SUBJECT LINES IN MANAGERIAL MEMORANDA:
CONTEXTUAL CHOICES AND THE COMMUNICATION
OF WRITER OBJECTIVE

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FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY

Abstract

While the desirability of well-crafted introductory devices is assumed, research indicates that memorandum subject lines have greater importance and potential than indicated by pedagogical advice or business practice. Almost three decades of experimentation in education research indicates that titles, topic statements, initial summaries and other "advance organziers," significantly heighten reader comprehension and retention. Moreover, as precursors, subject lines help readers determine how to treat a document, whether to read, skim, consider, transfer, neglect, file or destroy it. Either by default or by design, subject lines have persuasive impact.

Research findings suggest that business writers do not understand the strategic importance of subject lines. Over 480 subject lines, composed in controlled environments for specific business situations by business writers at all levels of proficiency, were analyzed. Analysis reveals that while subject lines comply with pedagogical directives for length and content--subject lines are usually short and descriptive--they often lack the focus and persuasiveness required for business contexts. Given the myriad choices a writer has in each communication situation, be they grammatical or syntactical, propositional or political, it may be less desirable to settle for subject lines which are little more than neutral labels.

One of the early modern teachers of business report writing, J. Raleigh Nelson, proposed the use of headings to "assure even the most cursory reader against confusion," in a chapter entitled "Sectional Headings as Evidence of Design" (p. 86). Since Nelson's 1952 proposal, headings, titles and subject lines commonly appear in business documents, and pedagogical materials for business writing typically include instruction on their use. Such introductory devices are said to aid the reader and expedite document handling and some practitioners believe the success or failure of a document may stem from the effectiveness of its beginning. "Because they're so important," wrote Holcombe and Stein (1981) in Writing for Decision Makers, "beginnings ... warrant special care" (pp. 85-6). William Zinsser (1976) expressed the same sentiment for a general readership in On Writing Well. "The most important sentence in any article is the first one. If it doesn't induce the reader to proceed to the second sentence, your article is dead" (p. 65). Writing specifically about the conventional opener for a business memoranda, Sherry Sweetnam stated in The Executive Memo (1986) "Your subject title is your advertising piece .... [and] is one of the most underused power hooks" (p. 84).[1]

While the desirability of well-crafted introductory devices is assumed, research indicates that headings, titles and subject lines have greater importance than many pedagogical discussions suggest or than some business writers realize. This study examines subject lines as introductory devices in business memoranda.[2] Over 480 subject lines, composed for specific business contexts, were analyzed. In the process, a number of questions were considered: How important are subject lines for reader comprehension and

retention? To what extent do subject lines reveal writers' communication objectives? What structural approaches are regularly used in the composition of subject lines? Addressing these queries advances the concept that business writing must be contextually based and strategically driven. More specifically, this study indicates that business writers compose subject lines as pedagogical materials suggest and yet do not entirely understand the extent to which subject lines are significant persuasive devices which can affirm or negate their reasons for writing.

Subject lines collected for this study were composed by 74 field managers from a Fortune 500 company and 409 MBA students, 77% of whom had business experience.[3] To evaluate their managerial writing skills, these individuals were given 50 minutes to compose a persuasive memorandum in response to a short case. Subject lines were provided by these memoranda. Two comparable cases were used, each involving a specific business situation with which the participants could readily identify. The Batton Industries Case asked writers to oppose a superior on the company policy of granting employees release time to obtain an MBA. The South Telco Case asked writers to outline expectations for a lower-level employee who was failing in his job. Using writing samples based on two cases allowed the researcher to examine the kinds of subject lines written for different contexts, and facilitated some comparison.

To induce composition of subject lines, participants were asked to write their memoranda on stationery with the company logo and the following heading:

To:

From:

Date:

Subject:

Prompted by the heading "Subject," only 24 of the 507 participants in the Batton and Telco experiments did not write subject lines for their persuasive memoranda, therefore, 483 subject lines were collected for analysis.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SUBJECT LINES FOR COMPREHENSION AND RETENTION

The value of subject lines is assumed by most; business professionals regularly write them and their importance is noted in the classroom. A felicitous subject line, like a one-line abstract, tells the reader what the memoranda covers and indicates how the document should be treated. Provided it is not overlooked, the subject line prompts the reader to do something with the document--to read, skim, consider, transfer, neglect, file, or destroy it. In other words, the subject line helps the reader answer the question, "What's in it for me?" Writers, midst the rush of a busy business day, may forget that readers use subject lines to evaluate the significance of a memorandum; therefore, either by default or by design, a subject line is a persuasive device.

That subject lines contribute to the success of business memoranda is further demonstrated by education research. After David Ausubel introduced the notion of "advanced organizers" in 1960, researchers staged a number of

experiments to determine the effect of "orienting passages" on readers.[4] Ausubel tested "the hypothesis that the learning and retention of unfamiliar but meaningful verbal material can be facilitated by the advance introduction of relevant subsuming concepts (organizers)" (p. 267). Ausubel asked participants in several experiments to study a 2,500-word passage about an unfamiliar topic, namely, the metallurgical properties of steel. Prior to contact with the passage, some participants read an introduction or what Ausubel called an "advance organizer" containing "substantive background material of a conceptual nature presented at a much higher level of generality, abstraction, and inclusiveness than the steel material itself" (p. 271). Other participants read a traditional historical introduction of identical length. Examination showed that those individuals provided with the advance organizer remembered more of the test passage than those who read the historical introduction, thus, Ausubel concluded, "the greater use of appropriate (substantive rather than historical) advance organizers in the teaching of meaningful verbal material could lead to more effective retention" (p. 271).

