Rubrics-based Writing: Liberating rather than Restricting in Many Contexts

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Introduction

“If you keep in mind that readers are content-driven, time-pressed, and decision-focused, you can write right-every time,” asserts Harvard Kennedy School lecturer in Public Policy, Holly Weeks (2005, p.3). She elaborates that because business audiences prefer their written messages to be clear, unembellished and to the point, business messages must not only convey the necessary information and ideas in plain English, but also make the right connections between the information and ideas for the reader. Granted, some schools of thought view the prospect of writers enabling their readers to make meaning of texts written by them as being reflective of a simplistic understanding of how individuals process information and make meaning of something that they have read, but if writing is about the “composing of texts intended to be read by people not present” (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), we have to make assumptions about the reader’s process of making meaning and compose the message accordingly (p.4). I maintain, however, that such assumptions should not be random but guided not only by the writer’s understanding of the purpose for writing, the knowledge of who might be the intended reader or readers, and of the particular context within which the particular written communication is taking place, but also by a set of writing rubrics.

The more complex the writing task, regardless of the genre, the more unlikely it is that a writer would be able to sit down and write something immediately. What’s more, even if he is able to write something, it is most uncommon that the first draft of that writing task would be the best one. Minto (1987) cautions that “no matter how carefully you have done your thinking in coming up with this initial structure, you are unlikely to produce a first draft that is perfectly logical and obeys all the rules” (p.81). To help improve their writing, she advises that writers be guided by a checklist or a set of rules. In a modern context, however, where writing is viewed as thinking made visible, writing that is strictly governed by a set of rules has a stultifying ring to it (Cooper & Patton, 2004, p. 1). The process of rule-governed
writing appears to throttle the creativity and joy out of the whole exercise. For this reason, I choose to refer to writing rubrics rather than a writing checklist because when the former are incorporated in the teaching of writing, students’ awareness of the range of possibilities available to them is raised. This awareness can help them make informed choices about the best way to approach a writing task based on their purpose, audience and context.

**Purpose, audience and context**

How often have we read a text that apart from being written in flawless grammar and awe-inspiring vocabulary has no impact on us because the question arises in our minds as to why the writer wrote this piece, whether there is a point that he intends to make, or a question he intends to pose, and last but not least, to whom it is intended. Such writing confuses more than it communicates.

The value of stating the purpose of a piece of written communication at the outset, be it in a professional or academic context, cannot be understated as it immediately lets the reader know why he is reading the text. To take it one step further, the explicit statement of the relevance of reading the text to the reader will help anchor the reader in the context of the intended message. In most professional contexts, readers are “in search of solutions.” In this manner, they appreciate having the purpose and the value of reading the text stated at the beginning even if it is bad news (Weeks, 2005, p. 3). Suffice to say then that regardless of whether the context is professional or academic, readers appreciate knowing why a text was written and what’s in it for them. In professional contexts, the statement of the purpose is usually deferred only in special situations such as terminations of employment. This is not just as a gesture of consideration but also because in this instance preceding the statement of the purpose with adequate substantiation may make for better persuasive strategy.

**Writing rubrics**

In most books on professional and business communication, the “7Cs” that are mentioned include clarity, conciseness, coherence, completeness, correctness, courtesy and consideration. These are seemingly reductive in logic at first glance since a fool-proof set of rubrics for producing effective written communication appears to conveniently ignore the use and value of the myriad rhetorical devices employed by writers to emphasize, clarify, substitute, compare and contrast information and persuade their readers. Another possible
rebuttal against the use of such rubrics is that the advocates assume that a text that abides by all the Cs will be read and understood perfectly well by the intended readers. Clearly such an assumption is at best naïve because of the multiple factors that enable or inhibit a reader’s comprehension of a given text. Nevertheless, in any communication situation, warranted assumptions have to be made about the listeners or readers or there would be no communication at all and the application of the “7Cs” should be based on such assumptions, which are closely linked to the writer’s knowledge of the purpose, audience and the context. I am further proposing that the “7Cs” need not be utilised to the exclusion of an understanding or application of rhetoric or rhetorical devices as students in higher education can only benefit from an expanded knowledge and understanding of the various considerations that can help them make strategic choices when writing with a particular purpose, for a particular audience in a particular context. In the ensuing paragraphs I will show how the knowledge of the “7Cs”, rhetoric and rhetorical devices and how each of these work within two different genres of writing, namely academic and professional writing, nurtures independence and accountability in writers.

**Rhetoric and rhetorical devices**

In both professional and academic writing it is essential for a text to be based on sound logic and reasoning. Just as an academic paper must contain ideas that are germane to the discussion therein for it to be cogent, a business report or proposal must also be based on data that is essential and pertinent to an issue or issues in discussion for it to be persuasive to the reader. “To write a convincing argument, you, the writer, must present yourself as a reasonable, sympathetic person at the same time that you convey respect for your readers,” explain Cooper and Patton (2003, p. 102). Similarly, Barrett (2010) asserts that in business, “the words we select and how we decide to combine them in sentences create our style; our audience perceives that style as our tone, and through that tone, they make assumptions about our ethos and our objectives. The tone, or what our readers perceive as our attitude toward them or toward the subject, influences the success of our message and inspires others to believe in us and our vision” (p. 60). Therefore, in both of these writing genres, the knowledge of the concepts of logos, ethos and pathos and their application through the use of appropriate rhetorical devices will help the writer achieve his purpose.


