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A TAXONOMY FOR THE COMPOSITION OF
MEMORANDUM SUBJECT LINES: FACILITATING
WRITER CHOICE IN MANAGERIAL CONTEXTS

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A Taxonomy for the Composition of Memorandum Subject Lines: Facilitating Writer Choice in Managerial Contexts

Existing pedagogy views memorandum subject lines acontextually. At the same time, research on advance organizers suggests a relationship between communication context and memorandum subject lines. This article presents a taxonomy for subject line composition that takes context into account by distinguishing subject lines as either neutral or directed. Findings from the analyses of 483 memorandum subject lines written for two managerial contexts, and exercises testing the usefulness of the taxonomy indicate that writers compose subject lines much as pedagogical materials recommend and that these subject lines are usually neutral; however, when given alternatives, writers actually prefer directed subject lines. While the study focuses on subject lines in managerial memoranda, the proposed taxonomy and findings on writer choice have wider implications for managerial writing pedagogy and research.

"Everyone agrees that a writer's sense of purpose usually directs choices about what to say and where and how to say it," writes Knoblauch. Indeed, a number of composition scholars believe that writers are aware of what might be called "contextual factors." After studying the perceptions of administrators and caseworkers in a county social-service agency, Odell and Goswami concluded that "writers in non-academic settings are sensitive to rhetorical context" (220), including the characteristics of their audience, the status of their subject, and their personal role, ethos, and feelings.

Associated with the belief that writers are mindful of rhetorical context, is the growing recognition of the need to understand how contextual factors impact writer decisions. We have little information, Odell and Goswami state, "about the types of stylistic and substantive choices writers make or the reasons that govern a writer's choosing one alternative in preference to another" (202). Studies exploring writers' contextual choices, including those of Herrington, Paradis, Dobrin and Miller, Huckin, Curtin and Graham, and Brown and Herndl, dramatically illustrate the need to know more about "what's really going on out there," and suggest the inadequacy and "acontextuality" of generally-accepted writing rules, formulas, and models for managerial writing. Evidence strongly suggests that writing research and pedagogy benefits as it increasingly accounts for the role of context.

This study continues the line of research exploring writer sensitivity to context by examining writers' choices for memorandum subject lines in two managerial situations. More specifically, the study examines the relationship between communication context and memorandum

subject lines, a relationship, it will be shown, that is not accounted for in current pedagogy. Analysis of 483 memorandum subject lines led to the development of a taxonomy for subject line composition. Taking context into account, this taxonomy presents subject lines as either neutral or directed. The usefulness of the taxonomy was subsequently tested in several follow-up exercises. Findings from these analyses and exercises indicate that writers compose subject lines much as pedagogical materials recommend and that these subject lines are usually neutral; however, when presented with a variety of alternatives, writers actually prefer directed subject lines, that is, subject lines reflecting their purpose. While the study focuses on subject lines in managerial memoranda, the proposed taxonomy and findings on writer choice may be more broadly applied. Moreover, the taxonomy may suggest the nature of contextual writing tools that enhance writer decision-making.

Relationship of Subject Lines to Communication Context

Sometimes called "reference lines" (Wells) or "subject titles" (Sweetnam) subject lines are the thematic titles or topic statements of business memoranda.¹ The value of memorandum subject lines in writer-reader communication is often assumed; business professionals regularly write and read them and communication specialists note their importance in business communication textbooks. Subject lines are said to eliminate the need for detailed opening paragraphs, to introduce memoranda content, and to facilitate handling, hence they save time for the writer, the reader, and the staff members who file and retrieve documents (Sigband & Bell 295; Himstreet & Baty 249). Smeltzer and Waltman suggest that subject lines are also useful buffers for bad news, although they do not elaborate. Additionally, some recognize subject lines as persuasive devices--Sweetnam calls a subject line an "advertising piece" which is one of a writer's "most underused power hooks" (84). A felicitous subject line, like a one-line abstract, tells the reader what the memorandum covers, indicates how the document should be treated, and may prompt the reader to do something with the document--to read, skim, consider, transfer, neglect, file, or destroy it. In other words, a subject line can help the reader answer the question, "What's in it for me?" The fact that readers may use subject lines to evaluate the significance of memoranda, suggests that either by default or by design, a subject line may contribute to the success or failure of a memorandum.

Research on the Effectiveness of Advance Organizers

While there appears to be no research testing the effectiveness of memoranda subject lines per se, studies of "advance organizers" certainly apply. David Ausubel introduced the notion of advance organizers when he tested the hypothesis that "the learning and retention of unfamiliar but meaningful verbal material can be facilitated by the advanced introduction of relevant subsuming concepts (organizers)" (267).² 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" (271). Other participants read a traditional historical introduction. Ausubel's results showed that individuals provided with the advance organizer remembered more of the passage than individuals who read the historical introduction; therefore, Ausubel concluded, "the greater use of appropriate (substantive rather than historical) advanced organizers in the teaching of meaningful verbal material can lead to more effective retention" (271).

Other researchers broadened the definition of "advance organizers" to include simple summaries, topic statements, titles, or brief verbal or visual introductions which they tested in a variety of experiments. Findings from these experiments are dramatic, especially those of Dooling and Lachman who explored the impact of titles on reader comprehension and recall. Dooling and Lachman asked two groups to read a vague metaphorical passage. One group read a titled passage; another group read an untitled passage. Afterward, individuals in both groups completed a questionnaire requiring them to recall the passage. Through blind ratings of the participants' questionnaires, Dooling and Lachman determined that 116 of the 180 individuals who read the titled passage understood the specific thematic content of the passage, whereas only four 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 of prose passages.