In Ausubel's wake, researchers defined "advance organizers" to include simple summaries, topic statements, titles or brief verbal or visual introductions which they tested in a variety of experiments.[5] While there appear to be no studies on the effectiveness of subject lines as advance organizers for business memoranda, findings from experiments involving thematic titles and topic statements certainly apply--subject lines are the thematic titles or topic statements for business memoranda. Most relevant are studies by Dooling and Lachman, Bransford and Johnson, as well as, Kalt

and Barrett which affirm the significance of titles and topic statements.

Dooling and Lachman (1971) designed an experiment to evaluate the impact of titles on reader comprehension and recall. They asked two groups to read a vague, metaphorical passage. One group read a titled passage; another group read an untitled passage. Afterwards, individuals in both groups completed a questionnaire requiring them to recall the passage. Through blind ratings of the participants' questionnaires, it was determined that 116 of the 180 individuals who read the titled passage understood the specific thematic content of that passage, whereas, only 4 of the 180 individuals who read the untitled passage were similarly successful. Dooling and Lachman concluded that thematic titles serve as interpretive and mnemonic devices, for the comprehension and the retention of prose passages.[6]

Other researchers reinforced Dooling and Lachman's findings. Through a series of experiments, Bransford and Johnson (1972) demonstrated that individuals who were given topics prior to hearing a passage had a higher comprehension level than individuals who were not.[7] Kalt and Barrett (1973) tested the effectiveness of various advanced organizers in technical manuals. Working with an experimental group of 40 engineers, they found that initial summaries facilitated learning and enhanced the effectiveness of a manual as a reference tool. Taken together, these studies strongly suggest that information is more comprehensible, memorable and functional when introductory devices such as titles, topic statements and subject lines are provided.

Research demonstrating the significance of advanced organizers

generates two general questions about the use of subject lines in managerial memoranda: How do managers and students in management training typically employ subject lines? How might subject lines be used more effectively? Analyzing the word usage, structure and length of the 483 Batton and Telco subject lines and describing the situations for which they were written, addresses these questions.

SUBJECT LINES AND IMPACT OF WORD USAGE

Mark Twain said, "A powerful agent is the right word. Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words in a book or a newspaper the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt" (1906). Analysis of the subject lines gathered for this study, reinforced the idea that meaning can change with the addition, deletion or placement of a single word. Although respondents to the Batton and Telco cases were writing for the same readers and the same situations, they composed a variety of subject lines. Evaluating their diverse responses generated subject line categories and continua which demonstrate the communication impact of individual word usage in specific contexts.

Batton and Telco Categories and Continua

Analysis reveals two basic types of Batton and Telco subject lines. Like neutral labels or titles, some subject lines introduce memorandum topics without revealing a writer's communication objective. The subject

line "Batton's MBA Studies Policy," for example, introduces a specific company policy, but does not indicate the writer's reasons for communicating about that policy. Subject lines limited to a topic statement are categorized as "Neutral" (N). By contrast, other subject lines include "directed words" which reveal a writer's communication objective. The subject line "Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy," for example, suggests writer support for "Batton's MBA Studies Policy" with the directed word "Value." Subject lines with directed words which explicitly or implicitly reveal a writer's intention, are categorized as "Directed" (D).[8]

D subject lines are subcategorized into two groups. One group of D subject lines includes "directed words" which affirm the communication objectives given the Batton and Telco participants. Another group of D subject lines includes "directed words" which negate the participants' given communication objectives. Therefore, D subject lines are either "Directed-Affirming" (DA) or "Directed-Negating" (DN). To illustrate the difference between DA and DN subject lines and to expose the variety of subject lines within each group, subject lines are placed on continua. N subject lines are positioned in the center while D subject lines are positioned at points either to the left or the right of center: DA on the left and DN on the right as illustrated by Figure 1. Specific placement of any one DA or DN subject line is determined by the extent to which that subject line either confirms or counters the writer's communication objective. Some Batton and Telco DA and DN subject lines assert the writer's intention like proposition statements; others only hint at the writer's goals. Batton and Telco continua illustrate this diversity.

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        4    3    2    1         N         1    2    3    4
   ←——I————I————I————I——————————I——————————I————I————I————I——→
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"Directed-Affirming"   "Neutral"   "Directed-Negating"
        (DA)   (N)   (DN)

Figure 1. Subject line continuum.

To further facilitate comparison, "representative" subject lines were composed to characterize the subject lines at each position on the continua. To create representative subject lines, "directed words" and "appropriate proper nouns" were identified. Usually the most commonly used directed words were employed in the representative subject lines. Furthermore, since directed words appear as first words in the majority of the D subject lines, all the representative subject lines begin with directed words. In addition to directed words, representative subject lines include appropriate proper nouns. Company, policy and department names, found in most of the subject lines collected, were standardized in the representative subject lines. References to "Batton" and "MBA policy" became "Batton's MBA Studies Policy" in representative Batton subject lines, and references to "department" and "I & R" became "I & R Department" in representative Telco subject lines. While representative subject lines do not account for the handful of anomalies (which are discussed throughout the paper), representative subject lines are appropriate characterizations which foster useful comparison.

Although Batton and Telco subject line categories and continua are appropriate, specific placement is debatable, even though follow-up tests indicate the researcher is "on the right track."[9] They are offered as reflective devices to heighten managerial awareness, and as pedagogical tools to generate lively classroom discussion. Subject line categories and continua facilitate analysis and illustrate how individual words impact interpretation.

