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VOCABULARY IN WRITING FOR BUSINESS:
SIX PROPOSITIONS FOR PEDAGOGICAL USE[1]

—Nihil volitum quin praecognitum[2]

Basic writing students entering a business writing course often undergo a kind of linguistic double jeopardy—after having come to terms with, and to a degree mastered, the conventions of standard written English, these students are suddenly confronted with yet another set of usages, rules, and formulas which differ markedly from the English they have been speaking, reading, and writing most of their lives. Unfortunately, most business writing textbooks downplay the separateness, the apartness of business writing and emphasize its continuity with the entire communications process. For instance, a recent text takes as its instructional starting point the need for "active listening" in all business situations.[3] Another often lapses into overly general, and thereby ineffectual, pronouncements: "An important part of any sales letter is good psychology."[4] Conversely, some texts adapt the phraseology of business communications without stressing its discreteness or analyzing its construction. In touting its "unique Four-Way Access System," the co-authors of a recent business writing handbook are obviously appealing to a business and bureaucratic mentality, not to the business writing novices a vast majority of their students would be.[5]

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2. Nothing is willed but what is previously known.

3. Bonnie D. Phillips, *Effective Business Communication* (Albany: Delmar, 1977), p. 1.

4. Charles L. Cherry and George D. Murphy, *Write Up the Ladder: A Common Sense Guide to Better Business Communication* (Pacific Palisades, Calif.: Goodyear Publishing Co., 1976), p. 93.

5. See Charles T. Brusaw, Gerald J. Alred and Walter E. Oliu, *The Business Writer's Handbook* (New York: St. Martin's, 1976), rear cover, p. vi, *et passim.*

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What is needed—I believe—is an approach to the teaching of writing for business that is at once more practical and more radical than that found in most business writing texts. In the inaugural issue of this journal, Sarah D'Eloia wrote that "whatever the political philosophy of the teacher, the values of the student must be given preeminence. All evidence indicates that most students . . . are in college because they wish to improve their economic and social status in life."[6] Confronted with a class of business writing students, almost all of whom want to become functionally literate business managers, administrative assistants, accountants, computer programmers, secretaries and the like (positions unlikely to appeal to most academics), the teacher has a moral obligation to set aside, *but not to dismiss,* whatever antithetical feelings he or she may harbor toward the business world and the present economic structure. Business writing—or, more properly, the use of language in business writing—is a system, and we, as teachers, must instruct students in the rudiments of that system.[7] As John Dewey has noted, "The realm of the practical is the region of change"[8]—and helping transform students from unskilled workers into ones able to function linguistically in entry-level business positions is, in baldly economic terms, to change their market value.

Teaching students, especially students whose families come from non-business backgrounds, how to function in a business context is something of a radical activity, for it often results in a change in class status. Perhaps Toni Cade (Bambara) is somewhat dogmatic in asserting "If you want to get ahead in this country, you must master the language of the ruling class,"[9] but she does point to a linguistic fact-of-life in our society—and in business one must be careful not only to be, but also to sound, "businesslike." (As Calvin Coolidge said, in what is apparently the only quip he ever managed, "The business of America is business.")

6. "Teaching Standard Written English," *Journal of Basic Writing,* 1, 1 (Spring 1975), p. 9.

7. It is very well to complain, as does John Kenneth Galbraith, that "To assert aesthetic goals is. . .to interfere seriously with the management of the consumer" (*The New Industrial State* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967], p. 348), but to impose such attitudes on a class of business writing students would be elitist—and premature, since students would need to understand how language typically functions in a business context before they could grasp some of the aesthetic shortcomings inherent in that functioning.

8. *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (1927; rpt. New York: Capricorn, 1960), p. 19.

9. See Dorothy Z. Seymour, "Black English," rpt. in *The American Language in the 1970's,* ed. Herman A. Estrin and Donald V. Mehus (San Francisco: Boyd and Fraser, 1974), p. 142.

Rather than imbuing students with a washy humanism which condescends to business writing, we need to made students better able to *control* the system of business writing, in hopes they will eventually discover that the system, precisely because it is specialized, is predicated on values too narrow to encompass their full range of values.[10]

The six propositions made below concerning the use of vocabulary in business writing are meant to be both practical, in that they all should affect the way writing for business is conceived and taught, and radical, in that they all are unapologetically predicated on the assumption that writing for business is a limited, specialized, and generally unhumanistic endeavor. Before turning to the propositions, however, two assumptions about the use of vocabulary in business writing should be mentioned, since the six propositions are based on them. First, "vocabulary" means not simply the learning and correct usage of words, but also encompasses an awareness of how words in general function and how contexts shape the choice of words. What Mina Shaughnessy notes about an analogous field, academic vocabulary, also holds true for basic writing students approaching business vocabulary:

At least three kinds of learning are involved:

1. learning about words;
2. learning words;
3. learning a sensitivity to words.

To learn about words is to acquire the kind of information about words as physical, grammatical, and semantic entities that makes analysis possible. To learn words is to absorb specific words into one's active vocabulary. To learn a sensitivity to words is to become aware of the process whereby exact choices are made in writing.[11]

Second, "vocabulary" choices in business writing are made through a recognition that standard business phraseology must always adjust to the

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10. The Italian semiologist, Umberto Eco, reminds us that the careful analysis of communications processes also can be a means of gaining control over our destinies: "By studying techniques of communication and persuasion, you can make them public, you inform people of the means by which other people determine their behavior." (Elizabeth Bruss and Marguerite Waller, "An Interview with Umberto Eco," *The Massachusetts Review*, 19, 2 [Summer 1978], p. 411).

11. *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 211.

requirements of each business situation. As Richard Lloyd-Jones has written, "Most of what we call creation is really adeptness in handling conventions of language and social situations"[12] —in this regard, most writing for business is unusually uncreative, but often more effective thereby.

It should be noted, also, that while the discussion of each proposition includes some practical exercises and applications, teachers who believe these propositions possess a certain candid validity will generate many more exercises and applications.

I. ACCEPTABLE BUSINESS DICTION EXCLUDES VAST AREAS OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Think of Othello's outbursts of jealous rage or Miss Lonelyhearts' cries against a wantonly cruel universe: Such behavior appears of such a different order from the actions and facts reflected in business writing that in reading of passions we seem—and indeed are—in an entirely separate linguistic universe. Business writing simply cannot—or will not allow itself to—reflect strong emotions, mental anguish, ecstacy and the like, even though normally ambitious businessmen and businesswomen may experience such feelings more than occasionally in their careers. The American societal model posited nearly thirty years ago by the authors of *The Lonely Crowd* still contains valid insights into the American business world and its norms of behavior:

> . . .temper is considered the worst trait in the society of the glad hand. It is felt as an internal menace to one's cooperative attitudes. Moreover, the peer-group regards rage and temper as faintly ridiculous: one must be able to take it with a smile or be charged with something even worse than temper, something no one will accuse himself of even in an interview—lack of a sense of humor.[13]

No businessperson can, without incurring suspicions, communicate rage, despair, exaltation or even indifference over, for example, a co-worker's performance. Nor can a business writer "lapse" into figurative language, except for those similes and metaphors which have

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12. "Ex Nihilo,. . .," *College English,* 40, 2 (Oct. 1978), p. 150.

13. David Reisman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character,* rev, and abrg, ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1953), p. 268.

become so common that their figurative quality is not normally noticed (e.g., "tool," "golden opportunity," "channel"). Thus, when a business writing text asserts that "the larger your vocabulary, the easier it is for you to choose accurate, precise, and meaningful words,"[14] it asserts only a half-truth, for a larger vocabulary also means control of more words which should *not* be used in business writing.

Basic writing students, of course, are not completely oblivious to the existence of a decorum in business writing. Early in the term I give my students the following "opening paragraph" of a hypothetical letter of application and ask them to underline all the words and phrases which seem inappropriate to them:

> I thought you might be interested in hiring me as an administrative assistant with your firm. Recently I was fired by Beston Industries, after having worked there for some time. The reason I was fired had nothing to do with my job performance, but it was because of a fight with my boss which made him pick me when the company made him reduce his staff by one member. Later he apologized, and last week he begged me to fill a new opening on his staff, but I decided to seek another job. My career at Beston is quite good, and all my job ratings were at least satisfactory. You can contact my ex-boss, who assures me he will say nothing bad about my work.

The phrasing is highly inappropriate, and students can immediately point to—indeed, enjoy pointing to—very poor word choices in the passage.[15] Certain words are not, except in extreme situations, permissible in a business context (*fight, fired, begged, apologized*); other words carry informal overtones (*boss, ex-boss, job*); some of the phrasing emphasizes the negative (*at least satisfactory, nothing bad*); one word (*career*) is used inaccurately, another (*made*) inappropriately, and a third (*new*) redundantly; and there are examples of vagueness (*some time*) and indecisiveness (*might*) in the passage as well. However, when they have finished tearing the paragraph apart, students will still admit that they understand it, and, more importantly, that it describes a work experience which, if vaguely unpleasant, is not atypical, an experience

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14. *Effective Business Communication*, p. 17.

15. A personal note: students find this exercise amusing because it works partially through ludicrousness. Over the years I have found it very useful to step out from under the rather solemn aegis of the Protestant Work Ethic when teaching business writing.

which might well have to be handled—obviously more adequately than it is here—in written terms.

At this juncture, some of the basic insights of structuralism are useful. For example, Robert Scholes' succinct summary of Roman Jakobson's communication theory can be used to focus attention on business writing as a process: ". . .the message must be delivered through a *contact,* physical or psychological; it must be framed in a *code;* and it must refer to a *context.*"[16] A letter of application is a physical and psychological *contact* (i.e., it links the applicant to the employer in a hierarchical structure) which is framed in a *code* (through its language the applicant offers qualifications and expertise) to create a *context* (the applicant as job supplicant, the employer as potential job provider).

Once students recognize the general principle of exclusion (that there is much that cannot be written or said in business communication), they can work on some of the chief vocabulary weaknesses many of them still retain after passing through basic writing courses: the reliance on vague, often informal, qualifiers (e.g., *a lot, all right, nice, good, nowhere near, kind of, sort of*); the use of redundant phrases (e.g., *rarely ever, outside of, over with, reason is because*); the carryover of slightly inaccurate oral phrasing into written work (e.g., *try and* for *try to, while* for *that, on account of* for *because, since* for *for*); and the inappropriate introduction of contractions. Such flaws—not all of them qualify absolutely as faults—are generally more damning in business communication, where interpersonal relationships, oral or written, are conducted on a more consciously formal, impersonal level than in many other spheres. However, recognition that much, in terms of fact and in terms of phrasing, should be excluded in business communication naturally raises the question of what should be included, and, more significantly, *how* it should be included.

II. BUSINESS DICTION, WITH RARE EXCEPTIONS, MUST EMPHASIZE THE POSITIVE.

A proposed business operation is never "cheap;" it is "economical" or "cost effective." Companies might "over-extend" their operation and face "collapse," but the situation is likely to appear as "a definite need for review and consolidation" in memos and reports. Employees

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16. *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale, 1974), p. 24.

never "stagnate" in the business world, but "broaden their experience" and "enhance their capabilities," even when they have held a series of very similar positions. To emphasize the positive is to choose the side of action, the side of progress—which, after all, makes sense in the business world, where people are paid chiefly to act, not to deliberate endlessly.[17]

A "Resume/Curriculum Vitae Development Booklet" printed by the Division of Educational Placement of the University of Pennsylvania contains a 73-item "Action Word List," a list intended to help the graduate job-seeker maximize the presentation of his/her work experience.[18] Besides words with relatively explicit meanings (e.g., *directed, headed, researched, wrote*), it contains an even larger number with relatively inexplicit meanings (e.g., *facilitated, coordinated, implemented, reviewed, reduced*), words which can be used to bolster and diversify the entries listed under "Experience" on one's resume. The premise underlying such a list is clear: positive action in the past promises positive action in the future.

The usefulness of such "action-oriented" phraseology on a resume (and elsewhere) is a point students are usually quick to grasp. With more continuous and less minutely worked kinds of business writing than resumes, achieving an active, positive tone is a more complex matter. After my students have revised the decidedly negative sample "opening paragraph" (see Proposition I above), we discuss where their revisions have and have not been able to put the elements of the passage into a positive light. Then we compare their revisions with the following, which is meant to be a sound, realistically positive revision of the passage, written on a level the students could reach:

I think you will be interested in my qualifications for the position of administrative assistant with your firm. I have had two years of concentrated experience in the administative field, working for Beston

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17. Benjamin Franklin, that archetypal American businessman, even extended this principle of "positive action" into the sphere of ethics, with his belief that virtue could be cultivated as a habit. In analyzing Franklin's ideas on virtue, Norman S. Fiering detects a very pragmatic side to them: ". . .it made little difference whether the 'habit' was appearance or reality, whether it was merely external behavior—in effect, acting—or representative of a profound internal change." ("Benjamin Franklin and the Way to Virtue," *American Quarterly*, 30, 2 [Summer 1978], p. 217). The assumption of a generally positive tone in business writing works in much the same way—whether the product of repetition or belief, such a tone consistently favors action to inaction, movement to stasis.

18. Citations will be taken from the 1975 edition of the booklet, wherein the "Action Word List" appears on p. 6. It is not without point that such a publication issues from a university founded by Benjamin Franklin.

Industries. My former supervisor at Beston, Mr. Harry Jones, has kindly offered to recommend me for the quality of my work.

Several months ago a budget reduction forced Beston Industries to release several junior employees, myself included, and although Mr. Jones recently offered to rehire me in my former position, I now believe myself ready and qualified for a new challenging position in the administrative field.

The word choice in this revision makes the most of what appears in the original version as chiefly a negative work experience: the writer's abilities are stressed (*qualifications, concentrated experience, quality*) as are the writer's personal attributes (*quality, ready, new challenging*— even *position,* rather than *job,* reflects well, suggesting someone more concerned with the work than the pay); a knack for cooperation is implied (*kindly, recommend, interested*); and what originally was a "firing" is now the *release* of a *junior employee* because of an unfortunate economic circumstance (*a budget reduction*), a fact proven by Mr. Jones' recent offer to *rehire* the writer in his/her *former position.* Virtually nothing has been added that was not in the original (save that several other junior employees were laid off at the same time), yet all the vocabulary choices, as students soon realize, were made from a consistently positive viewpoint meant to enhance the writer's employability.

There are numerous specific techniques for turning a neutral, or even negative statement, into a positive one. A number of the ones I work with in the classroom focus on vocabulary choices, including:

1) anticipating an objection and interjecting an adjective to "answer" it (e.g., "an inexpensive, *but effective,* method; "a thorough, detailed *and economical* approach").

b) recognizing that what is a positive word choice in one type of business writing might not be in another. (For example, a report writer might refer to "the amount to be saved" by a proposed operational change, whereas a writer of a sales letter is permitted the somewhat more vulgar phrasing of "the money you will save.")[19]

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19. That most .brilliant analyst of modern advertising and its "mythology," Roland Barthes, notes wryly what seems to have become an advertising precept in the last few decades: "A little 'confessed' evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil." ("Operation Margarine," *Mythologies,* trans. Annette Lavers [New York: Hill and Wang, 1972], p. 42).

c) differentiating, in terms of self-presentation and peer-evaluation, between "acceptable" qualities for men and for women in a business world generally run with a definite, if diminishing, sexist bias. (For example, men are allowed to be *aggressive, independent,* and *self-motivated,* whereas women are expected to be *incisive, cooperative* and *receptive to guidance*).[20]

There comes a point, though, where we must remind ourselves, and our students, that there must be a certain linguistic constraint in casting everything in business writing into the positive mode.[21] Language is meant to reflect, not to disguise—in writing for business it is almost always necessary, because almost always expected, that the writing will "reflect well" on the writer and his/her work; it should not be necessary that the writing ever lie.

III. TECHNICAL AND SEMI-TECHNICAL BUSINESS TERMS CONSTITUTE THE MOST LITERAL, LEAST JUDGMENTAL ASPECT OF BUSINESS VOCABULARY

The business-related writing course I teach at LaGuardia College is entitled, quite accurately, "Writing for Business"—an indication that the course centers on the written use of language in business situations, and not, as a course entitled "Business Writing" might, on the acquisition and employment of a specialized "business vocabulary." Since almost all the students are enrolled in business curricula, it is possible for members in each field (e.g., accounting) to share their stock of specialized terms (e.g., *accounts receivable, accrued, deficit, equity,*

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20. Business writing texts, if anything, often exaggerate—and thereby help perpetuate—sexual stereotypes. For instance, the following 'situation', taken from a text published just seven years ago, presents a dominant, domineering male (with a WASP name) and a subservient, dominated female (with an ethnic name):

> Mary Beth Ryan has submitted her resignation as Mr. Jonathan Davis' secretary, and for weeks he has been frantically reading application letters and resumes in search of a replacement. Mary Beth couldn't help but think "Thank goodness! He's finally found someone," when he rushed to her desk one day and said: "Mary Beth, if this girl is as good as this letter makes her sound, I'm going to let you get married next month. Just read it and judge for yourself. If you don't agree that this applicant looks mighty good, I'll give you a two-day vacation with pay."

(Rosemary T. Freuhling and Sharon Bouchard, *The Art of Writing Effective Letters* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972], p. 143).

21. Without constraint, language can be shaped to disguise any action, even the most heinous, as the Nazis did in calling their slaughter of six million Jews the "endgultige Losung" ("final solution").

liability) with their classmates. Moreover, there are some common business terms—e.g., *stock, bond, beneficiary, actuary, capital, maturity*—the precise definition of which at least some of the students still need to learn. However, I consider working with business terms one of the less crucial aspects of the course, and find it is not necessary to devote a great deal of time to such activity.

As John C. Condon, Jr., notes, "Naming is . . .the first dimension of the language. Naming is a convention."[22] When specialized terms have acquired a single definite meaning—as they tend to have in the business world—learning them remains an elemental matter, a "first dimension" act of equating one word (or phrase) with one thing.[23] Students normally find it easy enough to master such terms, although they do need some practice in "activating" them. (Shaughnessy has pointed out that writers at the "basic level often fail to name the object or person or idea they are writing about"[24] —and some students in writing for business courses still gravitate toward vague nouns and ambiguous pronouns by instinct). One way of "activating" students' business vocabulary is to have them correct a paragraph containing improperly used business terms (e.g. *stock* for *bond*), inappropriate substitutes (e.g., *combination* for *merger*), overly technical phrasing (e.g., *arbitration* for *planning meeting*) and pronouns with unspecified antecedents. A more effective method is to have students compose a paragraph or two requiring the precise use of a number of technical and semi-technical terms. For instance, students well-advanced in their collegiate careers can write, *for a veteran in their chosen field,* an explicit and detailed description of the entry-level position they are capable of filling. Less advanced students can, after being briefed, write an explicit description of some business process such as a stock transfer.

Still, the proper employment of business terms remains, in a sense, the province of teachers in business courses, rather than the province of English teachers. Our primary task is to inform students *how* to employ

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22. *Semantics and Communication* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 28.

23. The French philosopher, Henri Bergson, sees simplicity as an inherent quality of things, and complexity as the by-product of the human tendency to project multiple meanings and symbolic significances onto things: ". . .the simplicity belongs to the object itself, and the infinite complexity to the views we take in turning it around, to the symbols by which our senses or intellect represent it to us, or, more generally, to elements of *a different order,* with which it remains incommensurable, being of a different nature." (*Creative Evolution,* trans. Austin Mitchell [New York: Modern Library, 1944], p. 100).

24. *Errors and Expectations,* p. 199.

more than *what* to employ—how, for instance, to make "experience" (or "work experience") cover a multitude of performed tasks more than to teach what an "actuary" is.

IV. BUSINESS WRITING FUNCTIONS MOST EFFECTIVELY WHEN FORMULAIC, IMPERSONAL, AND CLASSLESS.

Piaget has noted that children, relative neophytes in the use of language, are more linguistically consistent than adults: "It is well known that in spelling and in grammar children are more logical than we are."[25] Adults, on the other hand, have become so accustomed to communicating in accepted linguistic patterns that they often fail to notice internal contradictions within those patterns—and in few kinds of writing does pattern hold more sway than in business writing. Consider, for example, a series of collection letters, the first employing the phrase "the amount outstanding," the second "the amount you owe us," the third "you owe us"; each phrase means the same thing, but to disrupt their order would destroy the sense of pattern, which, in a supra-literal way, is crucial to their effective employment. The logic in this instance is situational, not linguistic—and it illustrates a formulaic logic which often informs and shapes writing in business. Such formulas are usually efficacious and time saving—the writer is not pressured to create each letter or memo *ex nihilo;* the reader, in immediately recognizing the formulas employed, is already half way to understanding.[26] For instance, La Guardia College includes in its "New Course Proposal Form" and "instruction sheet" lists of infinitive phrases to be employed in filling out "Instructional Objectives" (e.g., *to reinforce, to enable the student, to provide the student with*); "Performance Objectives" (e.g., *to define, to locate*); and other required course proposal sections.[27] Although one might regret a certain descriptive sameness that inevitably results, such lists make the lengthy form easier to complete and, more significantly, easier for a Curriculum Committee of twenty people from various disciplines to comprehend and evaluate.

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25. Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child,* 2nd ed., trans. Majorie Babain (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 198.

26. One is reminded, curiously, here of Miguel de Unamuno's comment that "The singular is not particular; it is universal." (*The Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations,* trans. Anthony Kerrigan [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977], p. 15).

27. References taken from the form approved Jan. 26, 1978. "Instruction Sheet" is page 3.

Much writing for business is done, and done effectively, in similarly rote phrases. For example, an advertisement for IBM speaks of "the corporate manager's need to know" when facing "what if" questions, and how the computer can be "a strong right arm," for it is no longer just "an administrative tool" but "has become part of the fiber of business itself."[28] The text of the advertisement appeals with certain standard phrases which a corporate manager might use to define his/her position and responsibilities and moves to several of those metaphors which have become so common they are read figuratively without awareness of their figurative quality (see Proposition I). Formulaic phrasing helps the writer for business around potentially delicate situations: "We regret to inform you," "It is with pleasure that," and like phrases permit the writer's "placing" the situation in one of several standard categories, rather than having to deal with it *sui generis.*

It is one of the greater fallacies of many business writing texts to insist, the mass of business writing not withstanding, that writers should "personalize" their styles. Note the almost ludicrously stiff and impersonal style in which one text conveys this notion: "If you, as a future dictator of letters, can personalize your correspondence, you will enhance your value to your firm."[29] The fact is that such supposedly personalizing (employing the first person pronoun) phrases and clauses as "I am happy to report," "We received with pleasure your. . ." and "I feel it is important for the company to insure. . ." are merely standard formulas of politeness—the reader does not take them "personally," but as a mere indication of "businesslike" courtesy.[30]

A recent technical writing text takes a much sounder approach to the question of tone than most texts in the field, stating quite pragmatically:

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28. See *Business Week,* 10 May 1976, pp. 8-9.

29. Robert L. Zetler and W. George Crouch, *Successful Communication in Science and Industry: Writing, Reading, Speaking* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 52.