Subsequent research reinforced Dooling and Lachman's findings. Through a series of

experiments, Bransford and Johnson demonstrated that individuals who were given topics prior to hearing a passage had a higher comprehension level than individuals who were not. Individuals without advance topics reported actively searching for the meaning of the passage as they read. Kalt and Barrett tested the effectiveness of various advance 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. 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.³

By proving the value of advance organizers, Ausubel, Dooling and Lachman, et. al. suggest a relationship between memoranda subject lines and rhetorical context: readers use advance organizers, such as subject lines, to decipher and distinguish messages. This finding leads one to question the extent to which writers understand and pedagogy introduces this relationship. Do managerial writers generally use memorandum subject lines to reveal their reasons for writing? Do instructional materials account for the contextual significance of memorandum subject lines?

Pedagogical Directives for Subject Line Composition

Current pedagogical discussions of memorandum subject lines provide general recommendations. Typically, writers are instructed to compose "clear," "complete" and "concise" subject lines (Kohut & Baxter); however, explanations of these directives, if offered at all, seldom exceed one page and often only consist of a sentence or two. Taken together, pedagogical recommendations for clarity and completeness suggest that subject lines should:

- 1) answer the questions "when, where, why, what and how, whenever appropriate" (Varner 70).
- 2) include verbs indicating memoranda conclusions or recommendations (Murphy & Hildebrandt 448).
- 3) be frontloaded, suggesting memoranda content via the first word (Sweetnam 79).
- 4) present information positively, changing a negative statement such as "Long Overdue Raise," to "Raise for Tony Andrino" (Roman & Raphaelson 39).

Often subject line samples are offered in lieu of explanation: "Car Insurance" is said to be more complete as "Change in Company Policy on Rental Car Insurance" (Kohut and Baxter 73); "Sales" is said to be more specific as "Sales Data of District 5 for June 3, 19XX" (Varner 70). Munter illustrates how a subject line can be either too broad, as with "Announcement," or too specific, as with "Announcement about the meeting at 2:00 P.M. on Friday, October 15, to discuss three items" (157). Pedagogical materials do not explain when, where, and why particular examples might be effective.

Pedagogical directives on conciseness are more diverse. Some recommend that subject lines not exceed one line (Bowman & Branchaw 145). Munter (157) explains that a subject line is not a sentence or a paragraph, but a phrase, and provides the following illustration:

Incorrect: Subject: We will be holding a meeting next Friday at 2:00 P.M. in the conference room

Correct: Subject: October 15 meeting agenda

In contrast to these directives, Roman and Raphaelson (39) prefer that one not worry about length, but simply use as many words as needed.

All in all, textbook directives recommend that memorandum subject lines be clear, complete, and concise and frequently provide examples illustrating these characteristics. However, some communication scholars believe that pedagogical precepts of this kind do not sufficiently correspond with the complexities writers confront in the real world. For example, Hagge contends that such directives "sound sensible at first . . . but . . . convey little actual content." He calls them "vague apothegms" (49-50). Supporting this view, case studies of managerial documents indicate that writing directives of this kind are of limited practical use to writers attempting to compose specific documents for specific readers in specific situations, or for instructors attempting to teach writing strategies (Brown & Herndl; P. Rogers). Current directives do not provide writers with a conceptual framework for composing effective subject lines in a variety of contexts.

A Taxonomy for Contextual Subject Line Composition

How might pedagogy alert writers to the connection between subject lines and communication context? Responding to this query, this section offers a taxonomy for subject line composition. The taxonomy resulted from the analysis of nearly 500 memorandum subject lines written by managers and students in management training. This analysis suggests that although writers compose subject lines much as pedagogical directives recommend, the majority reveal little or nothing about writers' reasons for writing. The proposed taxonomy is a modest attempt to address this concern by helping managerial writers compose subject lines keenly crafted to meet their particular needs in various situations. After the taxonomy is introduced, this article reviews the subject line analysis that prompted its development and the follow-up exercises that support its usefulness.

The taxonomy classifies subject lines as either "Neutral" or "Directed." Neutral (N) subject lines introduce the memorandum topic without revealing the writer's intention or specific purpose for writing. N subject lines may be either broad labels, such as "Batton's MBA Studies Policy" and "I & R Department," or somewhat more informative phrases including verbals or modifiers that narrow, specify, or otherwise qualify the topic in some way, such as "Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy," and "Current Management of I & R Department at South Telco." Borrowing from pedagogy on headings (Lesikar & Lyons; Bovee & Thill), we might differentiate N subject lines as "N-Topical" (N broad labels) or "N-Talking" (N qualified phrases). In either case, N subject lines reveal little or nothing about a writer's objective.

By contrast, "Directed" (D) subject lines reveal a writer's intention. For example, the subject line "Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy" suggests that the writer intends to argue in favor of a specific policy, and the subject line "Changes to be Implemented in the I & R Department" suggests the writer intends that particular actions be taken. Further examples of N and D subject lines are listed in Figure 1.

