

Assessing written communication assignments in a workforce preparation course in Animal Sciences: Lessons Learned



Mark Tucker, Inez Ponce de Leon, and Mark Russell
College of Agriculture, Purdue University, IN 47907 USA

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Introduction

The objectives of this presentation are to aid those in attendance in consistent assessment of writing assignments with customized rubrics and that attendees will take home examples of various writing style assignments, student peer review strategies with face-to-face feedback, and writing rubrics.

“Leadership for a Diverse Workplace”

This Animal Sciences course serves as a written communications elective for majors. The class meets for 75 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays and is co-taught by faculty in Agricultural Communications and Animal Sciences.

Catalogue Description: cr. 3, lec 2, sem. 2. An interactive, small-group, discussion class covering effective interpersonal and group skills needed to enhance career satisfaction in a diverse workplace including building networks within industry, cross-cultural communication and gaining experiences in group problem-solving & decision making.

Written Assignments:

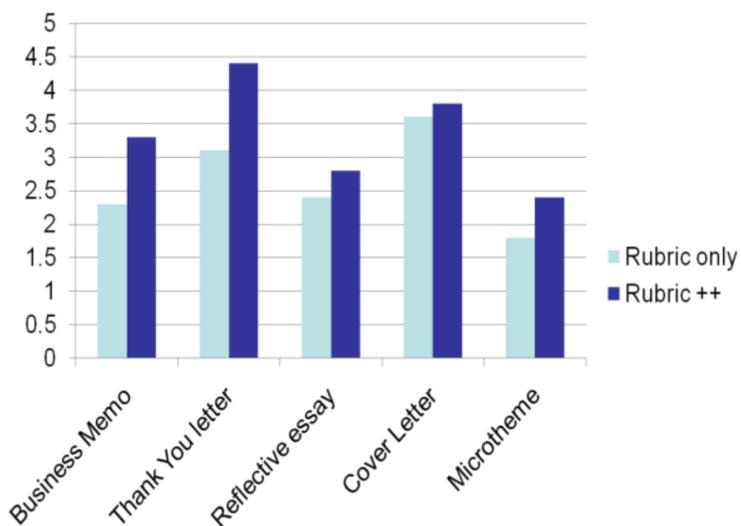
- a business memo to the class
- a business thank you letter to the speaker
- a reflective essay describing an influential leader
- an employment resume and an employment cover letter
- a summary report on the industry network contact
- a position paper stating your position on an action team plan for presenting and a written case report and planned solutions
- a microtheme –a written response during class
- Face-to-face peer review and feedback

Assessment Project:

We are comparing student writing comfort and competency when general assignments were given and rubrics utilized to assess the assignments (n=30, 2009) with the rubrics and more detailed assignments given before the assignments (n=48, 2010).

Assessment variables:

Actual grades given on the same assignments were averaged across years



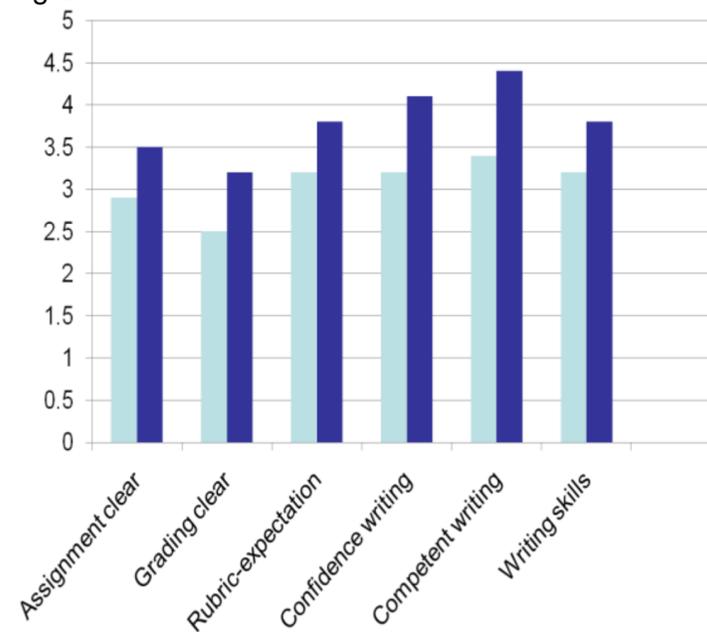
The writing rubric used in this course was developed by faculty in the College of Agriculture specifically for use in undergraduate course work. Instructors should introduce and explain writing rubrics early in the semester and refer to them when explaining how assignments are to be evaluated. Students are more likely to use rubrics as a writing aid if their instructors use and refer to them across different assignments.

General Results

Students were more likely to use rubrics as a writing aid if their instructors use and refer to them across five different writing style assignments. Students in this project improved their comfort level writing a business memo, position paper, letters, reflective essay, and summary report when clearer assignments and rubrics are provided in advance. They improve the competence at face-to-face peer reviews and actually writing skills as evidenced by the assessment of the writing against the rubric.

Assessment variables:

Student responses to the following prompts were compared across years:
 Comments on my papers help me improve my writing;
 The assignment expectations were clear;
 The grading of assignments was clear to me;
 The writing assignments made me more confident in writing in these styles;
 I am a more competent writer of these styles as a result of this course;
 The use of the rubrics helped me know the expectation;
 This course improved my writing skills;
 Peer-review feedback from other students helps improve my writing; and
 This course contributes significantly to my professional growth.



Discussion and Implications

It is essential to forge a close partnership between the subject matter faculty member and the faculty in communication for this to work well. Both disciplines must have expertise represented and the students respect the credibility of each separately. Student peer evaluations enhance the students' abilities to critically assess others' work, provide face-to-face criticism in a professional manner, and to accept criticism from others. The use of specific assignment sheets that describe our expectations for each writing exercise as well as grading rubrics to assess the assignments enhanced confidence and self-perceived competence overall. Applying the written styles to everyday workplace experiences within the curriculum is far superior to sending the students across campus for general education in writing, as this separates critical writing skills from professional preparation in the field of leadership.

Conclusions/Recommendations

It is important that students' writing skills and experiences are developed across the curriculum and particularly within the discipline of their major.

The most rewarding aspect of this course experience is the infusion of writing improvement strategies into a departmental based leadership course. Instead of directing students to the English or Communications department for their communications requirements, we are able to use their interest in animal industries to attract them to leadership development and then, without their intention, we are advancing their writing skills.

This animal sciences example is a place to begin this interdisciplinary approach to teaching leadership in other departments.