

Chapter VI

Writing-Across-the-IT/MIS Curriculum

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Abstract

Popular literature not only claims that college graduates are entering the workforce lacking sufficient writing skills but that companies must spend billions of dollars annually to train employees how to communicate effectively through writing (Canavor & Meirowitz, 2005; College Board, 2004). While writing across the curriculum is not a new concept, it seems that only certain areas of the curriculum have adopted it. The integration of writing into the management information systems (MIS)/information technology (IT) curriculum is an important and achievable goal necessary for the overall development of students in IT or MIS degree programs. While traditional IT/MIS programs rely heavily on technology-based courses, we argue that these technology courses must also promote effective writing habits needed for career growth in the IT/MIS fields. As business proposals, newsletters and reports are frequently being written by those in the information systems department of a corporation, rather than by those in the communication department, it is increasingly important that we prepare IT/MIS students with the appropriate writing skills needed for their careers. For example, in many cases we prepare students to create Web pages, a highly public information source, without providing any instruction on writing within the IT/MIS curriculum. This chapter illustrates how writing assignments can be used in many MIS/IT classes.

Introduction

The National Committee on Writing surveyed 120 major American corporations and found that the ability to write clearly significantly impacts the hiring and promotion process among salaried (i.e., professional) employees (College Board, 2004). While business majors may find writing integrated in the classroom at various academic levels, students majoring in IT and MIS are frequently focusing on technical material (e.g., hardware, software, communication technologies, programming languages, database management) rather than refining much needed communication skills like writing. While these students may find themselves employed at the same corporations as the business majors, they may not be granted the same opportunities for advancement.

A report in *Business Wire* (Technology Industry Suffers, 2005) states that writing activities account for an average of 37% of the typical professional's workday in the technology industry. The IT/MIS graduates entering today's workforce will be expected to write various communications, from business proposals and reports to online newsletters and Web sites. Even a simple e-mail requires clear and easily understood writing. In many cases, we prepare students to create Web pages, a highly public information source, without preparing them to fill the pages with appropriate text. IT/MIS students may be required to defend or explain a component of their technical work, either in a formal business proposal or as an answer to an online technical question.

In either instance, a written explanation that is hard to understand could hurt the bottom line. Canavor and Meirowitz (2005) argue that clear and easily understood writing provides a competitive advantage in this time of globalization. They state, "whatever the language, there's a critical need for clear, jargon-free writing that can easily be understood by non-native readers" (p. 31). According to *Business Wire* (Technology Industry Suffers, 2005), "Technology is new and complex by nature; therefore, technology companies depend on strong writing to clearly reveal the value of their products." This same report argues that unclear writing can dramatically affect the success of technology sales, customer service and overall customer satisfaction, as technology sales tend to be broad and frequently impact hundreds of thousands of users at a time. Effective writing and technical documentation is expected of today's IT workers. Without it, companies will find initial sales difficult and can expect an increase in the types and amount of support services it must provide after the sale.

Many writing deficient students may not get the chance to do any writing on-the-job as some companies now test writing skills as part of the hiring screening process. A 2004 survey concludes that "80% or more of the companies in the service and finance, insurance and real estate (FIRE) sectors, the corporations with the greatest employment growth potential, assess writing during hiring" (College Board, 2004,

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