**Clarity**
In most professional and academic contexts, there is usually a body of common knowledge or understanding between the writer and the reader of the issue or problem at hand. Take for example, writing a proposal in response to a call for improving services in a particular department or even writing an academic paper on a topic chosen by a student for his teacher or supervisor. In both cases, it is expected that new information that the writer provides would be understood by the reader in the context of what is already known but it is the writer’s task to firstly state the new information explicitly and then make clear the relationships between the new and the old by defining, explaining, illustrating and providing adequate support that links the new information to the old. Here, again, assumptions guided by a prior knowledge of the purpose, audience and context have to be made. Based on this knowledge, clarity in writing can be achieved through first defining new terms and then explaining and elaborating further with examples and illustrations where this is deemed necessary.

**Conciseness**
Conciseness is not about being brief or using only simple sentences. It is about making informed decisions on how best to say something without weighing down or burdening the reader with unnecessary verbiage. The generous use of adjectives may be elegant in a descriptive text and actually enable the reader to visualize a scene or a process in close detail, but such a style may not be appropriate in an analytical report which seeks to troubleshoot a problem and present possible solutions. In this instance, crisp sentences that are free of jargon and wordy expressions would work better in conveying information quickly and efficiently. Yet another example is a job application letter, the purpose of which is to persuade the recruiter that you are worthy of an interview. Thus, the use of active verbs instead of nouns, and a variety of short, ‘punchy’ sentences interspersed with occasional complex sentences may be more effective than a string of lengthy sentences with multiple clauses, which could dilute the impact one wants to achieve in the application letter.

In academic writing, however, the skilful use of appositives to elaborate on meaning and modifiers or participles to establish logical relationships between ideas are strategies employed by writers to convey an argument succinctly. Thus, conciseness in academic
writing usually means avoiding the overuse of abstract or fuzzy language and substituting such words or phrases with more concrete ones.

**Coherence**

Coherence is about how well-connected the different parts of a text are from sentence to paragraph to different sections of it. Often, in a first draft, points that seem to be perfectly well-connected in the writer’s mind may only have a “tenuous connection” to the reader, (Minto, 1987, P.81). Writers are often unable to see this unless they are guided by a set of rubrics that helps them view their own writing critically and incorporate the appropriate linking words and transition phrases. In a sense, a text that coheres well is one that is audience-centred because it enables the reader to anticipate what is coming next and to some extent how it will conclude. Again, there is a need to make warranted assumptions on what would be the best way to organize the text and which transition words and phrases to use to enable the intended reader to follow the reasoning and logic easily. Clearly, there is no place for suspense and surprises in professional and academic texts, and readers definitely appreciate being ‘led by the hand’ through the various points and arguments in the texts to the conclusion. It could be argued that a writer can never fully perceive how a reader would comprehend something that he has written. However, all communication is about making certain warranted assumptions, which is tantamount to taking calculated risks but without which all communication would cease.

**Completeness**

Completeness must be seen in the context of the specific writing task at hand. It is obviously impossible to provide all possible information or arguments on an issue. So writers have to decide how much is adequate for the particular purpose, audience and context. In most academic and business or professional writing, the writer must first research the topic, the issues involved, the specific needs of the audience and the limitations in terms of the availability of information, etc. Based on his knowledge of these aspects, he can then decide on the scope of the writing task, which will determine how much information to provide in the text. There may still be gaps in information in the final piece, but having done the research, the writer can establish the scope and state the limitations clearly so that readers will at least be aware of the gaps. The point here is that the information at the time of submission or communication is as complete as is possible.
Correctness
Grammatical and mechanical correctness are often viewed in both the academic and professional or business worlds as a reflection of the writer’s attention to detail, and hence, his professionalism. One could argue that the need for correctness in both these aspects vary according to the text type, for example, copy writers in advertising take liberties with respect to grammar, spelling and punctuation, but this is done for a desired effect that the advertisement would have on its target audience. Taking such liberties in certain fields of work is acceptable because it is done with full knowledge of the purpose, audience and context for which it is being done. What is unacceptable though, is making such mistakes in a class assignment, a business letter or email meant to go out to the company’s clients, or a job application letter because then the mistakes are a reflection of the writer’s negligence and callous treatment of the audience’s expectations.

Courtesy and consideration
Negation or disagreement can be expressed in a firm but non-threatening or non-antagonistic way. Written arguments can be powerful and impactful without being discourteous or inconsiderate through the careful selection of supporting reasons and persuasive language. Position papers and parliamentary bills that do not fall prey to logical fallacies such as personal attack are examples of strong arguments that are not necessarily discourteous or inconsiderate. Although it may be argued that as long as some quarters are unhappy with the contents of such papers, the writing is inconsiderate, a counter-argument is that such papers are usually targeted at a very wide audience, and as such, it is impossible to please everyone regardless of the careful choice of words.

Complaint letters can be written stating the grouse, the supporting details and the request for restitution in a reasoned manner. The particular choice of persuasive devices is important here because the aim is to avoid being overly emotional if the writer wants to be taken seriously. An opposing view is probably that such a stance is only possible if one is dealing with rational readers or if it is the first time that the writer is making the complaint. My response to that would be that instead of writing repeated complaint letters and descending into discourtesy and a lack of consideration, perhaps the next level of communicating the complaint should be explored. This could mean making a phone call or perhaps even meeting the other person to discuss possible recourse. This is common in the business world. Thus,
the onus is on the individual to recognise the point at which writing to express displeasure or complaint is no longer useful and then to decide on the next course of action.

Conclusion
I have argued that the teaching and learning of writing based on rubrics enables teachers to raise students’ awareness to the requirements of style, tone and register in various genre of writing. Further, rubrics-based writing aims to equip students with a variety of tools available to them to enable them to communicate their ideas effectively given a particular purpose, audience and context. Knowledge of writing rubrics also helps students become more accountable for their own writing, and it allows them to gain a greater sense of ownership of what they have written.

References

About the Author
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