Batton Industries Case

The Batton Industries case placed the writer in the position of a subordinate who is instructed by his/her immediate superior, Jennifer McFee, to compose a memorandum in favor of continuing Batton's policy of granting leaves of absence to employees working on MBA degrees. Batton's new president, James Wuest, proposes that the company discontinue this practice, a view which Jennifer McFee supports. The writer has just begun MBA studies and has strong concerns about the president's proposal. Participants in the Batton experiment were asked to become that writer and to compose a persuasive memorandum in favor of continuing the company's MBA studies policy.

Although all the participants in the Batton experiment were given the same communication objective, the complex task of writing a document persuading a superior to maintain an unpopular policy was approached in a variety of ways. Analysis revealed N subject lines and nine distinct types of D subject lines as shown in Figure 2. After briefly describing subject lines at

each position, a conclusion offers reasons for writer choices.

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     4    3    2    1         N         1    2    3    4    5
  <--I----I----I----I---------I---------I----I----I----I----I->

     Directed-Affirming      Neutral      Directed-Negating
          (DA)                 (N)              (DN)
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Representative Subject Lines

Category N: "Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

Category DA:

    DA1: "Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

    DA2: "Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

    DA3: "Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

    DA4: "Arguments for Continuing & Upgrading Batton's MBA
        Studies Policy"

Category DN:

    DN1: "Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

    DN2: "Arguments for the Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

    DN3: "Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

    DN4: "Elimination of Batton's Studies Policy"

    DN5: "Batton's New MBA Studies Policy"

Figure 2. Batton subject line continuum.

Neutral (N) Batton Subject Lines

Sixty-seven percent of the subject lines composed for the Batton Case are N. Although N Batton subject lines do not indicate writer intention, most provide sufficient description with adjectives and subordinate phrases. Even the "least descriptive," two-word N subject lines, such as "MBA Policy" and

"Batton Program," use adjectives. The handful of subject lines without adjectives contain modifying subordinate phrases. In fact, over half of Batton's N subject lines use subordinate phrases: many include prepositional phrases (such as "Leave of Absence Policy for the MBA Degree"); some include participial phrases (such as "Company Policy Regarding MBA Studies"); a handful include infinitive phrases (such as "Leave of Absences to Obtain MBAs") and subordinate noun phrases (such as "Employee Benefits: Policy Regarding MBA Studies"). Subordinate phrases and adjectives provide detail much as business writing textbooks and style manuals recommend.[10] However, although most of Batton's N subject lines are sufficiently descriptive topic statements, none reveal writer intention.

Directed-Affirming (DA) Batton Subject Lines

Sixteen percent of the subject lines written for the Batton Case confirm the viewpoint which the respondents were asked to defend. These "Directed-Affirming" (DA) subject lines indicate writer support for the policy allowing company employees release time for MBA studies. Analysis of the DA Batton subject lines, reveals four distinct levels of affirmation.

DA1: "Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

Well over half of the DA subject lines are positioned at DA1 on the Batton continuum. All indicate a measure of support for Batton's MBA Studies Policy with directed words including, "continue," "grant," "support," "need" and

"maintain." What is particularly striking about the collection of DA1 subject lines, is the number which begin with participles. Whereas the vast majority of the subject lines collected for this study are noun phrases, over one-fourth of DA1 subject lines are participial phrases, such as, "Maintaining Education Leave Policy for MBAs at Batton Industries" and "Granting Leave of Absence for MBA Studies."

DA2: "Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

Almost one-fourth of the DA subject lines are placed at DA2 on the Batton continuum. All propose "reasons for continuing" Batton's MBA Studies Policy. With one exception, DA2 subject lines are noun phrases beginning with one of two directed words: "reasons" or "arguments." (The one exception, "MBA/Educational Leave Grants and Arguments to Retain the Program," consists of two phrases, the second which begins with the word "arguments.") More than proposing that the policy "continue," like DA1 subject lines, DA2 subject lines suggest a reasoned defense of the policy in jeopardy.

DA3: "Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

The four DA subject lines positioned at DA3 do more than suggest "arguments for continuing" Batton's MBA Studies Policy by including strong directed words such as "value" or "benefit," words which assume the importance of Batton's MBA Studies Policy and leave little doubt about the writer's goals. DA3 subject lines read like debate propositions. Especially

noteworthy is the fact that the directed words "value" and "benefit" are not lifted from the Batton case, as is the word "continue" which is common to DA1 subject lines. Writers of DA3 subject lines originated forceful directed words to support their given objective.

DA4: "Arguments for **Continuing & Upgrading** Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

One DA subject line proposes that Batton's MBA Studies Policy "be continued" and "upgraded." As this subject line suggests, the text of this memorandum argues for "better support [for] employees wishing to attain an MBA degree," and outlines several inadequacies of the current policy. Placed at DA4, this subject line goes well beyond the communication objective of defending Batton's MBA Studies Policy.

Directed-Negating (DN) Batton Subject Lines

Sixteen percent of the subject lines written for the Batton Case counter the writers' communication objective. These "Directed-Negating" (DN) subject lines indicate writer support for President Wuest's viewpoint, namely, that Batton's MBA Studies Policy be discontinued. Analysis of the DN Batton subject lines reveals four distinct levels of negation.

DN1: "**Proposed change** in Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

Over one-fourth of the DN subject lines indicate that Batton's MBA

study policy might change. Most DN1 subject lines use the directed word "change" in conjunction with one of the following qualifiers: "possible," "potential," or "proposed." Several others state that the policy will be "reviewed" or "assessed." To suggest that Batton's MBA Studies Policy may be altered, confirms, albeit with qualification, the opinion of Wuest and McFee and therefore counter's the writer's reason for writing.

