We identified categories of concern for soon-to-be new hires in two areas: task and tone. These were associated with textual components of writing that may help or hinder reporting. Knowing these categories and textual alternatives may help novices observe them and appropriate them as is expected in their new environment—e.g., “If I can see what others do successfully, perhaps I can replicate it.”

While we built the framework for novices with little or no professional reporting experience, it may prove useful for others as well. Individuals accept new jobs, get promoted, change departments, and move to different companies and countries. In the course of such transitions, they face different and sometimes quite unique reporting roles and responsibilities.

Related to this are cultural differences that the framework can identify. The fact that Singaporean students in our sample scored higher on deference than their US counterparts illustrates that the framework can reveal differences and deficiencies that may not be detected via traditional tools. Our culturally diverse research population and team, coupled with consensus reaching at every stage of the research process, was designed so that the resulting framework would be applicable across contexts, including cultural.

Since its development, members of our research team have used the framework with undergraduates, MBAs, Executive MBAs in global programs, and upper-level managers participating in executive education. In every case we have asked these individuals to make judgments about writing, including their own. Table 6 works quite well for such activities, particularly in conjunction with the six-point scoring grid in Appendix B. Comparing scores generates classroom discussion; suddenly the categories become real and memorable. In our experience, such discussions are more sophisticated and helpful if trainees are also asked to justify their scores by pointing out specific features in the writing--e.g. "What linguistic and rhetorical components support your conclusion that this piece of writing scores low on ownership?"

While we have quite successfully used the framework to generate meaningful classroom discussion, we know that additional research is needed to find out if and how the framework helps new hires. The framework also begs use for cross-cultural research, perhaps scoring writing samples to see if differences fall along cultural lines as one might expect--e.g. the Singaporean students in our sample scored higher on deference than their US counterparts. Scores on the framework may also help researchers select research samples and provide statistical analyses to complement close linguistic and rhetorical analyses.

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Appendix A
Criteria for Holistic Evaluation

Audience Adaptation

The writer

- shows recognition of relationship between writer & reader
- is aware of reader's perspective and concerns
- structures and develops information/claims that lead to the desired response
- uses appropriate tone

Organizational Strategy

The writer

- chooses an organizational pattern that is appropriate for the message and the reader
- develops the message from beginning to end with a clear sense of logic
- has paragraph-to-paragraph and sentence-to-sentence transitions so that the message is coherent

Content Development

The writer

- presents information and/or claims clearly and consistently
- uses both general and specific information and/or data to support points of information or claims
- presents content that is essential rather than trivial
- presents enough information to effectively inform or persuade

Language Control

The writer

- manages grammar, spelling, and mechanics so that they do not interfere with comprehension and so that management goals for the situation may be achieved
- uses vocabulary suited to the situation
- has overall mastery of correct sentence structure

Appendix B

Analytical Tool for Subordinate Reporting

Contribution: Degree to which the communication content provides information, analysis, solutions, and action as requested, required, or otherwise expected given the role and responsibility of the communicator and the situational demands.

1	2	3	4	5	6

No, Little, or Inappropriate Contribution **Some Contribution** **Appropriate Contribution**

Examples that show/hinder Contribution to justify score:

Deference: Degree to which communication appropriately defers to the individual or group with seniority or in a superior position in terms of power, organizational responsibility, and/or expert knowledge.

1	2	3	4	5	6

No, Little, or Inappropriate Deference **Some Deference** **Appropriate Deference**

Examples that show/hinder Deference to justify score:

Ownership: Degree to which communication relates responsibilities, tasks, problems, and successes to shared organizational goals; to "own" these as a member of the group, rather than as an individual working alone—e.g. it's "our" problem versus "your" problem.

1	2	3	4	5	6

No, Little, or Inappropriate Ownership **Some Ownership** **Appropriate Ownership**

Examples that show/hinder Ownership to justify score:

Objectivity: Degree to which communication focuses on the work itself, describing and depersonalizing tasks, problems, concerns, e.g., concentrating on what needs to be done to solve a problem or to address a concern rather than on who is to blame.

1	2	3	4	5	6

No, Little, or Inappropriate Objectivity **Some Objectivity** **Appropriate Objectivity**

Examples show/hinder Objectivity to justify score: