

Training International Teaching Assistants Through a Writing Across the Curriculum Course

In the fall of 2013, I began teaching Business 100W: Management Communication and Writing to upper-division business students at the University of California, Riverside (UCR). This class, located in a subset of “core classes” in the business major, is designed as a Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) course to satisfy a general writing requirement for UCR. The Teaching Assistants (TAs) who serve Business 100W are recruited from a variety of disciplines (religious studies, history, political science, and English), but the majority of TAs are housed in the School of Business Administration. During my tenure as the course instructor, I have encountered numerous challenges, one of the most significant being the training of international TAs charged with the task of teaching and evaluating written English.

TAs are expected to demonstrate competence in the subject matter as well as writing. Standardized tests such as the SAT, GRE, and GMAT help identify qualified graduate students, and the academic/professional backgrounds of these students can also be indicators of strong WAC candidates, so the School of Business Administration uses these tools to make a concerted effort to recruit only the most capable TAs for the course. However, with very few exceptions, the TAs assigned to the course demonstrate a much stronger competence in the subject matter than in English prose, so I designed the course with this consideration in mind because, within a matter of weeks, TAs are expected to evaluate undergraduate writing, a field that they have not specialized in.

Many of the TAs assigned to the course are international students whose first language is not English. Some of these students are very highly trained in formal English grammar, a clear boon to staffing the course, while others, however, demonstrate only a rudimentary grasp of the English language.

As a service to both the undergraduate students and the international TAs, I devote about ten percent of lecture time to grammar and syntax instruction. This pedagogical approach is germane to a WAC course and its stated goals of developing competent writers, writers who can generate error-free prose and have some awareness of the rules of grammar.

Addressing all aspects of grammar is neither feasible nor desired in a WAC class devoted to management communication, but I have identified certain areas of grammar and syntax that can be addressed in such a way that benefits both undergraduate students and TAs alike in terms of instruction and evaluation.

Much of the course is dedicated to generating more complex thought and an ability to articulate that complex thought through complex sentence structures and sentence variety. Modifier problems, in particular, often manifest themselves during this process as students begin to challenge themselves with more advanced sentence structures, like the sentence trees Steven Pinker discussed in *The Sense of Style*, so lessons tethered to increased sentence variety, nuanced style, and syntax seem appropriate; with this consideration in mind, I thread these aspects of composition throughout the lectures.

Punctuation is yet another concern that often frustrates the undergraduate students. In particular, many of the business students struggle with semicolons (and seem to enjoy using them, even if incorrectly), so I have opted to include this specific form of punctuation to broaden student articulation and encourage complex thought through access to a broader variety of sentence trees (though sometimes in this process students became a bit too enthusiastic about using semicolons). Finally, to help students craft more concise prose, I explain active and passive voice. Limiting the writing instruction in a management communications course to these five elements (modifier problems, semicolons, active voice, passive voice, and sentence tree awareness) creates a clear focus for TAs who often sport less familiarity with more fundamental aspects of the English language. I then frequently encourage the TAs to emphasize these issues at the sentence level when evaluating undergraduate work, an approach which affords those less confident about teaching grammar a chance to anchor themselves, as quickly as possible, in some basic ideas at this level. In other words, the TAs engage constructive criticism at the sentence level very early in the course, regardless of their academic training. Undergraduate students in the course are, as a result, held responsible for some of the most common concerns with their writing. Of course, I encourage those TAs who have a deeper understanding of grammar and syntax to comment in a more robust manner at the sentence level, but the class can still function without that higher level of scrutiny. Here is a compromise that addresses the diversity of the TAs and the needs of the undergraduate students.

Sustaining a high level of instruction and evaluation from a transient graduate student population, many of whom are international students, is very challenging in a WAC course to be sure. The goal, however, is possible to achieve if a very specific focus is adopted when considering grammar and syntax for both the TAs and the undergraduate students they teach.

Paul A. J. Beehler

University of California, Riverside