DN2: "Arguments for the Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

One subject line suggests "the change" in Batton's MBA Studies Policy can be justified. In contrast to DA2 subject lines, this DN2 subject line employs the directed word "arguments" which indicates that the memorandum presents contentions supporting a different policy. Use of the definite article "the" before the word "change," further negates the writer's communication objective by assuming that "arguments" support a specifc change rather than merely the "idea of change."

Examination of the memorandum text demonstrates that the writer actually intended to defend the existing policy rather than the opposite as his subject line indicates. In his first sentence, the writer expresses surprise that "the company may discontinue" the MBA Studies Policy. Later, he constructs arguments which support continuation of the policy which he speaks of as "essential for our company to survive." Given the memorandum text, this writer's subject line might have more appropriately read, "Arguments for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy."

DN3: "**Change** in Batton's MBA Studies Policy"

Over one-fourth of the DN subject lines use the directed word "change" without qualification. In sharp contrast to DA1 subject lines, which call for the "continuation" of the Studies Policy, DN3 subject lines suggest that the memorandum describes an anticipated or existing change. That the present policy will "change" or has "changed" is clearly opposite to the writer's intention.

DN4: "**Elimination of** Batton's Studies Policy"

DN4 holds the largest number of subject lines countering the writer's given objective. Well over one third of the DN subject lines placed at DN4 contain directed words including "abolishment," "cancellation," "discontinuation," "elimination," and "termination" which deny rather than defend Batton's MBA Studies Policy. One DN4 subject line speaks of "Wuest's Proposal to Drop the Program," another suggests "Cutting Support." The directed words in most of the DN4 subject lines suggest that Batton should no longer grants leaves for MBA studies.

It is also noteworthy that the directed words which dominate DN4 subject lines, with the expection of "discontinuation," are not found in the Batton case. Rather, they were originated by the writers.

DN5: "Batton's New MBA Studies Policy"

Three DN subject lines read as if discontinuation of Batton's MBA Studies Policy is a _fait accompli_. One speaks of, "The Decision to Discontinue" and two declare "The New Policy." Stating that the present policy has already been changed, DN5 subject lines directly counter the writer's goal.

Examination of the memoranda texts clarifies in some measure why writers composed subject lines directly opposite their objective. Two of the DN5 subject lines actually correspond to the writers' overall approach. For example, the writer whose subject line reads "The Decision to Discontinue the MBA Program," assumed throughout his memorandum that a decision had already been made. "I am writing this memo to you," he states, "with the hope that you might reconsider your decision to discontinue the MBA sabbatical program." In this and one other instance, writers misread the case and assumed that Batton's MBA Studies Policy had already changed. If, as these writers believed, the MBA Studies Policy had been replaced, then subject lines such as "Batton's New MBA Studies Policy" merely describe the status quo and are therefore neutral. Placed at DN5 for the sake of discussion, these subject lines might be more accurately located at N given writer interpretation of the communication situation.

One DN5 subject line is not similarly explained. The memoranda text following the subject line "New Policy Regarding MBA Studies," does not assume a change of policy. "If this change takes place," reads a sentence in

the first paragraph, "it [will] definitely be a big loss for Batton Industries." Since this memorandum stridently defends the existing MBA Studies Policy, the subject line directly counters the writer's intention.

Conclusions Regarding Viewpoint in Batton Subject Lines

Of the subject lines generated by the Batton Case, 67% are N and 32% are D: 16% DA and 16% DN as illustrated in Figure 3.[11]
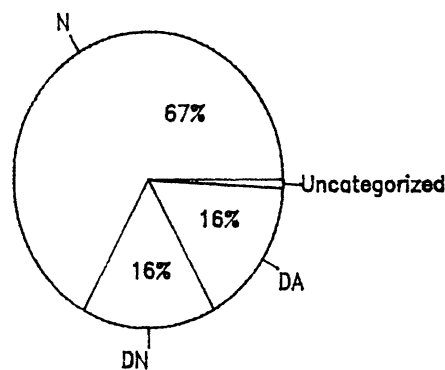

Figure 3. Percentages of N, DA, DN and uncategorized Batton subject lines.

(N = Neutral; DA = Directed-Affirming; DN = Directed-Negating)

That over half of the Batton respondents choose N subject lines is understandable given the communication context. A writer may deliberately begin on neutral ground when writing upward or when defending an unpopular position. The Batton communication context may also explain why well over half of the DA subject lines are DA1 subject lines which, rather moderately, suggest that Batton's Studies Policy be "continued," but which do not invite debate. Taken together, N and DA1 account for almost 80% of the Batton subject lines.

On the other hand, it may surprise some that DA2, DA3, and DA4 subject lines, which strongly confirm the writer's point of view, account for only 5% of the Batton subject lines. Even though writers in the Batton situation were asked by superiors to compose memoranda presenting an opposing point of view, relatively few Batton respondents asserted that objective to any great degree in their subject lines. Moreover, 16% of the Batton respondents composed subject lines which may be interpreted as negating their reason for writing.[12]

A follow-up survey indicates that participants in the Batton experiment may have composed more D subject lines if they had been presented with the possibilities. When two similar groups were asked to select a subject line for the Batton Case from randomly listed N and D representative subject lines, 64% choose DA subject lines, 21% choose DN subject lines, and only 15% selected N subject lines. The most popular subject line was DA3, "Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy," which was chosen by 32% of the survey respondents. The N subject line "Batton's MBA Studies Policy" received slightly more votes than the DA2 subject line, "Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy," which was chosen by 14% of the respondents. The DN1 subject line, "Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy," was picked by 13% of the respondents and was by far the most popular DN subject line. The least chosen subject line was DN5, "Batton's New MBA Studies Policy," which only received one vote. Results from the follow-up survey indicate that writers prefer D subject lines when they are given N and D alternatives. Moreover, one speculates, many more writers would choose D, and perhaps DA, subject lines if they were not only

given a list of possibilities, but were alerted to the affirming and negating messages communicated by the same.

