The Art of the Commander, The Art of the Servant

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Art of the Commander, Art of the Servant: Why a Business Student Chose a Humanities Minor

By William Adams
In the personal reflection below, I apply a simple framework to the question of choosing a minor degree. A minor is worth pursuing if it fits at least one of two criteria:

Is the minor a field of study you enjoy?

Does the minor complement your major?

A minor can offer a change of pace from your major coursework, often boost your GPA, expose you to new ideas and groups outside the business school, and help you develop scarce skills. Ultimately, the key is to effectively communicate why you chose a minor. That's exactly what I try to do here.

People tend to comment on my choice of academic degrees. The first question I get in most interviews is, “Business strategy and an English editing minor, huh?” I’m pretty sure I’m the only student currently enrolled at BYU with this combination, but in my mind the two aren’t diametrically opposed. They’re complementary disciplines.

In my first class as a strategy major, our professor showed us a video that described strategy as the art of the commander. In business strategy, we learn to set intelligent goals and find the most effective ways to achieve them. We learn how to manage people and resources. In the role of manager or executive, the work is often highly visible and entails great responsibility.

In the classes for my English editing minor, I have learned that editing is the art of the servant. Although some editors might view their position as a throne from which they issue grammatical edicts, they do not understand the core of their discipline. Like a good butler, we editors are best when we’re invisible, but behind the scenes our work still entails a great deal of responsibility. In editing, we see the details others overlook, and we are eager to assist the author in improving the clarity of the prose.

Together, strategy and editing have taught me the art of leadership. While strategy has taught me the valuable skill of taking the initiative to chart a course of action, editing has taught me the equally important skills of supporting the team once a course is charted and aiding in the team’s effort to reach the destination. I have developed these sister skills through both my fields of study.

WHO NEEDS A MINOR?

Many employers will tell you that minors don’t matter. This advice is imprecise. While it’s true that earning a minor only for the sake of adding an additional degree may not make you any more attractive in the job market, a minor can make a difference if it’s chosen strategically. There are two key reasons why pursuing a minor would make sense: first, if it’s a field of study you enjoy, and second, if your minor complements your major. For me, English editing fulfills both. Writing and grammar come naturally for me. I love to read, and I like helping people improve. Thus, editing is a logical choice. More importantly, however, my coursework in editing has allowed me to develop complementary skills that extend beyond red pen and the dangling modifier—my experience in editing has given me another arena for mastering the art of leadership.

1. LEADERS PAY ATTENTION

The editing minor has helped me as a leader in at least three ways, each more valuable than the last. First, every team could use someone who can catch the typos. Leaders pay attention. Their commitment to the cause drives them to see what the rest of the team might
miss. I have participated in over a dozen business case presentations. Because of my love for catching grammar and usage errors, I have developed a reputation among my teammates for being meticulous. Some people would consider my fastidious nature overkill, but I need to see parallelism down the entire bulleted list. I remember many nights spent rephrasing each line to start with a verb. Although this attention to detail is a useful skill that enhances a team’s deliverables and occasionally annoys the team’s members, knowing the finer points of the Chicago Manual of Style isn’t reason enough to do the editing minor.

2. LEADERSHIP REQUIRES PERSUASION

Second, successful leadership requires persuasion. People are most easily persuaded when they understand the points you make. The key to understanding is clarity. Editing helps writing become clear because it works with the very mechanics of communication, the building blocks of clarity. With this perspective of editing in mind, you can see why the minor could be worth the effort if you anticipate being in a role that requires clear writing and presenting. In my case, I am pursuing a career in consulting that will hopefully lead to landing an executive position in an established company or to starting my own venture. In either case, I will need to communicate complex ideas simply, be it to clients or employees or investors.

3. SERVANT LEADERSHIP IS THE HIGHEST FORM OF LEADERSHIP

Finally, editing has helped me as a leader because servant leadership is the purest, most effective, and most noble form of leadership and a good editor practices this form daily. Servant leaders lead others by providing constructive feedback and attain greatness by helping others achieve the same. Thus, the real difficulty in editing isn’t knowing whether a word should be hyphenated (although that can be tricky) but rather knowing how to manage the delicate situation of providing constructive feedback. I remember reading a paper in which the author was clearly struggling to collect her thoughts. Rather than rip her papers to pieces, I empathized with the author and used the opportunity to build her up. We thought through what she really wanted to say, and she ultimately produced a cogent report. I’m grateful for the practice the editing minor has given me towards mastering collaboration skills because I will use them constantly in the workplace and throughout my life. The ability to interact positively with others is such an integral part of editing that Carol Fisher Saller made it the subtitle of her book The Subversive Copy Editor: Advice from Chicago (or, How to Negotiate Good Relationships with Your Writers, Your Colleagues, and Yourself). From the readings for my editing classes I have learned guiding principles regarding the giving of feedback that I plan to incorporate into my interactions with others going forward. I want to highlight two of them here.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Principle number one:
The author and the editor are on the same team.

Although an editor may never receive the fame of the author (do you know who edited Harry Potter or The Grapes of Wrath?), the editor freely gives because the editor and the author together work for the benefit of the reader. Likewise, managers and employees together work for the benefit of the customer. Harry Truman once said, “It’s amazing what you can accomplish when no one cares who gets the credit.” Editors can convey this same sense of comradery in every interaction with the writer. Saller points to just one of these interactions: “In managing your relationship with a writer, questions serve another important purpose: they foster a collaborative environment rather than an adversarial one” (Subversive Copy Editor, 16). Similarly, Amy Einsohn in The Copyeditor’s Handbook offers this advice on providing feedback: “Another approach to query writing is to treat the manuscript, no matter how poorly written or prepared, as though it were the author’s ugly newborn. That is, no matter how ugly you may think the baby is, you would never say so to the new mother or father; no—surely, you would find something polite to say” (Copyeditor’s Handbook, 45). Now she’s not saying that you avoid pointing out the bad, but rather that you find the right words and timing to help the writer improve. This advice applies not only to editors, but to every leader giving critical feedback.

Principle number two:
Everyone’s experience has value.

Sometimes while editing a paper I’ve caught myself thinking, “Wow. I didn’t know this person was so sloppy. I guess I overestimated their abilities.” Saller is quick to correct this way of thinking. She writes: “A trove of knowledge, don’t forget, exists in your author. She may be clueless about the style you are following, but she probably has two kinds of expertise that you may not: she knows her subject, and she probably knows her reader” (Subversive Copy Editor, 26–27). People charged with “improving” or “rescuing” a situation can be quick to dismiss the work already done (Want to Help Someone? Shut up and Listen!). Saller’s statement above could easily be rewritten to refer to a consultant’s client: “A trove of knowledge, don’t forget, exists in your client [or anyone you serve]. She may be clueless about the macroeconomic implications or larger industry trends influencing her business or the strategic framework you are suggesting, but she probably has two kinds of expertise that you may not: she knows her own business, and she probably knows her customers.” With this thought in mind, I can see the value in listening to others before jumping in to “solve” their problems.

After my college career, I may never have the title of editor. But I won’t stop being an editor. In reality, everyone is an editor because everyone is a leader. The leadership skills I have learned in my editing class—humility, teamwork, listening, and carefulness—will stay with me throughout my life.

Works Cited


