Writing for Leadership

Management 298
Visiting Associate Professor    Graduate School of Management
Daniel Kennedy    UC Davis
Kennedy46@gmail.com    Course: Writing for Leadership
916-501-3352

Course Overview

This is an all-new course within the GSM. The rather long description that follows should be helpful, inasmuch as there is no word of mouth from past classes.

Consider the variety of communications situations that confront a business leader. To unveil a new consumer product on stage calls for one style; a terse written recap for a board of directors about that product’s eventual failure will have another. After a public catastrophe, a CEO apology written for the web will require just the right note of contrition. A market analysis for potential investors, however, will need a persuasive executive summary.

An accomplished business leader is up to each of these tasks, provided the essential skills are in the individual’s “toolkit.” What’s more, a leader in business with an educated eye can pass judgment on the writing of others who represent the company. Put simply, it’s important that a business leader know what good looks like.

In Writing for Leadership, students will sharpen their writing skills markedly, whatever their entry level. They’ll develop styles that are pitch-perfect for given situations. Finally, they’ll learn to think strategically about each communication challenge, be it routine or a watershed event. Such basics as grammatical structure, word choice, and punctuation will inevitably improve.

The truth is, too many business leaders are hamstrung by their reliance on a very official, turgid, bureaucratic written style. It’s a form of expression quite common in government, academe and corporate environments. It is often useful. However, business leaders frequently need to communicate in a way that their personal voice comes through convincingly, with just the right note of empathy, confidence, or persuasiveness.

During some of the classes, part of the time will be used to teach a systematized, easy-to-learn set of writing and editing techniques. These skills are essential to develop clear, concise prose. The learning curve is very rapid. Also, in the working professional program, we will have students bring in written communications from their places of work for review and enhancement.
Case studies will pose typical complexities that confront business leaders. These case studies, plus materials extracted from real-life contemporary situations in the business world, will give a realistic flavor of business to the classroom.

Grading:

Situation analysis and strategic communication decisions  20%
The quality of written assignments     60%
Final group presentations and documents    20%

Required Materials:

A downloadable course packet of case studies and readings:
“Thomas Green: Power, Office Politics and a Career in Crisis,” HBS
“The Myth of Full Disclosure: a Look at Organizational Communications during Crises,” Gale Group, Business Horizons
“Exxon: Communications after Valdez,” HBS
“Effective Business Presentations,” HBS
“The Dark Side of Customer Analytics,” HBR
“Framing: Position Your Messages for Maximum Impact,” HBSP
“In The Lead: Effective Leaders Say One Pivotal Experience Sealed Their Careers,” WSJ, 2002

Suggested books will be listed a month prior to the start of class.

Instructor will provide frequent selections from all media to illustrate, provoke discussion, and serve as base materials for class activity. In addition, there will be numerous customized worksheets and insight materials. Students will also revise some of their own pre-existing or ongoing work for business. While editing exercises and worksheets are specifically mentioned during the first few classes, they are likely to be incorporated in ongoing classes as needs arise.

Classes

1st class: Vivid illustration of the need for concise, effective writing. Related in-class exercises. Critique a sampling of real-world business communications. Learn and discuss communication theory.

IMPORTANT: All students should have IN HARD COPY and available on their laptop at least one double-spaced, full-page document that is typical of their writing. (It
should not be technical writing, such as engineering reports, scientific analyses, financial critiques. Application essays for UCD admission, marketing proposals, position papers, long memos from the workplace – these all work fine.)

IMPORTANT FOR SAN RAMON STUDENTS ONLY: Read the Thomas Green case prior to attending class on the first day, as it will be discussed. SACRAMENTO AND DAVIS CAMPUS STUDENTS will read the case prior to the 2nd class, when it will be discussed.

2nd Class: “Thomas Green: Power, Office Politics, and a Career in Crisis.” Promoted to senior market manager in a successful firm that sells check-in kiosks to airlines, hotels and others, this precocious sales star quickly runs afoul of his manager, who had no voice in Green’s appointment. Within the first two months, Green must defend in writing his performance, with his future on the line. Discussion of his communications challenge. Further exercises and examples tied to writing skills.

3rd Class: “Method: Entrepreneurial Innovation, Health, Environment and Sustainable Business Design.” An exciting new company, based in the Bay Area, is having great success selling its green household cleaning products. However, there is a dilemma concerning a potential new product that won’t be green enough to satisfy some distributors. The CEO must write a convincing position statement for the web before launch. Further editing worksheets. A “reverse” writing competition, taking a famous, plain-spoken line from American history and transmogrifying said line, with redoubled effort, into official gobbledygook.

4th Class: “The Myth of Full Disclosure: a Look at Organizational Communications during Crisis.” Discuss the strategies and conflicting pressures that come to bear on businesses in critical moments, and decide when and how much to communicate with the public. Prepare a strategy, and write announcements, incorporating points from the base text. Discussion will include 9/11, The Miracle on the Hudson, the Peanut Corporation product recall in winter ’09, and more. The Exxon Valdez will be used as a case study, inasmuch as the catastrophe just fully played out, due to a recent Supreme Court decision.

5th Class: Writing a Speech. Discuss the wide variety of speech needs facing a business leader, including on-stage presentations, advocacy, humor, and off-the-cuff talks with a conversational flair. Communication theory comes to bear. Students will learn ways to open and close a presentation, and various styles for content presentation. Students will choose a situation, write a presentation, and deliver it this week or next.

6th Class: TBD

7th Class: Crafting a Persuasive PowerPoint Presentation. Learn how to use PowerPoint as a persuasive accompaniment to an oral presentation. Discuss samples from the TED conference in the Bay Area available on the New York Times website. Learn what not to do with PowerPoint, as it’s often badly conceived and delivered in many large organizations.
8th Class: “The Dark Side of Customer Analytics.” Discussion about wringing value from customer data gathered at Shopsense supermarkets, which reveals purchasing habits and preferences of individual shoppers. However, the data has far-reaching possibilities – individual purchase histories can be fed to health insurance companies for sales leads, for example. Students will write a related proposal on this controversial opportunity.

9th Class: “In the Lead” was a standing column in the Wall Street Journal. In 2002, it noted that many effective leaders say a single life experience (often as a child) became an enormous influence on the direction of their careers. With that in mind, students will write such a column for a prestigious (fictional) university’s magazine, for publication prior to their coming to speak as an honored guest. It will be based on their own lives.

10th Class: Team presentations, featuring a hard-copy leave piece, a presentation script, and a PowerPoint presentation by members of each team. Duties will be divided, but it will be collaborative.

There is no exam during exam week.