



## Pedagogical Tools in Our Briefcases: Teaching the Business and Professional Communication Course

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**Abstract:** As a practical and applied course, Business and Professional Communication is an excellent opportunity to blend theory and practice, prepare students with the knowledge and skills they will need in the “real world,” and continually innovate and experiment to meet the ever-changing communication needs of the workplace. Whether filled with students majoring in communication, business, or another discipline, as a General Education or sequenced class, the Business and Professional Communication course is a worthwhile and value-added course that is both challenging and rewarding to teach.

Conventional wisdom states that effective communication skills are part and parcel of career preparation and professional success. Indeed, a variety of surveys and occupational assessments reveal a compelling degree of uniformity regarding manager and employer preferences for workplace communication behaviors and proficiencies (Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Hart Research Associates, 2018; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018; Robles, 2012; Winsor, Curtis, & Stephens, 1997). Moreover, Morreale and Pearson’s (2008) thematic review of academic and professional publications from 1998 through 2006 identified “succeeding . . . in one’s career and in business” (p. 228) as a main justification for 21st-century communication instruction. Recognizing both individual and managerial interests in effective workplace preparation, many universities offer a range of career services and academic experiences aimed at equipping students with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to function proficiently in a competitive, information-driven job market. Within the Communication Studies discipline, coursework in Business and Professional Communication focuses on

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conceptual and applied issues in workplace communication, with particular emphasis on those practices viewed as central to communicating competently within diverse and rapidly changing organizational milieus. The purpose of this article is to identify the conceptual foundations of business and professional communication curricula, highlight major content areas covered in the course, present two examples of applied assignments, and call attention to special issues instructors might consider when planning and teaching the course.

## Foundations

As a subdivision of organizational communication, coursework in business and professional communication affords instructors opportunities to lead students beyond “macro” level descriptions of organizational systems toward specific considerations for professional growth and individual career development. While particular objectives, approaches, and textbook content will vary, the “typical” course integrates fundamental concepts, theories, and perspectives from verbal and nonverbal communication, interpersonal communication, intercultural communication, group/team communication, interviewing, and public speaking to prepare students with the requisite skills for communicating successfully across a variety of organizational and professional settings. Consequently, the business and professional communication course balances theory-guided information with an appropriate and engaging blend of experiential, hands-on instruction. Minimally, course curriculum and pedagogy should facilitate (a) an examination, synthesis, and application of basic communication theory and processes relevant to workplace contexts and experiences; (b) the acquisition and demonstration of effective business communication “core” skills (e.g., collaborating with others, employment interviewing, delivering informative/persuasive presentations); and (c) critical consideration of ethical challenges and obligations across varying professional levels, circumstances, and platforms.

## Content Areas

A preliminary overview of the Table of Contents of 10 Business and Professional Communication textbooks listed over 30 chapter titles. From this overview, 10 content areas emerged as foundational to the Business and Professional Communication course. These key areas highlight the knowledge that students should acquire in this course to be applied across a variety of business and professional contexts. Combining complementary topics, the final list includes six substantive areas: Interpersonal Communication and Listening, Diversity and Intercultural Communication, Verbal and Nonverbal Messages, Interviewing and Employment Communication, Working in Teams and Small Group Communication, and Presentations. This list reflects the skills and knowledge traditionally covered in this course as well as what is required to succeed in today’s workplace. In this course, students should study, apply, and practice interpersonal, employment, and group communication. In the interpersonal realm, it is paramount that students actively listen and engage in conversation, appreciate and respect cultural and diverse experiences and perspectives, and effectively design and decode verbal and nonverbal messages. Within employment communication, it is necessary that they understand and practice interviewing and be aware of the job search process, which includes creating cover letters and resumes and defining career goals. The essential group communication section focuses on the advantages and challenges of teamwork and can include negotiation, leadership, conflict management, meetings, project planning, and decision-making. Students also must learn about, and practice, presentations, which includes the preparation and delivery of multiple presentations to various audiences through a variety of channels. These presentations may be individual, partner, or small group in nature, and may utilize technology and audiovisual elements.

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## Applied Assignments

As a practical and applied course, Business and Professional Communication offers students the opportunity to transform information into knowledge by focusing on content areas while connecting to core communication concepts and offering experiential learning opportunities. One assignment—Team How To Guide—focuses on intercultural communication in the business and professional world and incorporates multiple content areas including interpersonal communication and listening, diversity, and teamwork. With a global economy influencing much of the current business climate and with many students interested in study abroad experiences, this is an assignment with relevance and application. It encourages students to step outside their ethnocentric perspectives and learn more about the customs and nuances of Business and Professional Communication practices and expectations around the world. Students discover that things such as dress, greetings, and nonverbal communication vary widely across the globe and can be quite influential in business dealings. They are usually surprised by the role of time across cultures and are intrigued by gift giving and dining etiquette conventions.