30. At times a piece of writing for business will consciously violate decorum and become overly familiar in terms of diction, usually with the most ulterior motive. A recent article by Abbott P. Smith on proper preparation of a resume is replete with slang and unbusiness-like phrasing: *bombed, bad vibes, tinker's hoot, bad news, We cynics in the business world.* (See *Training: The Magazine of Human Resources and Development,* May 1977, pp. 63-64). Smith's article is obviously meant to convince readers he is giving them the real "lowdown," a series of suggestions based on a "hard-nosed," "realistic" appraisal—*and* that they should at least buy his forthcoming book on resume preparation, if not register with his placement firm (Abbott Smith Associates Inc.), which is, quite blatantly, advertised on p. 64!

Technical and business writers. . . are not generally interested in the creation of special tones. They try to appear objective, reporting what happened or at least what they think happened. Opinions are generally stated directly rather than implied through the subtle use of connotations. Words, with strong connotations, therefore, usually get in the way.[31]

The control of tone in business writing, which often means the suppression of the personal element, is critical in the typical business situation, for the writer normally appears first as the representative of a company (or with internal communication, as the representative of a section of a company) and only second as an individual. "I think" or "I believe" are generally acceptable, because essentially neutral, ways of pointing to personal judgments, and can be mingled with more strictly objective phrases like "It appears that" and "analysis shows"—but one cannot normally, even when feeling animus, expand such phrases to "I think it absurd" or "I believe it criminal." Business writing assumes, at base, that there is always some "job to be done" and that to become personal, emotional, usually interferes with its doing. In this respect, contemporary office furniture provides, for students, a useful visual analogy: like efficient business writing, it is cleanly designed, primarily functional, generally lacking in all but the simplest ornamentation, and essentially unreflective of individual taste.[32]

Certain grammatical errors—i.e., deviations from standard English usage and patterns—are particularly glaring "faults" in a piece of business writing: e.g., the use of the double negative, subject-verb agreement errors, and the employment of minority-group usages (like the "be durative" of Black English). Other errors, like inconsistency in pronoun number and over-capitalization, are far less grievous, since such errors do, more than occasionally, creep into the day-to-day writing of the white, middle-class male whose language usage still provides the basic norm for business writing. While one would hardly wish to encourage the latter type of errors, it is the former which require the greater concentration in a writing for business course. Students particularly need to dissociate themselves from, though not to deny, those vocabulary choices which carry class (and racial) overtones—efficient business

31. David E. Fear, *Technical Writing*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1978), pp. 18-19.

32. Second personal note: I also find the better-designed office furniture vastly superior to the mass of oversized, overstuffed, overornamented pieces—pseudo-Mediteranean, fake-Moorish, simpering-Italianate—which crowd the floors of so many furniture stores.

writing implies nothing about its writer's class origins, but rather shows his or her ability to "translate" all the facts and ideas into that vaguely white, vaguely middle-class, vaguely male language business favors, a language which is really an amalgam; for no one, except through developing the (business) habit, really speaks or writes it in exactly this way.[33]

V. BUSINESS WRITING IS MEANT TO SIGNAL AS WELL AS TO INFORM

Among the criticisms my "Writing for Business" students find easiest to understand and accept are those on the appearance of their resumes. Smudgy, ill-balanced, empty-looking resumes, whatever the person's qualifications, are bound to create a negative impression, because they signal to the potential employer, in the most visual terms, the existence of several characteristics which the business world considers with alarm: carelessness, sloppiness, and indifference. A person with such qualities simply would not be considered "safe" in the business world.[34]

Presentation, as almost any experienced businessperson will tell you, is as significant as content. Learning the micro-language of business is, like learning the macro-language we acquire in childhood, a socialization process—and adapting to such linguistic socialization processes is, as the linguist B. Bernstein observes, very much a matter of learning what is and is not permitted:

> Socialization sensitizes the child to various orderings of society as these are made substantive in the various roles he is expected to play. In a sense then socialization is a process for making people safe. The process acts

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33. In this sense, "business English" resembles the language J.L. Dillard describes in *Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States* (New York: Random House, 1972)—i.e., Dillard posits a language which he admits, except in the case of pre-schoolers in insulated all-Black areas, is not spoken in its entirety by anyone. Rather, its speakers (and writers) intermingle its usages, more or less (depending on their awareness of linguistic decorum in any given context), with standard English usages.