Neutral-Topical Subject Lines (broad labels)

"Fresh Catch Co. Donations"

"Leave of Absence"

"Sportech's Fitness Events"

Neutral-Talking Subject Lines (qualified phrases)

"Fresh Catch Co. Donations For Next Year"

"Leave of Absence to Pursue MBA Degree"

"Participation in Sportech's Fitness Events in August"

Directed Subject Lines (phrases revealing writer intention)

"Fresh Catch Co. Should Donate Seafood to Arbor Haven"

"Leave of Absence Needed"

"Benefits of Participating in Sportech's Fitness Events"

Figure 1 Neutral and Directed Subject Lines

The subject lines analyzed for this study suggest that D subject lines do not possess particular linguistic features that consistently distinguish them from N-Talking subject lines. While D subject lines may have a greater incidence of verbs, D and N-Talking subject lines alike tend to be longer and to include significantly more modifiers, verbals, and internal phrases than N-Topical subject lines, which tend to consist of unadorned nouns, often proper nouns. The distinction between D and N-Talking subject lines seems to rest in the situational meanings of individual words rather than their linguistic arrangement. This observation suggests that the taxonomy focuses writer attention not on the linguistic features of subject lines, as do many pedagogical precepts, but rather on the function of subject lines in particular contexts. The completeness and detail found in both D and N-Talking subject lines recommend them for managerial use; however, in situations calling for assertion (and these are frequent for managers) D subject lines may be the most effective choice.

Before leaving the discussion of the taxonomy, it is also useful to note that we might assign any number of names to subject lines that reveal a writer's intention, names such as "assertive subject lines," "thesis subject lines," "instructive subject lines" or the like; however, the term "directed" seems well suited to discussions of managerial writing, which is, after all, at its core about directing people and their activities.⁴ Work with managers in company training programs and students in management communication courses confirms the appropriateness of

"Directed"--in my experience managers and students in management training readily understand and adopt it. At the same time, what is significant is the concept rather than what we decide to call it.

Writer Awareness of Contextual Choices for Subject Line Composition:

The analysis of 483 memorandum subject lines suggests that while pedagogical directives appear to be generally understood, managerial writers may not recognize the extent to which subject lines reveal their intentions in any one communication context; however, the proposed taxonomy seems to increase writer awareness of the relationship between memorandum subject lines and communication context. These conclusions followed from a series of exercises. Central to the study, Exercise 1 involved the collection of memorandum subject lines written for specific managerial situations and allowed the researcher: a) to examine the features of subject lines typically written, b) to identify some of the contextual considerations writers overlook when composing them, and c) to design a taxonomy to enhance subject line composition. Follow-up Exercises 2, 3, and 4 were designed not as experiments from which to derive quantitative results, but rather as preliminary explorations into potential tools to increase writer sensitivity to context. Exercise 2 investigates the subject lines writers choose when presented with N-Topical, N-Talking, and Directed alternatives. Exercises 3 and 4 test the usefulness of the proposed subject line taxonomy. The qualified findings that emerge suggest a logic, I believe, that would not have surfaced so readily in a study of a different kind.

Exercise 1: Characteristics of Subject Lines Writers Originated

Subject lines collected for analysis were composed by 74 managers from a Fortune 500 company and 409 MBA students, 77 percent of whom had previous business experience. Writing skill was not a criterion for participation; rather, the managers were beginning a communication training seminar and the students were new entrants into the MBA program at The University of Michigan. To evaluate their managerial writing skills, these individuals were given 50 minutes to compose a persuasive memorandum in response to a short case. Two comparable cases were used, each

involving a specific business situation with which the participants could identify readily. The Batton Industries Case asked writers to oppose a superior on the company policy of granting employees release time to obtain an MBA (see Appendix A). The South Telco Case asked writers to outline expectations for a lower-level employee who was failing in his job (see Appendix B).

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

To:

From:

Date:

Subject:

Prompted by the lead "Subject," only 24 of the 507 respondents did not write subject lines for their persuasive memoranda; therefore, 483 subject lines were collected.

Especially striking about the resulting 483 Batton and Telco subject lines is their general compliance with pedagogical directives.⁵ The majority are clear and complete including meaningful proper nouns and modifiers, especially adjectives and internal phrases. Sixty-one percent include at least one internal phrase, as in "Leave of Absence for the MBA Degree, and 15 percent include more than one internal phrase as in "Company Policy Regarding Leave of Absence for MBA Study."⁶ The fact that over half of the Batton and Telco subject lines contain internal phrases suggests that writers understand the need for sufficient detail.

Batton and Telco subject lines also comply with pedagogical directives on verb use and frontloading, to some extent. About 25 percent contain verbs or verbals as in "Reasons for Granting Leaves of Absence to Employees Working on MBA Degrees," and "Leave of Absence to Pursue MBA Degree." In about 11 percent of these, the first word is a verb or verbal as in "Maintaining Educational Leave Policy for MBAs at Batton Industries." On the whole, the 483 Batton and Telco subject lines collected begin with meaningful nouns, possessives, modifiers or verbs as illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1