In this assignment, students work in groups (i.e., partner, team) to design and present how to effectively and respectfully engage in business practices with professionals from other cultures. In effect, each group creates a “How to do business with the French” (for example) guide. The value of this assignment lies in both the creation and presentation of the group product and in the collective sharing of, and learning from, all presentations. Deliverables can include a group PowerPoint presentation, a written “How to” guide, and a team reflection. Additionally, each PowerPoint presentation can be posted to the class Learning Management System for student review and comments.

A second assignment highlights interviewing, a popular topic consistently covered in the Business and Professional Communication course. This assignment consists of (a) assigned readings (either textbook chapters or a collection of recent articles) written from a variety of perspectives and viewpoints and (b) an interview simulation activity. In the simulation activity, each student serves as a member of a hiring panel and as a candidate for a “real” position. As a member of the hiring panel, students create questions, collaboratively select a set of common questions to ask each candidate, interview each candidate, and then collectively deliberate to select a “hire.” As a candidate for a job, students research the company and position, have questions prepared to ask during the interview, and are appropriately dressed for an interview. Adaptations or additions could include writing cover letters, resumes, or thank-you letters.

## Issues to Consider

Several issues should be considered in the planning and implementation of a Business and Professional Communication course. First, depending on its location in the department’s curriculum (i.e., course level, required/elective, prerequisites), students may come to the course lacking the requisite content knowledge in communication theory that would allow for more advanced pedagogical activities. In fact, for one of us, this course serves as a General Education class with no prerequisite expectations. While the course can easily be adapted for any level of student experience, we have found that when it is offered at the upper division level, students who have previously taken an introductory communication or public speaking course fare better on oral delivery assignments (e.g., sales speech, mock interviews) than those students who have not. For this reason, instructors should bear in mind the degree of background knowledge and preparation students have in the planning of learning objectives and teaching strategies to be used.

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Second, instructors should consider the scope and sequence of course content. Given the conceptual breadth of subjects encompassed in the majority of Business and Professional Communication textbooks, instructors should reflect on two central questions related to their instructional planning: “How much content can be reasonably covered?” and “Do certain topics warrant more emphasis than others?” Approached as a survey course, instructors may allot approximately equal time to major class divisions and utilize projects or assessments that determine basic understanding and skills as set forth in the sequencing of material. Alternatively, instructors may schedule major units that span several class sessions or weeks that concentrate on focused themes or learning activities. A unit, for instance, on employment interviewing may encompass resume-building and cover letters, preparation for and participation in mock interviews, guest speakers, and self-appraisals of interview performances. Equivalent in-depth units also could be fashioned for professional speaking, communication technology and social media, or group and team communication. Likewise, it may be the case that not all textbook material is of equal importance and that the text’s composition is not necessarily optimal given the interests, needs, and abilities of students or departments. On this point, instructors are encouraged to consult with colleagues about the expected breadth and depth of the course as well as contemplate the overarching purpose of the class relative to the program’s curriculum plan and student learning outcomes.

From an institutional perspective, it is important to consider the ways the Business and Professional Communication course—as taught in the field of communication—differ from the business communication curricula frequently offered in business administration departments. While these courses enjoy a great deal of conceptual overlap, two distinctions are worth mentioning. For one, recent audits of the business discipline’s course reveal that *written communication* (e.g., letters, memo writing, business proposals, formatting documents and e-mail messages) continues to be the prevailing pedagogical focus of business communication coursework (Moshiri & Cardon, 2014; Russ, 2009). Though written communication occupies a critical niche in our interpretation of the course, we suspect that it is not assigned the same degree of prominence as it is in business curricula. Second, in most business departments, business communication is taught as a stand-alone, independent course offering with few internal opportunities for advanced study in communication (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013). In contrast, for students majoring or minoring in communication-related areas, business and professional communication is much more likely to appear within a sequence of associated communication coursework. Accordingly, communication instructors may assume reasonably that students enrolled in such a course *have had* and/or *will have* additional opportunities for reinforcing prior study and supporting more sophisticated applications of communication theory.

## Conclusion

The Business and Professional Communication course is an excellent opportunity to blend theory and practice, prepare students with the knowledge and skills they will need in the “real world,” and continually innovate and experiment to meet the ever-changing communication needs of the workplace. Whether filled with students majoring in communication, business, or another discipline, as a General Education or sequenced class, the Business and Professional Communication course is a worthwhile and value-added course that is both challenging and rewarding to teach.

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