34. Although it would be rare, one could imagine a person with compensating qualities—e.g., intensity, brilliance, objectivity—which could balance out such faults as those mentioned. One doubts, however, that he or she would ever be given the chance to demonstrate such qualities, for the business world, like any other, works on certain assumptions (such as neatness = efficiency) which have taken on the appearance of near-dogma. C. Wright Mills reminds us that we should not always equate such assumptions with proven fact, when he writes, "In truth, the relationship of corporate size to efficiency is quite unknown; moreover, the scale of the modern corporation is usually due more to financial and managerial amalgamations than to technical efficiency." (*The Power Elite* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1959], p. 124).

selectively on the possibilities of man by creating through time a sense of the inevitability of a given social arrangement, and through limiting the areas of permitted change.[35]

Roland Barthes, who, like virtually every semiologist, builds on the tripartite linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, states emphatically that the language (*langue*) of any group "is at the same time a social institution and a set of values."[36] We have already noted some of the values inherent in the language used by business: its exclusion of strong emotion, its tendency to emphasize the positive, its reliance on formula, its favoring of impersonality. The informed writer for business would of course signal to his/her reader-receiver an ability, *within the business context,* to accept and embody such values within his/her individual use of business language. (Barthes, following Saussure, calls the employment of *langue* by a single [communicating] individual *parole,* "speech;" he describes *parole* as a concrete embodiment of what exists only as a collective, and hence abstract, entity—i.e., *langue.*) However, to signal belief in such values is less significant—or at least less comprehensive—than the chief signal which must be given in an act of business communication—namely, belief in a *sui generis* business system (or world) which has a fully adequate linguistic correlative. In other words, the business communicator must signal to his/her receiver that *both* of them are working within the same accepted (and acceptable) structure.

The capitalist economic system—of which the business world is a reflection—is a structure which, at least in the abstract, assumes a sense of completeness (*vide* Adam Smith). And if we follow Piaget's reasoning—"structure in the broadest sense is a system which presents laws or properties of a totality seen as a system"[37]—it then follows that in writing for business there is, perhaps without the sender or receiver being fully aware of it, a "code" which is as self-reflexive as it is communicative.[38] In employing the code, the sender at once asserts

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35. "Social Class, Language and Socialization," rpt. *Language and Social Context,* ed. Pier Paolo Giglioli (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 162.

36. *Elements of Semiology,* trans. Annette Lavors and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 14.

37. "Genesis and Structure in the Psychology of Intelligence," trans. Anita Teazer, rpt. in Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies* (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 143.

38. For illuminating discussions of "codes" in relation to writing in general, see Shaughnessy, p. 12, *et passim* and D. Hymes, "Toward Ethnographics of Communication: the Analysis of Communicative Events," rpt. in *Language and Social Context,* pp. 21-44.

his/her authority and increases the believability of the message. For example, to whom a memorandum is "cc'ed" (normally persons at or below the receiver's level, often persons above it) can greatly affect the receiver's response: inappropriately "cc'ed" it could cause friction; not "cc'ed" it could result in inaction; properly "cc'ed" it involves the receiver in a pattern of mutual obligations (the sender, as prompted by request or job initiative, has passed on information to primary and secondary receivers—as a potential cause of both their and his/her future actions).

With vocabulary choices the "signaling" function of business communication can become a tricky matter, because the writer is involved in a whole set of interlocking contexts, running, let us say, from the answer to a quickly hand-written note to a report prepared for company executives with whom the writer has no direct contact. To help students learn this "signaling" function I work with several exercises based on my "principles of familiarity" for business diction:

1) In response to any official written request, try to approximate the tone of the request.

2) When in doubt, be more "businesslike" in tone than might be necessary.

3) Assume on your reader's part a common interest in your subject, because that subject ultimately has some bearing, great or small, on the efficient function of the company (or institution).

4) Do not choose words that are meant *only* to impress and not to clarify.[39]

Most writing for business is not so much humorless or cheerless as it is supra-humorous. The common phrases "to mean business" and "to get down to business" imply a suspension of frivolity and a turn to more serious, substantial matters. Business writing, except in certain cases like sales letters for leisure products, signals an acceptance of a system of work rather than a system of play—and even imaginative linguistic play, something we normally encourage in basic writing students, must be restricted to the relatively rare written business instances which call for, or at least allow, a sense of competence to be signalled with a sense of

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39. The last principle is a reduction—hopefully not too ignoble a one—to pragmatic terms of the last of George Orwell's six rules for clear writing: "Break any of these rules rather than say anything outright barbarous." ("Politics and the English Language," *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell,* IV, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968], p. 139).

style. If the American businessperson is expected to be cheery and even-tempered at all times (see the quotation from *The Lonely Crowd* above), such equanimity is meant chiefly to permit straightforward, serious writing, and not to be directly reflected in it.

VI THE MESSAGE IN ANY PIECE OF BUSINESS COMMUNICATION MUST ULTIMATELY BE REDUCIBLE TO ECONOMIC TERMS.

