Part I: Planning and Teaching the Course

There are as many different ways to teach business communication as there are business communication instructors—and what works for one person may not work for another. Thus, the advice that follows is meant to be adapted to your situation. Use it in any way that helps you develop your preferred course plan and teaching style.

Determining the Course Outline  
  
Determining the outline that is just right for you and your students involves deciding how much emphasis each of the text chapters deserves.

For example,

* If your students need considerable coverage of basic principles and skills, you might spend several weeks on Chapters 1, 2, and 4 and Bonus Chapter B and little if any time on long projects. On the other hand, if your students are more advanced, you might move them quickly through the more basic material and spend more time on such topics as effective use of visuals, report writing, and cross-cultural communication (Chapters 3, 8, and 9 and Bonus Chapter C).
* If you’re teaching a course that includes both written and oral communication, you will probably want to spend more time on Chapter 10 than if you’re teaching a business writing course.
* If your students particularly need instruction on the job search, you might devote considerable time to Chapter 11 and use it as the basis of several assignments. On the other hand, if time is short or your students have already received advice on the job search, you might forego this topic and focus instead on other kinds of persuasive writing (Chapter 7).
* If your students need to learn the strategies for creating common types of business messages and reports, you will likely spend much of your time on Chapters 5-7 and 9.

The choice is up to you. *M: Business Communication* can be tailored to any kind of course and to your changing goals as instructor.

As an aid to your planning, we present two sample outlines, one for the semester system and one for the quarter system.

Outline A: Semester System

This is a plan for a 15-week course (two 75-minute meetings per week). It is based on five practice homework assignments (2 good news messages, 2 bad news messages, and 1 persuasive message); four graded in-class assignments (1 good news message, 1 bad news message, 1 team oral presentation, and 1 persuasive message); two graded out-of-class assignments (report and job search assignment); and two exams (mid-term and final). In addition to homework assignments, other items such as quizzes and clicker points can be included in class participation scores. If you are using Connect, the homework and practice items assigned could also be included.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Class Meeting*** | ***Topic for Meeting*** | ***Chapter*** |
| 1 | Introduction and Course Overview | [preview Chapter 1] |
| 2 | Overview of communication in the workplace | 1; Bonus chapter on correctness |
| 3 | Writing process; main written forms | 2; Bonus chapter on document formats |
| 4 | Style--words, sentences | 4 |
| 5 | Style--paragraphs, positive effect | 4 |
| 6 | Good news and neutral messages | 5 |
| 7 | Good news and neutral messages | 5 |
| 8 | In-class writing--good news |  |
| 9 | Bad news messages | 6 |
| 10 | Bad news messages | 6 |
| 11 | In-class writing--bad news |  |
| 12 | Design and use of visuals | 3 |
| 13 | Mid-term exam |  |
| 14 | Reports--short written reports | 9 |
| 15 | Reports--determining factors,  gathering information | 8; Bonus chapter on documenting sources |
| 16 | Reports--interpreting, organizing, writing, collaborating | 8 |
| 17 | Oral presentations | 10 |
| 18 | In-class presentations |  |
| 19 | In-class presentations |  |
| 20 | Persuasive messages | 7 |
| 21 | Persuasive messages | 7 |
| 22 | In-class writing--persuasive |  |
| 23 | Job search writing | 11 |
| 24 | Job search writing | 11 |
| 25 | Course wrap-up and review |  |