**Percentages and Samples of Parts of Speech Used to
Frontload Batton and Telco Subject Lines**

52% Modifiers	" <u>Quarterly</u> Review of I & R" " <u>Company</u> Policy Regarding MBA Studies"
18% Nouns ⁷	" <u>Performance</u> of Telco's Installation & Repair Department" " <u>Reasons</u> for Granting Leaves of Absence to Employees Working on MBA Degrees"
8% Controverted Verbs	" <u>Management</u> of I & R at South Telco" " <u>Continuation</u> of Leave of Absence Policy for MBA Studies"
11% Verbs/Verbals	" <u>Granting</u> Leave of Absence to Pursue an MBA Degree" " <u>Required</u> Supervisory Duties"
11% Possessives	" <u>Mr. Wuest's</u> Proposal to Drop MBA Leave of Absence" " <u>South Telco's</u> Expectations for the Installation and Repair Department"

As for the number of subject lines which present information negatively rather than positively, that is more difficult to determine since the Batton and Telco communication situations are hypothetical and we can only conjecture how readers might interpret them. Readers might find the following subject lines negative because of certain key words:

"Proposal to Eliminate Eight Month Leave of Absence Allowed for Pursuit of MBA Degree"
"Threat of Discontinuation of MBA Studies Program:
"I & R Backlog"
"Poor Performance of Installation and Repair"

Subject lines with negative words of this type comprise only about seven percent of the total.⁸

Much as textbooks and writing manuals recommend, Batton and Telco subject lines are usually concise, seldom exceeding one line. The average subject line length is five words. The longest subject line consists of 19 words, which is clearly an exception. Only 10 percent of the subject lines have 10 or more words, and only two percent have 12 or more words. All of the subject lines collected adhere to Munter's directive that a subject line should be a phrase rather

than a sentence or a paragraph.

These findings suggest that managers and students in management training know a great deal about memorandum subject lines.⁹ Much as pedagogical sources recommend, the Batton and Telco subject lines are usually concise phrases averaging five words in length with key words frequently placed first. Almost all the Batton and Telco subject lines include proper nouns, modifiers, and internal phrases and about one-fourth include verbs or verbals that provide clarity and completeness.

At the same time, analysis suggests that writers may not realize the extent to which their subject lines can reveal their reasons for writing: only eight percent of the Batton and Telco respondents wrote subject lines that may be characterized as D. Even though respondents were asked to compose memoranda asserting a particular point of view, few respondents chose to reveal their intention in their subject lines. The discussion of "representative" subject lines, which follows, illustrates this point.

Subject line analysis allowed this researcher and two research assistants to distinguish nine basic types of Batton subject lines and to compose "representative subject lines" characterizing each type. Representative subject lines consist of often-used descriptive nouns, verbs, or modifiers. Since such descriptive words appear first in the majority of the Batton subject lines, they also appear first in the representative subject lines. References to "Batton" or the "MBA Policy" were standardized as "Batton's MBA Studies Policy." The resulting representative subject lines typify the majority of the Batton subject lines collected. Subsequently, the Batton representative subject lines were classified as N-Topical, N-Talking or D by this writer and three other researchers as shown in Table 2.¹⁰ The resulting classified Batton representative subject lines are intended to illustrate the types of subject lines composed and their relative popularity.

Exercise 1 participants, who originated subject lines for their Batton memoranda without benefit of instruction, composed largely N-Topical subject lines. As shown in Table 2, Column 1 sixty-seven percent composed N-Topical subject lines, 28 percent composed N-Talking subject lines, and only three percent composed D subject lines.

TABLE 2
Classified Representative Batton Subject Lines
and Writer Responses to Exercises 1, 2, and 3

	Exercise 1 <u>%Originated*</u>	Exercise 2 <u>%Selected</u>	Exercise 3 <u>%Selected with Taxonomy</u>
<u>Neutral-Topical</u>			
"Batton's MBA Studies Policy"	67	15	0
<u>Neutral-Talking</u>			
"Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy"	11	12	0
"Elimination of Batton's MBA Studies Policy"	6	3	0
"Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy"	5	13	4
"Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy"	4	4	0
"Batton's New MBA Studies Policy"	1	1	0
"Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy" **	1	32	12
Total % N-Talking	28	65	16
<u>Directed</u>			
"Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy"	3	14	52
"Arguments for Continuing and Upgrading Batton's MBA Studies Policy"	***	6	32
Total % D	3	20	84

* Slightly less than two percent of the Batton subject lines were not classified.

** Four researchers agreed on the representative subject line classification in Table 2 with this exception. Two researchers classified "Value of . . ." as D rather than N-Talking. Without a consensus, I conservatively placed this representative subject line in the N-Talking category since a D subject line must clearly communicate the writer's opinion or intention.

***This representative subject line characterizes less than one percent of the Batton subject lines collected.

The fact that so many Exercise 1 respondents composed N subject lines in a situation where they were asked to assert a particular point of view, suggests a lack of awareness among writers as to the extent to which subject lines may introduce their reasons for writing.¹¹ Follow-up exercises support this conclusion.

Exercise 2:

Types of Subject Lines Writers Selected When Given Alternatives

The second exercise was designed to determine what kinds of subject lines writers would select if they were presented with a number of N-Topical, N-Talking and D alternatives. Given a variety of N and D subject lines from which to choose, would writers still prefer N-Topical subject lines? To address this question 20 medical managers and 58 students in management training were asked to read the Batton case, to select a subject line for the Batton memorandum from a random listing of the representative Batton subject lines, and to write an explanation of their choice (see Appendix C). These 78 participants were given no other direction nor were they introduced to the subject line taxonomy.