South Telco Case

Each participant in the Telco experiment took the role of Operations Manager, a position involving the management of the Installation and Repair Department (I & R) at South Telco, an independently-owned telephone company. As the case goes, the Operations Manager hired Jim Jervakis as I & R supervisor about four months earlier. Since then, Jim had failed to monitor job progress, attend staff meetings and to submit progress reports; moreover, I & R's service orders were well behind schedule. An informal discussion with Jim about these problems brought no changes. As Operations Manager, each participant in the Telco Case experiment was instructed to write a memoranda: 1) persuading Jim to fulfill his responsibilities and 2) documenting the current problems in the I & R Department.

As with the Batton Case, respondents to the Telco Case wrote memoranda subject lines which communicated a variety of messages. N subject lines and eight categories of D subject lines were positioned on the Telco Subject Line Continuum.

```
    6    5    4    3    2    1    N    1    2
  <-I----I----I----I----I----I----I----I------------->

            DA              N         DN
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Representative Samples for Each Position

Category N: "Management of the I & R Department

Category DA

    DA1: "Performance Review of the I & R Department"

    DA2: "Expectations for the I & R Department

    DA3: "Concerns for the I & R Department"

    DA4: "Problems in the I & R Department"

    DA5: "Current Problems and Need for Change in the I & R
        Department"

    DA6: "Changes to be Implemented in the I & R Department"

Category DN

    DN1: "Performance of the I & R Department"

    DN2: "Productivity of the I & R Department"

Figure 4. Telco subject line continuum.

Neutral (N) Telco Subject Lines

Thirty-four percent of the subject lines composed for the Telco Case may be categorized as "Neutral" (N). All N Telco subject lines use adjectives and all but three include the department name, "Installation and Repair" or "I & R." Whereas seven subject lines consist of only the department name, the

majority of N Telco subject lines provide more description. Typically, the department name is used as an adjective modifying a noun, as in "I & R Operations." Like N Batton subject lines, the great majority of the N subject lines written for the Telco experiment include useful detail without revealing writer intention.

Initially, N subject lines with the words "guidelines," and "objectives" were placed at DA1 because they suggest standards for I & R, much as a job description outlines standards for a job. However, further reflection led to their N placement, for while they suggest possible reiteration of I & R procedures, they do not indicate the writer intention to document I & R failures and to outline needed changes. It was determined that subject lines such as "I & R Department Guidelines" and "I & R Management Objectives" may indicate a discussion of procedures rather than problems.

Directed-Affirming (DA) Telco Subject Lines

Forty-six percent of the subject lines generated by the Telco Case affirm the writer's given objective to some extent by suggesting that the management of Telco's I & R Department is inadequate. Analysis reveals six degrees of affirmation as indicated on the continuum.

DA1: "Performance Review of I & R"

Almost one-third of the DA subject lines introduce the memoranda as a performance appraisal of Telco's I & R Department. Almost half of these DA1

subject lines actually use the word "review" as in, "I & R Department Progress Review." Subject lines without the directed word "review" use phrases suggesting the same, such as "recent performance" or "current status." Since evaluation of strengths and weaknesses is implicitly communicated with the suggestion of appraisal, DA1 subject lines hint at the writer's intention.

DA2: "Expectations for I & R

Just over one-fourth of the DA subject lines include some form of "expect" or "require," as in "Current Performance and Expectations of Supervisor Position." Suggesting more than mere performance appraisal, DA2 subject lines indicate that the memoranda outlines specific actions for I & R.

DA3: "Concerns for I & R"

By including the directed word "concern," the handful of subject lines at DA3 may communicate writer misgivings about the I & R. While for some, the word "concern" may mean mere interest, for others it suggests the existence of problems. Given the viability of the latter interpretation, subject lines which used "concern" were positioned at DA3.

DA4: "Problems in I & R"

Over one-tenth of the DA subject lines leave no doubt about the writer's belief that problems exist in I & R. With directed words such as

"problems," "inefficiency," "poor performance," and "reprimand," DA4 subject lines assert the writer's intention to document the inadequacies of the department.

DA5: "Current Problems in I & R and Need for Change"

One subject line not only acknowledges I & R problems but also affirms the need for change. Placed at DA5, this subject line forcefully asserts the writer's intention both to document problems and call for correction.

DA6: "Changes to be Implemented in I & R"

Just over one-tenth of Telco's DA subject lines assert specific "changes," or "improvements," or "revisions" for I & R. These DA6 subject lines imply that specific actions must be taken. Of all the DA subject lines, those at DA6 most clearly reveal the writer's objective.

Directed-Negating (DN) Telco Subject Lines

Twenty percent of the Telco subject lines negate the writer's given objective. Rather than indicating any problems with Jim Jervakis' supervision of the I & R Department, these subject lines suggest the opposite.

DN1 "Performance of I & R"

Over half of the DN subject lines use the word "performance" without qualification, as in "Managerial Performance" and "Performance of Telco's I & R Department." Since "performance" implies "effectiveness" or "accomplishment," it's unqualified use may be misinterpreted in the Telco situation. Writers of DN1 subject lines may have intended that the word "performance" suggest "performance appraisal," but "performance" without clarification is ambiguous and may be interpreted as complimentary. Moreover, the qualified use of "performance" at other positions, justifies, to some extent, placing subject lines with "performance" alone at DN1. [13]