Outline B: Quarter System

This is a plan for a 10-week course (two 75-minute meetings per week). It is based on five major assignments: good/neutral news message, bad-news message, written report (individual or group), group oral report, and persuasive message. You might substitute proposal and/or job-search messages for the written report and/or the persuasive message. The schedule includes class time for peer editing.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Class Meeting*** | ***Topic for Meeting*** | ***Chapter*** |
| 1 | Introduction | [Preview Chapter 1] |
| 2 | Overview of business communication;  direct messages | 1, 5 |
| 3 | Writing process; main forms; layout | 2, 3\* |
| 4 | Draft day; word choice | 4 |
| 5 | Sentence and paragraph work | 4 |
| 6 | Tone/you-viewpoint; bad-news messages | 4, 6 |
| 7 | Draft day; correctness | Bonus chapter on correctness |
| 8 | Introduction to reports | 8 |
| 9 | Short reports | 9\*\* |
| 10 | Visuals/graphics | 3 |
| 11 | Draft day |  |
| 12 | Oral communication | 10 |
| 13 | Draft day for slides |  |
| 14 | Group oral reports |  |
| 15 | Group oral reports |  |
| 16 | Group oral reports |  |
| 17 | Persuasive messages | 7 |
| 18 | Proposals | 7 |
| 19 | Draft day; quick look at job search | 11 |
| 20 | Review, preparation for final exam |  |

\*Can reference Bonus Chapter A on formatting of letters, memos, and reports as needed.

\*\*Can reference Bonus Chapter E on documentation and the bibliography as needed. If the short report topics relate to cross-cultural communication, Bonus Chapter C can be assigned.

Teaching the Course

What follows is advice accumulated from our many years of teaching and from other teachers who have shared their strategies with us. Again, you should use whatever strategies will serve you and your students best.

Use of Lecture, Illustration, Discussion, and Other Class Activities

Most business communication instructors teach through a combination of lecture, illustration, discussion, and various types of hands-on activities. They first explain the subject matter, supplementing material from the text with their own experience and knowledge. Then they illustrate the day’s lessons by showing or reading examples. They invite class discussion at whatever point it will help students learn what they are trying to teach. Additional participatory activities—such as dividing students into groups to do audience analysis, brainstorm about possible communication solutions, or critique various solutions—help keep the class interesting and enhance learning.

The instructor versions of chapters’ PowerPoint® slides contain teaching notes and suggested activities/discussion questions. You can revise these slides and notes as you see fit.

Perhaps of special value to new instructors are the teaching notes on the problem-solving cases in Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10. At the end of the lecture notes for these chapters, you will find solutions for many types of cases and in-depth analyses and strategies for preparing effective solutions.

One good classroom procedure to follow is to first discuss the case with the class, inviting them to help define the problem, identify any potentially sticky issue it raises, analyze the audience, set communication goals, and brainstorm possible solutions. Then lead the students through the process of constructing a workable solution. When appropriate, you can reference relevant examples in the book to illustrate the techniques you’re discussing. This process gives students helpful practice for solving other cases.

Discussion Questions and Exercises

Answers to the end-of-chapter discussion questions and exercises (on the book’s website) are also included in this manual. Covering these questions and answers can be an effective way of teaching text content. Additionally, we advise using the Manager’s Hot Seat videos with some chapters to enable students to apply the book’s advice as they critique the video participants’ communication.

Critique of Drafts or Graded Work

Showing and critiquing the students’ drafts or sharing some of the better graded assignments is another good teaching technique. If critiquing drafts, you can ask for volunteers to have their work shown (we don’t usually have any trouble getting drafts to show since the authors know they’ll receive extensive advice for improving their paper). We then put these examples on the screen and invite students to discuss the strong and weak points of each. If showing completed, graded papers, we recommend showing only those papers that reinforce the principles from the chapter unless you are allowing students to revise their papers. Otherwise, a “post-mortem” on a bad paper can be dispiriting and serves little purpose.

If you don't have access to presentation equipment, you can read the examples aloud or make them available electronically so that students can access them on laptops or mobile devices they bring to class.

Use of Contests

Conducting writing contests with recognition and prizes for the winners is one sure way of building student interest. You can make a contest of any of the writing assignments in the course. Judging can be done in any of a number of ways—by you, by a committee of students, or by the vote of the class. Grade bonuses make good prizes. But occasionally you may be able to find a business sponsor who will give prizes of monetary value. You may want your students to participate in the writing contest sponsored by the Association for Business Communication. You can find more information on their contest at [www.businesscommunication.org](http://www.businesscommunication.org).