As shown in Table 2 Column 2, the results of this exercise show a preference for N-Talking subject lines among well over half of the respondents. The most-selected subject line was "Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy." Thirty-two percent of the respondents preferred this N-Talking representative subject line because of its stress on "value" which, as one respondent put it, "is perhaps the best way to get the positive aspects across to your boss." A few respondents selected this subject line because they said it most clearly expressed the intent of their memo, but without antagonizing the readers.

Reasons why 15 percent of the respondents to Exercise 2 preferred the N-Topical representative subject line, "Batton's MBA Studies Policy," largely centered around its neutrality. As one respondent wrote, "I chose this subject line because it will not allow the reader to pre-judge the contents of the memo, because it is neutral." Similarly, another respondent stated, "I do not want to put the President on the defensive by mentioning . . . the fact that I am going to argue against his decision in this memo." By contrast, one respondent justified this choice by explaining that arguments should be presented in the body of the memorandum, not in the subject line.

Fourteen percent of the respondents to Exercise 2 selected the D representative subject line "Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy." As one respondent wrote, "[This] subject line states [the memorandum] purpose and provides enough motivation for the reader to want to read it in a non-combative way."

Those 13 percent who selected the N-Talking representative subject line "Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy," liked the word "change" because, they said, it identified the main concern of the memorandum. One respondent called "change" a "key word."

The results of Exercise 2 suggest that more writers prefer N-Talking subject lines when they are aware of subject lines alternatives. In this case, over half or 65 percent of the participants selected N-Talking subject lines, a dramatic increase over the 28 percent result of Exercise 1. D subject lines were also more popular when writers were given choices.

Exercise 3:

Types of Subject Lines Writers Selected Using the Taxonomy

The third exercise was designed to determine what kinds of subject lines writers would select if they were first introduced to the subject line taxonomy. Would knowledge of the taxonomy increase writer preference for D subject lines in the Batton context? To address this question, 25 students in management training were introduced to the taxonomy and then, like the respondents to Exercise 2, they were asked to select a subject line for the Batton memorandum from the random listing of the representative Batton subject lines and to write an explanation of their choice. It is important to note that the introduction of the taxonomy for Exercise 3 included a discussion of several memoranda written for specific managerial contexts, but included no mention of the Batton case, which participants were eventually asked to consider.

The results of Exercise 3 are only suggestive, given the small number of respondents, yet impressive. Eighty-four percent of the respondents selected D subject lines, as shown in Table 2 Column 3. The most popular subject line, "Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy," was selected by 52 percent of the respondents, all of whom justified this selection because, as one respondent explained, this subject line "tells the reader exactly what they will find in this memo."

Over half of these respondents also found "Reasons for Continuing . . ." potentially less offensive to the readers than "Arguments for Continuing" As one respondent explained it, the subject line "[Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy]" "communicates what I intend to state in the memo without attacking the president's or Ms. McFee's position." (By contrast, less than one-third of the respondents to Exercise 2 who selected this subject line registered similar

concerns over potential reader offense.)

Reasons why 32 percent of the respondents preferred the D representative subject line "Arguments for Continuing & Upgrading Batton's MBA Studies Policy" centered around the words "argument" and "upgrading." All the respondents who selected this subject line explained that since they would present arguments in the memorandum it was appropriate to introduce that fact in the subject line. Almost two-thirds of these respondents also liked the word "upgrading," because it acknowledged a need for change and therefore identified with the readers' viewpoint. "Upgrading implies I have understood Wuest's concerns," wrote one respondent, "and have found ways to improve or cure these problems." (Again, it may be of interest that, by contrast, none of the respondents to Exercise 2 who selected this subject line identified in this way with their readers.)

Those 12 percent of the Exercise 3 respondents who selected the N-Talking subject line "Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy" liked its positive stress on "value." "This subject line buffers the plea to keep the policy," explained one respondent. "It buffers it by looking at the value for the company. This 'value' term would catch corporate interest." Along the same lines, another respondent wrote, the "tone [of this subject line] is soft enough yet direct enough to promote reader interest." (Many of the respondents to Exercise 2 who selected this subject line also noted its positive tone as a reason for their choice; however, a far fewer percentage of Exercise 2 respondents noted its attention-getting potential.)

One respondent to Exercise 3 selected the N-Talking subject line "Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy." Much as Exercise 2 respondents explained their preference for the N-Topical subject line "Batton's MBA Studies Policy," this Exercise 3 respondent explained his preference for the N-Talking subject line "Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy" as follows:

I would want to start out on neutral ground. If my S.L. indicates an opposing position, the reader will immediately become defensive. However, I can slowly convince him/her of the value of the MBA policy by a neutral S.L. "Proposed Change" is neutral, but also implies the possibility of keeping the MBA program intact.

(Similarly, one Exercise 2 respondent who selected "Proposed Change . . ." did so because it avoided the "negativism" found in some of the other subject lines which, he explained, "could set a reader

off immediately.”)

The results of Exercise 3 indicate that when introduced to subject line alternatives and the subject line taxonomy, writers prefer D subject lines in situations calling for assertion. Moreover, Exercise 3 respondents' explanations suggest that the taxonomy heightens writer sensitivity to the contextual demands of a given situation, particularly sensitivity toward the intended readership.