DN2: "Productivity of I & R"

Eight subject lines are placed at DN2. All employ unqualified, positive words including "improvement," "progress," and "productivity." These subject lines may suggest that the I & R Department is running well. Since the writers' memoranda must report the opposite, DN2 subject lines negate the writers' communication objective.

Taken in isolation, DN2 subject lines seem incongruous. An examination of the memoranda texts, however, reveals that half of the DN2 subject lines are buffers for a "bad news approach." The memorandum headlined with the subject line "I & R Productivity," for example, begins with a paragraph about I & R's importance to the company. The first sentence reads: "The I & R department is a vital link in maintaining good will with our customers." Typical of the "bad news approach" the second paragraph introduces the fact that the "current situation within the I & R department is

not very good." In four instances, DN2 subject lines appear to be deliberately chosen.

Other DN2 subject lines are not similarly explained. The subject line "Improvement of Performance of the I & R Department," for example, introduces a text beginning: "Currently, the I & R service of South Telco faces a series of problems which are likely to undermine the competitiveness of South Telco." Given such a beginning, one wonders why the subject line did not read: "Need for Improvement of Performance of the I & R Department." In the Telco context, positive words like "improvement" and "performance" need qualification if the subject line is to communicate specific writer goals.

Conclusions Regarding Viewpoint in Telco Subject Lines

Of the Telco participants, 34% composed N subject lines and 66% composed D subject lines—46% DA and 20% DN, as illustrated in Figure 5.
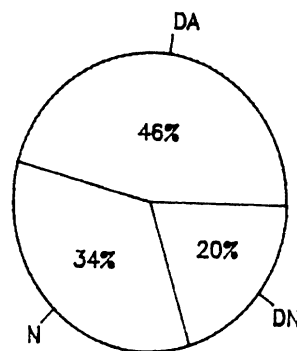
Figure 5. Percentages of N and D Telco subject lines.

That only 46% of the Telco respondents chose DA subject lines is surprising given the circumstances. In the Telco situation, participants were writing to

a subordinate who had failed to effectively manage his department; moreover his inadequate management reflected poorly on the writer. Given this context, one wonders why more Telco participants did not assert their intention from the start. As described, some writers employed DN subject lines as buffers, taking a "bad news approach." Others, however, may not have considered the ways in which their unqualified directed words could be misinterpreted.

SUBJECT LINES AND THE IMPACT OF STRUCTURE

All 483 Batton and Telco subject lines are phrases: almost 95% are noun phrases and 5% are participial phrases.[14] All the participial subject lines are also D subject lines—20 affirming and 4 negating writer objective. None of the N subject lines are participial phrases.[15]

Sixty-one percent of the Batton and Telco subject lines include at least one subordinate phrase.[16] Typically, subordinate phrases are prepositional phrases, as in "Leave of Absence Policy for the MBA Degree," although some Batton subject lines include subordinate participial phrases, as in "Company Policy Regarding MBA Studies." Subordinate infinitive phrases and subordinate noun phrases appear in several Batton subject lines.[17] Use of subordinate phrases in memoranda subject lines is extensive.

Subordinate phrases are found 20% more often in D subject lines than in N subject lines. However, subordinate phrases in D subject lines describe rather than reveal writer intention. Directed words seldom appear in subordinate phrases.[18] Instead, subordinate phrases in D subject lines

almost always function as modifiers, providing useful detail about the writer's stated objective. Examples include: "Poor Performance of I & R," "Maintaining Education Leave Policy for MBAs at Batton Industries," "Proposed Policy Changes Regarding Leaves of Absence for MBA Students," and "Current Performance and Expectations of Supervisor Position."

In most cases, subordinate phases in D subject lines clarify directed words, while subordinate phrases in N subject lines add description. Of the subject lines with more than one subordinate phrase, only two are needlessly repetitive.[19] That over half of the Batton and Telco subject lines contain subordinate phrases illustrates the extent to which business writers understand the need for sufficiently descriptive subject lines. This fact also demonstrates an acquaintance with subordination, which Brusaw, Alred and Oliu suggest is the "mark of mature writing" (1982, p. 543).

One further structural consideration is the extent to which subject lines are frontloaded or, as discourse analysts would have it, "thematized." Of the N Batton and Telco subject lines, 20% begin with nouns, as in "Management of I & R Department," and 80% begin with modifiers, usually the name of the policy, company or department used as an adjective as in "I & R Department Supervision," or "Batton Policy for MBA Studies."[20] Of the D subject lines, 71% begin with directed words, that is, nouns, participles or modifiers which indicate, to some extent, writer objective. Typical are: "Poor Performance of Installation and Repair" and "Granting Leave of Absence for MBA Studies." Directed words not found first are usually distinctly placed: a few are frontloaded in subordinate noun phrases (as in "MBA/Educational Leave Grants and Arguments to Retain the Program"), some

appear in infinitives (such as "Proposal to Eliminate Eight-Month Leave of Absence"), and others follow possessive nouns or pronouns (as in, "President Wuest's Proposed Policy Change for MBA Studies" and "My Arguments for the Change in Company's Policy). Well over half of the D subject lines not frontloaded with directed words, are backloaded with directed words, as in "MBA Leave of Absence Abolishment." Therefore, most of the participants in the Batton and Telco cases who composed D subject lines, placed directed words either first or last.

Analysis of Batton and Telco subject lines reveals several unique characteristics of D subject lines. While generally subject lines are noun phrases, D subject lines are sometimes participial phrases. D subject lines also include subordinate phrases more frequently than N subject lines. And finally, D subject lines frequently begin or end with directed words.