Recognition for Good Work

Perhaps even more motivating than awarding prizes is recognizing good work. If a class management site such as Blackboard, D2L, or WebCT is available, you can recognize good work by posting the top three or so papers for all students to see.

Setting Students up for Success

While each student will bring his/her particular abilities, knowledge, and work ethic to your course, you can use a few techniques to encourage students to do their best work. Here are some tips toward that end.

* **Assign a reasonable number of assignments**. What constitutes “reasonable” will depend on how skillful your students are, how long your term is, and how many credits your course carries. Just keep in mind that more is not always better. On the quarter system for a three-hour course, for example, 5 or 6 main assignments, including either one long or two short reports or proposals, is plenty (supplemented with exercises and homework). On the semester system for a three-hour course, 10 messages (6 practice/homework and 4 in-class, graded), one research report (individual or group), and one presentation (individual or team) works out about right.
* **Choose assignments that will strike students as real, interesting, and manageable.** When students doubt the realism of an assigned case, they feel that they are on uncertain ground and are wasting their time. That is why we strive to base our communication problems on real business practice. Whatever you can do to highlight the realistic details of any given case will both help and motivate students. You should also try to assign cases that the students in any given class can do well on. We typically ask students to share their business and business-communication backgrounds early in the term so that we can choose such cases. We also sometimes use early assignments to build students’ knowledge for related later assignments.
* **Encourage class input and feedback on student work.** Our philosophy is that no student should feel that he/she is solving an assigned communication problem without support. We spend a lot of class time discussing and strategizing about assigned problems. And then we give students opportunities to share their plans or drafts and get peer feedback before producing the final versions of their work. Creating an editing sheet for students to use when reviewing each other’s work can help them give good advice and see what they should be focusing on in their own solution. Also, posting or distributing rubrics or checklists with grading symbols can be helpful.
* **Allow revision when appropriate/possible.** Instructors’ policies about revision vary widely. Some count the grade on the first submitted version as final, reasoning that one rarely gets a chance to revise in business. Others allow unlimited revision, reasoning that enabling students to make their work the best they can teaches them how to improve their own work. And yet other instructors do something in between. We would simply observe that nothing teaches students better how to improve their own work than doing it. Watch for opportunities to allow them to do so.

Assessing Student Learning

These days, most universities require each course to have announced learning objectives. These should be featured on your syllabus, and each assignment should support one or more of them. But when preparing assignments sheets for the individual papers or presentations, you can tailor these learning objectives more specifically to the assignment. Be sure students know what skills you are particularly evaluating in each case. You can use the learning objectives stated in the relevant chapters as the basis for these assignment-specific objectives.

**Use of Grading Symbols and Comments**

The book’s website contains a list of grading symbols that are keyed to common errors in students’ papers. Using these symbols can save you a lot of writing time. Be sure, though, to discuss this list with your students to ensure that they will understand what the symbols on their papers mean (or at least know where to go to find their meaning).

Even if you rely heavily on the symbols when giving feedback, be sure to write a few comments, too. One ending comment may be enough—or you may want to write a brief note about one or more particular parts of the paper. Students appreciate the personal touch, and it helps them remember that there is a real reader on the other end of their communication.

Grading Messages

Just as solving business communication problems relies on good judgment, so does the grading of the solutions. As Chapter 1 points out, there is no one correct solution to a communication problem—but clearly some solutions are better than others. When assessing students’ work, be sure you have thought carefully about the problem yourself, and be open to solutions that you did not expect.

You can prevent undue subjectivity in evaluation by keying your evaluation to particular learning objectives or dimensions of the message. For example, you might assess a persuasive message using these criteria:

* Is tailored to the intended readers
* Is logically and readably structured
* Contains sufficient, accurate, and appealing details
* Contains an effective call to action
* Reflects well on the writer/writer’s organization
* Avoids wording, grammar, and punctuation problems

You may use such criteria as general guides to forming your overall evaluation of the work or assign specific weights or points to each of them. And, as we suggest above, you can use these factors as the basis of discussion and peer-editing *before* students submit their work for grading, to guide them toward meeting your main criteria for each assignment.