What George Santayana observed about the United States three-quarters of a century ago still holds true today:

> It is sometimes said that the ruling passion in America is the love of money. That seems to me a complete mistake. The ruling passion is the love of *business,* which is something quite different. . . The lover of business. . . [finds] his joy. . . in that business itself and in its further operation, in making it greater and better organized and a mightier engine of the general life.[40]

The rightness of Santayana's judgment can be proven by looking at most instances of business writing. For example, a proposed departmental change in organization might embody in its report observations on what that change can *accommodate, achieve, expedite* and *supercede* with *advantageous, noticeable benefits* which *undoubtedly* and *reasonably* would *produce* greater *liaison* and *interface.* Although every business institution ultimately exists to sell its goods and services, far more is written about its operation than its goal. The "economic terms" referred to in this proposition are less often the ones of profit and loss than they are the ones of institutional prolongation, streamlining and expansion. Most who write for business write of process (organizational operation) rather than directly of product (organizational output). As a result, future writers for business need to focus primarily on how to describe a perpetual series of actions, great and small, which relate to what will probably be the primary economic "given" of their positions: that such actions ultimately need to be linked to the smoother, more

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40. "Tradition and Practice," *George Santayana's America: Essays on Literature and Culture,* ed. James Ballowe (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1967), p. 117. A few years before, a young Bertrand Russell penned home from America an observation in the same vein: "Americans are unspeakably lazy about everything except their business." (*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell: 1872-1914* [New York: Bantam Books, 1968], p. 182).

efficient operation of their economic institution. For instance, a section manager urging staggered work hours for his/her employees would stress the *increased efficiency, better utilization of equipment* and *greater productivity,* but he or she would probably ignore in writing other considerations (e.g., employee complaints that the present schedule makes them report too early or leave too late) unless such considerations could be cast into obviously beneficial terms in relation to institutional operations (e.g., *increased employee morale*).

Structural linguistics, in its distinction between synchronic and diachronic analyses of language, provides a paradigm which, simplified and adapted, can be of definite use to students in business writing courses.[41] First, students can look at a passage of business writing (e.g., a memo on some project) synchronically—i.e., in terms of what, as a totality, it says about its specific subject. Then, they can analyze it diachronically—i.e., in terms of how it employs words which help (or hinder) its situation in the whole spectrum of business usage. The effect of such an exercise is that students come to see that a good piece of business writing combines words which will have a definite meaning in relation to the subject (e.g., *input, inventory control, research, recommendation*) with words that imply a continuity with the whole pattern of business usage (e.g., *systematic, discrete, flexibility, benefit*)—that each instance of sound business writing must reflect in its word choice both content (its subject) and form (the business patterns).

Mina Shaughnessy has observed that "The intermediate writer's vocabulary may give him a wider range of words to choose from than the basic writer has. But it does not guarantee better choices."[42] To improve the word choosing ability of students destined for business, it is necessary to explain, illustrate, and work with a concept which might be termed "economic constraint"—i.e., the writer for business seeks not an absolute linguistic expression of what he or she perceives, but rather a relative one which seeks what is "truest" in helping his/her economic institution to continue to flourish.

If the foregoing propositions seem a bit tasteless, bloodless, and self-serving, it should be remembered that they were derived from (what I believe is) a rational appraisal of the manner in which language is

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41. Scholes' *Structuralism in Literature* contains an excellent, succinct description of the basic approaches of synchronic and diachronic linguistics. See p. 17, *et passim.*

42. *Errors and Expectations,* p. 204.

generally used in American business. It is probable that few of the more powerful business executives in America even took a writing for business course, for their success must have been partially based on an early recognition of language's ability to project and control—that to rise in an economic (or other) institution one must not only master the language of the institution, but must also grasp, at least implicitly, the underlying logic of that language. For such people a writing for business course would have been superfluous, but for the many who actually do take these courses it is valuable to understand that in economic situations one is controlled linguistically to just the extent that one cannot fathom and utilize the accepted means of linguistic control. The psychologist Rollo May, in attacking what he sees as the modern romanticizing of passivity, begins with the premise that "power is essential for all living things."[43] The six propositions outlined above are intended, quite calculatingly, to help make a degree of power more accessible to those business writing students who will soon pass on to the lower positions in the business hierarchy.

Long ago, de Tocqueville observed that democracy "introduces a trading spirit into literature,"[44] but he did not, as far as I can recall, notice any "literary spirit in trading." Whenever, as an English teacher and lover of literature, I find myself a little too relentlessly insisting on the primal pragmatism inherent in writing for business, I pause and try to introduce some "literary spirit in trading"—i.e., I give the students a short literary work which reminds us (all) the world is much wider than the experience our business writing assignments cover (e.g., Auden's "The Fall of Rome" works wonderfully well with business students). Ultimately, though, it is the "trading spirit" which counts in trade—and those teachers who cannot comprehend the rather narrow linguistic realities of that spirit would do better to confine themselves to teaching the "broader" writing courses.

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43. *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: Dell, 1972), p. 19.

44. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* II, trans. Henry Reeve et al. (New York: Vintage, 1945), p. 64.