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Why We Write

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BEFORE SPOKEN DISCOURSE EXISTED, body language dictated the prehistoric business world.¹ Our ancestors expressed their desires, negotiated trades, and built their ancient economy with gestures, eye contact, and movement. Over time, the breadth of human communication skills increased—people learned to talk and started to write. Interpersonal interaction remained essential and continued to influence the business community. But now, centuries later, as fewer businessmen spend their afternoons talking, and more spend them typing, body language is becoming less and less consequential. The more technical we become, the less face time we have. Issues that were once debated face to face in board meetings and speeches are now left to emails, texts, and Skype conference calls. Accordingly, the skill set that enables us to communicate is changing. Our opportunities to demonstrate our interpersonal prowess are decreasing.

Yet, hidden behind computer screens, businesspeople depend increasingly upon what author Mark Edmundson describes as, “one of the greatest human goods:” writing.²

The importance of written communication is drilled into elementary schoolers’ heads from the time they learn to spell their names. Yet, some business students forget their childhood lessons. As they learn about Microsoft Excel, Word seems obsolete; as they code in new languages, they neglect their native tongue. While our tech-savvy interactions may increase efficiency, our inability to write may destroy it.

Let’s first consider a strong business writer. She could condense a three-hour meeting full of small talk and unnecessary tangents into a three-paragraph email.

“As they learn about Microsoft Excel, Word seems obsolete; as they code in new languages, they neglect their native tongue.”
She could highlight key points, create a persuasive argument, and ensure that her employees and clients remember exactly what she wants them to. This allows her to influence and improve the results of the meeting. A poor writer, on the other hand, would do just the opposite. A summary could become a lengthy composition full of confusing jargon. A three-minute memo could become a three-hour string of emails asking for clarification. A poorly written joke might leave his fingers humorously and arrive in his client’s inbox cynically or even offensively. CEO of Accenture’s North America business, Julie Sweet, told CNBC that “the greatest advice [she] gives” is to “develop excellent communication skills” not only in person, but also over email.

Business leaders recognize the significance of good writing and hire accordingly. Jason Fried, CEO of Basecamp stated, “Our top hiring criteria—in addition to having the skills to do the job—is, are you a great writer? You have to be a great writer to work here, in every single position, because the majority of our communication is written.” So as you enter more competitive job markets, strong writing becomes an increasingly powerful asset. A Grammarly study of 100 LinkedIn profiles found that, “professionals who received one to four promotions made 45 percent more grammatical errors than did professionals who were promoted six to nine times.” This statistic may indicate that good writers tend to have other marketable skills—a detail oriented eye trained by catching typos, the ability to organize thoughts well etc.—or maybe it just further endorses the importance of written communication. Regardless, writing continues to separate the successful from the average long after they leave school and secure jobs.

Here in the Marriott School at BYU, isolated from the humanities buildings, business students construct a pseudo-business world within the walls of the Tanner Building. While we may be fluent in corporate language, the ability to translate “fund capital” into “the money given” becomes essential in the outside world. Elon Musk, CEO and CTO of SpaceX, is known for explaining complicated technological projects simply. Business Insider praised Musk, for his “beautifully readable writing.” The public’s fascination with his work depends on his ability to describe it clearly. Founder of the Virgin Group, Richard Branson, gives writing similar weight. He advised, “Today, if you want to succeed as an entrepreneur, you also have to be a storyteller. It is not enough to create a great product; you also have to work out how to let people know about it.”

Thus, communication skills are necessary. Demand for them is high. Most Marriott School students could prove it with a graph. But their inability to explain that graph in writing makes the supply questionable. Dean Thompson of the Marriott School acknowledged that although the Marriott School prepares students well for the workforce, “a deficiency we share with a lot of business programs...[is] the amount of writing and editing the our students are required to do.” Many majors in the Marriott School require only one writing class. Ideally, students “write across the curriculum,” but their essays are often overshadowed by spreadsheets, data analyses, and quantitative skills. While these abilities are equally important in the workplace, writing has been neglected. As a result, a Bloomberg study analyzing employers’ opinions of business school graduates from the top 122 business programs ranked Marriott School alumni 7th for decision making skills but only 15th for communication skills. Both quantitative and communication skills are necessary for success throughout a person’s career.

So, what do we do to close the gap? We write. According to Dean Thompson, we “make sure [we] are doing more writing than we are required to do.” We participate in programs like the Marriott Student Review. We edit others’ work, learning from fellow students and fellow writers. We enroll in essay competitions and research for senior theses and seek every opportunity we can to put pen to paper. We make writing a priority because we recognize why it matters.
And we not only write, we read. Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, estimates that he dedicates up to 80 percent of his time every day to reading. In his words, “that’s how knowledge works. It builds up, like compound interest.” As we read articles, journals, newspapers, biographies, and reports, our ability to use language will improve. A statistical analysis of the effects of reading on children revealed that above average readers experienced a higher rate of vocabulary growth. Thus, our vocabulary will expand and our phrasing will advance. If we pair these improvements with our existing quantitative skills, the emails and cover letters that we write might transform our career trajectory.

So, if you use semi-colons more effectively to distinguish cell ranges in Excel than you do to punctuate sentences, pick up a student journal. Become involved in a writing project. Turn this page, and read the next article.

Notes