Exercise 4:

Types of Subject Lines Writers Originated When Previously Introduced to the Taxonomy

The results of Exercise 3 indicate that shortly after writers are introduced to the subject line taxonomy they tend to prefer subject lines revealing their intention in contexts calling for assertion. Yet, one wonders if the same writers would remember and employ the taxonomy in the future? Is the taxonomy memorable and transferable? Can the taxonomy facilitate writer decision-making in a variety of contexts, or will it be forgotten or dismissed (like some of the writing prescriptions in our textbooks) when writers face complex contextual expectations and constraints? Exercise 4 begins to address these questions.

For Exercise 4, much like Exercise 1, participants were given 50 minutes to compose a persuasive memorandum in response to a short case. The Empire Car Case asked writers to oppose their boss's proposal to base their promotions on the number of CarStyle Programs they sold (see Appendix D). As with the Batton and Telco cases, participants were asked to write on stationery with the traditional memoranda heading: "To," "From," "Date," and most importantly, "Subject." Prompted by this heading, only one of the 25 respondents did not compose a subject line, therefore, 24 subject lines were collected.

Although Exercises 1 and 4 were comparable, the participants for each differed in one important respect; namely, the participants in Exercise 4 had been previously introduced to the taxonomy. Actually, the Exercise 4 respondents had participated in Exercise 3 over two months earlier, and it was in conjunction with Exercise 3 that they learned about the taxonomy.¹² However, for Exercise 4 the taxonomy was not reintroduced nor was the significance of subject lines discussed. Rather, participants regarded Exercise 4 as a timed writing activity that would be

used to evaluate their writing. Under these circumstances, the participants composed the 24 subject lines which are listed and classified in Table 3.¹³

TABLE 3
Classified Empire Car Case Subject Lines*

Neutral-Topical

CarStyle Program in the Iowa and Nebraska Regions
CarStyle
CarStyle Program
Selling CarStyle in Iowa & Nebraska

Total % of N-Topical: 17%

Neutral-Talking

Proposed Changes to the CarStyle System Implementation
Reevaluating the Use of "CarStyle" Promotional Tool for District 2, Field 1
CarStyle Program's Problems as They Relate to the Midwestern District and Possible Alternatives
Determining the Appropriateness of CarStyle for Empire Territories

Total % of N-Talking: 17%

Directed

Disadvantages of Implementing the CarStyle Program in the Iowa & Nebraska Markets
CarStyle Ineffectiveness in Small Communities
Inappropriateness of CarStyle for Iowa/Nebraska Region
CarStyle Not Appropriate for Midwestern District
CarStyle Program Inappropriate for Iowa and Nebraska Dealers
Inappropriateness of "CarStyle" Program for Territory Three Dealerships
The Inappropriateness of the CarStyle Program for Territory K
CarStyle's Inappropriateness for the Iowa/Nebraska Region
Reasons Why Carstyle is Inappropriate for Small Town Dealerships
CarStyle's Benefits Exceed Field J's Needs
Selling CarStyle Does Not Reflect My Dealer Servicing Ability
Reasons for Opposition to "CarStyle" Program
Reasons CarStyle is Inappropriate for Usage in Region L
Iowa/Nebraska District Should Use an Alternative to CarStyle Promotional Program
The Best Way to Target Our CarStyle Marketing Efforts

Total % of Directed: 63%

*The unusual subject line "The Right Tools for the Right Job" was not classified.

For both Exercises 1 and 4, respondents were asked to compose persuasive memoranda for comparable managerial situations. Yet, with prior knowledge of the taxonomy, respondents to Exercise 4 originated far fewer N-Topical subject lines and far more D subject lines, as shown in

Table 4.

TABLE 4
Comparison of Subject Lines Composed for Exercises 1 and 4

	Exercise 1 % Batton	Exercise 4 % Empire Car
Neutral-Topical.....	67	17
Neutral-Talking.....	27	17
Directed.....	4	63

When comparing these results it is important to note that Exercises 1 and 4 were different in two respects: 1) sample size (Batton 483 and Empire Car 24 subject lines) and, 2) respondent characteristics (Batton respondents were managers and students in management training; Empire Car respondents were students in management training). With these differences in mind, we may draw the guarded conclusion that the taxonomy is memorable, transferable, and, most significantly, seems to enhance writer ability to compose subject lines suited to the unique demands of particular communication contexts.

Conclusion

Munter acknowledges that subject lines are the most difficult memorandum element for writers to compose, while research on advance organizers demonstrates that subject lines significantly increase reader comprehension and retention (Ausubel; Dooling and Lachman). At the same time, field studies illustrate a need to replace writing prescriptions with composition tools that heighten writer sensitivity to contextual considerations (Brown and Herndl; P. Rogers). Such tools would prompt writers to shape documents to meet their specific personal and organizational goals. As Knoblauch concludes, "the writer's own sense of purpose . . . is a crucial reference for measuring effectiveness" (155). The proven importance of subject lines, the difficulties inherent in composing them, and the need for pedagogical approaches that increase writer sensitivity to context recommended this study.

The collection and analysis of 483 memorandum subject lines composed for two

managerial contexts, and a series of follow-up exercises, suggest that in communication situations calling for assertion writers compose subject lines much as pedagogy recommends and that these subject lines are usually neutral; however, when exposed to alternatives writers select subject lines different from those they originated. This finding suggests that writers may have difficulty generating subject line options and may fail to understand the connection between their subject lines and their reasons for writing. Perhaps writers' tacit assumptions alone, particularly with regard to purpose, do not adequately equip them to compose documents suited to the complex situations for which they write.