**Plans for Grading Reports**

Below are sample evaluation criteria for short and long written reports and oral reports.

Structured Evaluation Plan for a Short Report:

10 *Physical Aspects.* Page layout, margins, form and content of title page, placement and spacing of headings, neatness, etc.

20 *Organization.* Logic in arranging information, wording of headings.

30-40\* *Content and Analysis.* Adequacy of coverage, pertinence, quality and quantity of information, completeness of introductory material, logic of analysis.

40-50\* *Writing Quality.* Style (interest quality, objectivity, time viewpoint), readability (clarity, conciseness, sentence structure, word choice), coherence (appropriate summarizing, concluding, and forward-looking parts).

0-20 *Visuals* (when helpful). Suitability, correctness, appearance.

\*Value varies, depending on the need for visuals.

Structured Evaluation Plan for a Long, Formal Report:

***Physical Factors***(25 percent)

10 *Appearance.* Page layout, margins, and numbering; form and content of title pages; placement and spacing of captions; appropriateness of design.

10 *Mechanics*. Correctness in spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

5 *Visuals.* Adequacy of coverage, suitability, variety, interest, technical correctness.

***Prefatory Elements*** (25 percent)

5 *Title Pages and Transmittal.* Completeness of title pages; directness, coverage, and personality of the message.

15 *Organization Plan and Outline.* Choice and consistency of main-head dimension, fullness and clarity of subheads, logic of sequence, parallelism, word economy.

5 *Executive Summary.* Completeness of coverage of high points, proportion in reduction, writing style.

***The Report Proper***(50 percent)

10 *Introduction.* Detail of identification, completeness, writing style.

15 *Coverage of Subject.* Choice and detail in presentation of information, interpretation and analysis, proportion and emphasis.

10 *Coherence and Connection.* Organization for sequence of points, use of forward-looking summaries, topic sentence leads, paragraph coherence.

15 *Writing Quality.* Readability, adaptation, objectivity, interest, time viewpoint, etc.

Evaluation Plan for an Oral Report:

15 *Speaker behavior* (eyecontact, facial expressions, gestures, body movements, posture)

35 *Content* (introduction, purpose, organization, completeness, conclusion)

10 *Voice* (quality, pitch, volume, speed, emphasis, variation)

25 *Visual design* (readability, you-viewpoint, visual appeal)

15 *Integration of Visuals* (support of oral contents; skillful handling of technology)

Testing Students

Much of the written work you require is likely to be assigned as homework, but you may also want to incorporate some in-class writing assignments. You might even have students prepare one or more major assignments as in-class writings. Writing under pressure is good practice for the business environment for which we are preparing our students.

Quizzes are a popular form of in-class assessment in business communication. They promote reading of the material and help students focus on key concepts. This book comes with an extensive Test Bank that provides numerous questions for each chapter. Each question is tagged by difficulty level as well as by chapter, topic, Bloom’s Taxonomy, and AACSB objectives, enabling you to tailor your tests specifically to your goals.

The Test Bank can also help you construct mid-term and final examinations. If you feel you have included sufficient writing practice in your other assignments, you may choose to use objective tests rather than performance tests for these exams (or, you could use a combination of formats).

Getting Connected

Teaching business communication is challenging for everyone, no matter how experienced. After all, we are not just teaching concepts; we are teaching multifaceted skills that require extensive practice. Plus, the student variables are endless: what works for one group of students may not work for the next. And the changing nature of business and technology only increases the challenge.

We strongly recommend linking up with other business communication teachers. Meet with the other instructors at your school (some of whom may teach in an different college); read journals in the field (for example, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*); and subscribe to relevant newsletters, email distribution lists, and Internet sites (including our biweekly blog, Bcomm Teacher Xchange, at <http://www.bcommteacherxchange.wordpress.com>). Our best advice, though, is to get to know your colleagues in the Association for Business Communication (<http://www.businesscommunication.org>). Attend a regional or international meeting, and start taking advantage of this supportive academic network.