SUBJECT LINES AND THE IMPACT OF LENGTH

The 483 subject lines gathered for this study largely comply with pedagogical recommendations for length: they are short and seldom exceed one line,[21] as illustrated in Figure 6. Batton and Telco subject lines average 5 words. (With prepositions removed that average drops to 4.) The longest subject line consists of 19 words and includes four prepositional phrases. This subject line is clearly an exception--only 10% of the subject lines have 10 or more words; only 2% have 12 or more words. All the subject lines collected adhere to the directive that a subject line "should not be either a sentence or a paragraph. ... [but] a headline phrase" (Munter, 1987, p.157).

Not one subject line is a complete sentence. It may be concluded that pedagogical mandates on subject line length are widely understood.

Word Count: Batton & Telco Subject Lines

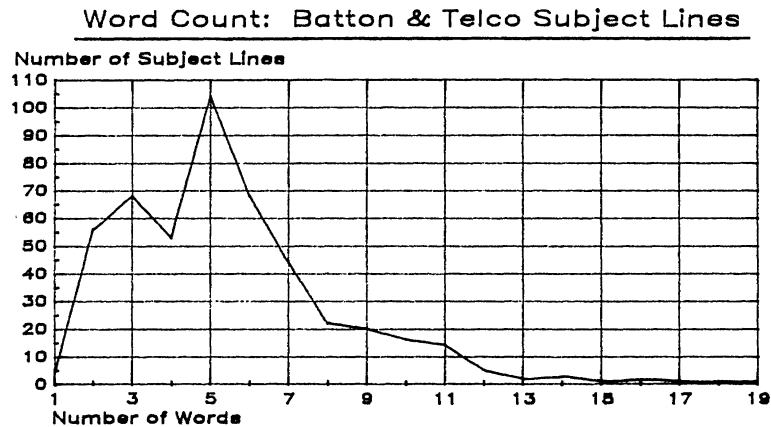Number of Subject Lines

Number of Words

Figure 6. Word count of Batton & Telco subject line

Apparently there is no major correlation between subject line length and subject line categories. Batton DA subject lines average 2 words longer than Batton N subject lines. Telco DA and N subject lines have the same two-word difference. Similarly, Batton DN subject lines on average use two more words than Batton N subject lines. Telco DN subject lines average two words shorter than Telco N subject lines. Most interesting is the average word length at advanced DA positions--DA2 and DA4 Batton subject lines, as well as, DA5 Telco subject lines, average 10 words. This suggests that DA subject lines tend to be longer than N subject lines, a conclusion which is qualified by the fact that the force of a single word can dramatically alter meaning.

That subject lines comply with "rules" for length has less relevance for the writer who bases writing choices on contextual considerations. The

contextual writer does not worry about length in terms of meeting some textbook standard, rather, he or she considers what the situation requires. In composing a subject line, therefore, the contextual writer may ask: What subject line length is the reader accustomed to reading? What is the standard length for memoranda subject lines in the company or the department? Would I best achieve my objective with a subject line which is typical for this setting and for this reader, or would it be advantageous to "break the mold?" Roman and Raphaelson (1981) suggest that the length of a memorandum title is determined by the content of the document. "Don't worry about the length," they write. "Say as much as necessary to identify your subject" (p. 39).

CONCLUSION: SUBJECT LINES AND CONTEXTUAL CHOICES

Analysis of 483 memoranda subject lines written for specific contexts indicates that managers and students in advanced management training know a great deal about subject lines. Much as textbooks and writing manuals recommend, the Batton and Telco subject lines are, by and large, noun and participial phrases; none are sentences. Moreover, most of the subject lines include meaningful detail. Appropriate proper nouns identifying with the reader, and specific modifiers, especially adjectives and subordinate phrases, are commonplace. That subject lines should not be too long is similarly understood--Batton and Telco subject lines average 5 words. Some conception of effective word arrangement is also apparent. For the most part, key words appear first or last, and in D subject lines, directed words

are usually prominent rather than subordinate.

While pedagogical directives for memoranda subject lines appear to be generally understood, the potential for <u>strategic</u> choices in specific managerial contexts is not realized. Batton and Telco subject lines suggest that writers <u>react</u> to context rather than <u>rely</u> on context when writing memoranda subject lines. When asked to support a policy in opposition to a superior, Batton participants favored N subject lines. In the Telco situation, where participants were to articulate the responsibilities of a subordinate who was failing in his job, DA subject lines were employed more often than N subject lines. These results suggest some responsiveness to context.

At the same time, Batton and Telco subject lines, and evidence from follow-up surveys, indicate that writer choices were more intuitive than cognitive. The data yields several reasons for this conclusion. For one thing, a substantial number of the Batton and Telco participants composed N subject lines in situations clearly calling for assertion. In the Batton context, writers were <u>asked</u> to defend a particular point of view, and the Telco situation <u>demanded</u> writer directness. Although, for both cases, DA subject lines were invited, if not perferred, N subject lines were employed by many. Furthermore, follow-up surveys suggest that when presented with a variety of choices, writers select DA subject lines. The large number of DN Batton and Telco subject lines, further indicates a lack of writer awareness. Managerial writers may not consider how their subject lines will be interpreted <u>contextually</u>.

In addition to indicating what writers know or do not know about memoranda subject lines, analysis has generated categories, continua and

vocabulary useful for management training. Given managers' day-to-day use of memoranda, and the significance of subject lines for reader understanding and retention, it is well to consider that, in addition to introducing memoranda topics and facilitating document handling, subject lines may also affirm or negate a writer's objective. With this idea in mind, managers may write subject lines which more successfully achieve their communication goals.

Although business communication textbooks and style manuals offer few specifics, it is generally accepted that subject lines, like titles and headings, should be clear, concise and complete, giving readers a fair idea about what the document contains. In actuality, many kinds of subject lines may be acceptable. Perhaps, however, the most important consideration for subject lines is that their composition stem from the demands of a particular situation. Rather than "rules" for writing effective subject lines, one has "reasons" for choosing the words, structure and length which are contextually based. One might say, the composition of an effective subject line comes from a thorough analysis of the situation for which the memoranda is written, rather than from a desire to comply with a "set of rules." Subject lines generated by contextual analysis rather than by pedagogical prescription, will more likely advance the writer's objective and alert readers to significance of the memoranda.[22]