Discovering what writers appear to know and not know about memorandum subject lines prompted the development of a taxonomy for subject line composition. By classifying subject lines as either Neutral (N) or Directed (D), the taxonomy accentuates the relationship between the composition of subject lines and the identification and communication of one's reasons for writing in a given context. As a composition tool, the taxonomy appears to heighten awareness by confronting writers with the notion that their subject lines either reveal their goals or remain neutral. Follow-up exercises suggest that when writers are introduced to the taxonomy they compose D rather than N subject lines in situations calling for assertion.

As a heuristic device the subject line taxonomy calls attention to the fact that writing is contextually-based. Using the taxonomy for discussions of memorandum subject lines reveals that N subject lines are most appropriate for some documents in some circumstances and D subject lines for others. As some of the respondents to Exercises 2 and 3 suggested, there may be times when a writer prefers to buffer his or her intention so that arguments may be presented first. Moreover, there are times when a writer is not promoting a particular opinion or action, but simply relaying information. N-Talking subject lines seem well suited for these situations. Current pedagogy does not invite such considerations.¹⁴

By connecting the composition of memorandum subject lines to the communication of writer intention, the taxonomy becomes instrumental in the composition process, and in that way it does more than simply prescribe the shape of a fully-formed product. In other words, the taxonomy provides a conceptual framework that encourages writers to consider what their writing choices mean in the situations for which they are writing. Consequently, the taxonomy is less bound by time and place; it is transferable. In this respect, the taxonomy may be suggestive of the kinds of tools particularly suited for teaching writing for specific purposes.¹⁵

Notes

- ¹Sweetnam distinguishes "reference headings" as titles which refer to previous communications.
- ²Lipson (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*.
- ³In 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" (651). However, in the same year, Mayer critiqued their analysis and reasserted the majority opinion that advance organizers contribute positively to the learning process (371-83).
- ⁴Ewing describes "instructional headings" which promote a particular point of view and provide information about the document topic. He calls "topical headings" lazy (111-12).
- ⁵Analysis revealed no discernable difference between the subject lines written by managers and those written by MBA students.
- ⁶Internal prepositional phrases are most common as in "Leave of Absence for MBA Degree" and "Policy Change for Employees Obtaining MBA Degrees." Several Batton subject lines include internal infinitive phrases and noun phrases. Typical of subject lines with internal 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 offset the phrase as in "Employee Benefits--MBA Education," and "Employee Benefits: Policy Regarding MBA Studies."
- ⁷Included in this total are the four subject lines in which a noun is preceded with the article "the," and the one subject line beginning with the pronoun "your" ("Your Job Performance").
- ⁸One could argue that, given the writers' objectives for the Batton and Telco situations, a memorandum subject line with such "negative" words may be appropriate. For example, in the Telco situation the subject line "Poor Performance of Installation and Repair" seems to identify the crux of the problem which the writer must address.
- ⁹To arrive at this conclusion I also examined the texts of the memoranda. In all but a few exceptional cases, the subject lines were in harmony with the text although the majority were N.
- ¹⁰In addition to this author, three researchers independently classified the Batton representative subject lines as N-Topical, N-Talking and Directed. Interestingly, there was, with one exception, unanimous agreement among us although we each specialize in a different communication or communication-related field, specifically, composition, interpersonal communication, language, and management communication.

- ¹¹It is also noteworthy that 16 percent of the Batton subject lines may be interpreted as supporting President Wuest's decision to discontinue Batton's MBA Studies Policy; that is, they seem to support the viewpoint opposite the writer's goal. For example, in contrast to subject lines which speak of "continuing" the Studies Policy, subject lines such as "Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy" may suggest to some readers writer support for change. Even more so, subject lines including words such as "abolishment," "cancellation," "discontinuation," and "termination" (as represented by "Elimination of Batton's MBA Studies Policy") seem to negate rather than defend the Policy. Subject lines such as "Batton's New MBA Studies Policy" read as if the discontinuation of the Policy is a *fait accompli*.
- ¹²Exercise 3 took place on 1 February 1989 and Exercise 4 took place on 10 April 1989.
- ¹³The same four researchers who classified the Batton representative subject lines also independently classified the Empire Car subject lines. Three agreed on the classifications in Table 3. The fourth placed the seven subject lines that use "ineffective" or "inappropriate" without qualification or elaboration (such as "Inappropriateness of CarStyle for Iowa/Nebraska Region" and "CarStyle Not Appropriate for Midwestern District") in the N-Talking category. I went with the majority opinion.
- ¹⁴I have also found the concepts of N and D useful for distinguishing the presentation of ideas in informative and persuasive messages, i.e. documents as a whole. In my experience, sometimes business writers and speakers intend that their messages persuade, yet present their key ideas as "neutral" points of information rather than "directed" arguments. For example, one of my students wanted to persuade his audience to respect the work of the Salvation Army. Toward that end he initially composed an outline with these major points: 1) General Information on the Salvation Army and 2) Special Services of the Salvation Army. After introducing him to the taxonomy he changed his major points to the following: 1) The Salvation Army is a Reputable Charity and, 2) The Salvation Army Contributes to a Stable Economy.
- ¹⁵This research was supported by The University of Michigan School of Business Administration. Special thanks to my case co-authors Carla Miller (Batton Case) and Leslie Southwick (Telco and Empire Car Cases), and to Professors Anne Harrington, Judy Lease, John Swales and Joanne Yates who provided valuable written evaluations of a related working paper. Critiques by Rick Rogers, Carol Mohr, and the editors and reviewers of this journal significantly strengthened the final presentation.