Notes

1. Similarly Cross writes, "Give your memo a good title. Like a newspaper headline, it should highlight your main idea for the reader" (p.93). Cross suggests the same of ad headlines, writing in Persuasive Business Writing, "The common wisdom is that a good headline is worth 80 percent of the advertising dollar. It's true: an ad sells on its headline" (p.161).

2. As standard element of business memoranda headings, subject lines provide readers with information about content. Sometimes subject lines are called "subject titles" (Sweetnam, 1986) or "reference lines" (Wells, 1985). Sweetnam distinguishes "reference headings" as titles which refer to previous communications. Bromage (1980) compares a memorandum subject line to "the title of the long report" (p.83).

3. There is no recognizable difference in the data collected from the group of managers and the group of MBA students.

4. Lipson (1983) also describes Ausubel's research on advance organizers in "Theoretical and Empirical Considerations for Designing Openings of Technical and Business Reports," published in the Journal of Business Communication.

5. In 1979 Barnes and Clawson took issue with these research findings. "The efficacy of advance organizers has not been established," they wrote. "Advance organizers, as presently constructed, generally do not facilitate learning" (p. 651). However, in the same year, Mayer critiqued their analysis and reasserted the majority opinion that advance organizers contribute positively to the learning process. (pp. 371-83).

6. Dooling and Lachman's experiment results suggest readers actually read and use titles to interpret documents.

7. Individuals not provided with topics beforehand, reported actively searching for the meaning of the passage.

8. In the seventh edition of <u>Report Writing for Business</u>, Lesikar and Lyons (1986) distinguish "topic captions," which "do nothing more than identify the topic," and "talking captions," which indicate "what is said about the subject" in addition to identifying that subject (p. 109). Lesikar and Lyons do not consider "writer objectives" in discussing "talking captions." However, Sigband and Bell (1986) suggest that writer "attitudes" are reflected in memoranda. "Memos may transmit more than information, policies, and summaries of meetings. They can also transmit attitudes . . . ." (p. 295). In the third edition of <u>Writing and Communicating in Business</u>, Janis (1978) discusses titles and headlines in a chapter called "'Elements of Persuasion." Janis would undoubtedly believe that memoranda subject lines are also persuasive devices.

9. To check the relative validity of subject line placement, a group of managers (similar in composition to those who participated in the Telco experiment) where asked to place the randomly listed Telco representative subject lines on a continuum. With some variation, the overall results confirmed the placement suggested here.

10. For example, Sigband and Bell explain that subject lines "may even eliminate all or part of the introductory paragraph" (p. 295).

11. One subject line, "Proposed Policy Change: Continuing Employee Education," includes contradictory directed words and is not categorized.

12. The two DN4 subject lines shown to be misnomers do not significantly reduce this percentage.

13. Consider the following examples: 1) the DA1 subject line "Jim Jervakis' Performance Review," uses "performance" as an adjective modifying the directed word "review," 2) the DA5 subject line, "Poor Performance of I & R," uses "performance" as a noun qualified by the negative adjective "poor," and 3) the DA6 subject line, "Improving I & R Department Performance," uses "performance" as a noun following from the participle "improving." These DA subject lines cloak "performance" with directed words and thus clarify the writer's intention. By contrast, DN1 subject lines, as represented by "I & R Performance," are less specific.

14. One subject line is a prepositional phrase which reads: "As a Role of I & R Supervisor." One wonders if the writer may have intended it as: "In the Role of I&R Supervisor." None of the Batton and Telco subject lines are infinitive phrases.

15. "Continuing Batton Industries MBA Studies Program" typifies the 16 subject lines at DA1, whereas "Improving I & R Department Performance" typfies the 4 subject lines at Telco DA6. "Changing Policy Regarding MBA Studies" is the one subject line at Batton DN2, and "Discontinuing the MBA Benefit Program" is typical of the three subject lines at Batton DN3.

16. Fifteen percent include more than one subordinate phrase. For example, "Company Policy Regarding Leave of Absence for MBA Study" includes the participial phrase "Regarding Leave of Absence," and the prepositional phrase "for MBA Study."

17. Typical of subject lines with subordinate infinitive phrases is, Leave of Absences to Obtain MBAs." All the subject lines with subordinate noun phrases use punctuation (dashes, colons, semi-colons or commas) to off-set the phrase as in "Employee Benefits--MBA Education," and "Employee Benefits: Policy Regarding MBA Studies."

18. Two exceptions are: 1) "Letter of Reprimand," in which the directed word "reprimand" is found in a subordinate prepositional phrase, and 2) "Proposal to Eliminate . . . ," in which the directed word "eliminate" is expressed in an infinitive phrase.

19. These subject lines repeat the department name as in, "Request for I & R Supervisor Action Plan and Follow-up of I & R."

20. Sixteen percent of the Batton subject lines which begin with modifiers, employ possessives such as "Batton Industries' Policy Concerning MBA Studies," or "President James Wuest's Meeting on Employee Benefits."

21. As Bowman and Branchaw (1987) wrote in Business Communication: From Process to Product, "Keep subject lines short, never longer than one line" (p. 145).

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