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Appendix A: Batton Industries Case

The new president of Batton Industries, James Wuest, is reviewing all company policies regarding employee benefits. He is especially concerned with the company's policy regarding MBA studies. Batton Industries has a history of supporting employees who wish to earn their MBA degrees by granting them an eight month leave of absence without pay, but with the guarantee of the same job when they return. Wuest suggests that Batton discontinue this practice for the following reasons:

1. Recent studies show there is a national glut of MBAs
2. The last three people who took advantage of the Batton program returned for only eight months of combined service and then left the company.
3. The company is concerned about the impact on production when key personnel are absent from their jobs for eight months.

Your boss, Jennifer McFee reported this information to you after she returned from a meeting with President Wuest and other division directors. She supports President Wuest on this policy.

You are just beginning your MBA studies and have some strong concerns about this policy change. You raise the issue that there are some good reasons for continuing the practice. McFee asks you to prepare a memo summarizing your arguments for her to present at the president's staff meeting next week.

Appendix B: South Telco Case

You are the Operations Manager for South Telco, an independently-owned telephone company. Founded shortly after the divestiture of AT&T, South Telco is a growing company, which handles all aspects of voice and data communications for medium-sized businesses in the Southeastern United States.

As Operations Manager, you oversee South Telco's Installation and Repair (I&R) Department. I&R is crucial to South Telco's growth and success. Requests for I&R Services are high--about 25 orders are processed and sent to I&R each month. These requests for service must be filled in a timely manner if South Telco is to remain competitive.

About four months ago, you hired Jim Jervakis as the I&R supervisor. Jim oversees 12 I&R employees who install and repair all voice and data communication stations serviced by South Telco. From the beginning, Jim has been asked to participate in staff meetings, to submit written progress reports, and to ensure that I&R requests are completed on schedule.

So far, however, Jim's management of I&R has disappointed you. Over the past four months, you have observed the following problems:

1. Jim delegates project duties, but rarely gets involved. I&R employees say that Jim gives assignments, but he doesn't monitor job progress. I&R employees like autonomy, but they also need direction, especially if differences of opinion arise in how a job should be handled.
2. Jim has only attended one of your staff meetings and has never submitted written progress reports.
3. Service order activity is far behind schedule. When you talked with I&R employees you found them working on service orders that should have been completed some time ago.

You spoke informally with Jim about these problems, explaining that his lack of follow-up on project and inadequate supervision have led to unhappy customers, loss of service, and loss of revenue for South Telco. Jim, unfortunately, continues to miss meetings, ignore reporting procedures, and I&R continues to run behind schedule. You realize you must take formal steps to improve the situation.

Appendix C: Subject Line Choice for Batton Industries Memorandum

For the Batton Industries Memorandum which of the following subject lines would you use?

- Batton's New MBA Studies Policy
- Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Reasons for Continuing Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Arguments for Continuing & Upgrading Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Elimination of Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Value of Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Batton's MBA Studies Policy
- Proposed Change in Batton's MBA Studies Policy

Explain your choice:

Appendix D: Empire Car Case

You are a field manager for the Empire Automotive Company of America. As a field manager, you sell company parts, services, and promotional programs to 20 Empire car dealers in Iowa and Nebraska. In addition, you perform market analyses to determine what parts, services, and promotional programs will help your dealers attract customers. Your ability to sell appropriate parts, services, and promotional programs has brought you special recognition, especially in 1988 when you were the top salesperson in the Midwestern District. You're convinced you succeed because you meet your dealers' special needs.

Your district manager, Maria Young, recently announced a new promotional program called CarStyle which was developed at Empire Corporate Headquarters. "I'm confident that the CarStyle Program will convince prospective customers that Empire has the perfect car for them!" Maria said, as she distributed the following description:

CarStyle is an innovative computer program designed to introduce prospective customers to Empire car models. Prominently placed in a dealer's showroom, CarStyle has a colorful display that invites a customer to "Find the Car Designed With You in Mind."

The CarStyle display includes a computer screen and keyboard. Using the keyboard, customers respond to questions about lifestyle, self-image and monetary limitations. CarStyle then presents the Empire car models especially suited to the customer's needs.

The CarStyle program will: 1) generate additional profits by engaging customers who avoid sales personnel, 2) show customers that Empire is a company "in touch with" the computer age, and 3) highlight car models the company wants to sell quickly.

Maria stressed the importance of the CarStyle Program. "Personnel at Empire Corporate Headquarters are convinced dealers will sell more cars if they invest in CarStyle," she said. "You must sell the program to at least 50% of your dealers for the company to profit, and I expect you to try for 75%. Your yearly appraisal and salary increase will be based on your success in selling CarStyle," she concluded.

You believe the CarStyle program is inappropriate for your dealers and their customers. All but two of your dealerships are located in small towns where the customers are largely farmers and small business owners. Your dealers know their customers personally--they sit with them at high school football games and eat with them in the local cafe. Your dealers know the car and truck models their customers need. Consequently, you are convinced your dealers will see little value in CarStyle, and you believe customers will be offended by the program.