Narrative: An approach to deciphering professional communication challenges in three professional venues

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Narrative: An approach to deciphering professional communication challenges in three professional venues

by

Rachelle R. Greer

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Rhetoric and Professional Communication

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2011

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation demonstrates the effectiveness of using narratives—stories to decipher current communications challenges within professional venues. The following three articles chronicle the construction of two organizations’ narratives, identify a current professional communication challenge, introduce a solution to the identified challenge, and illustrate how the narrative approach can be applied in practice and pedagogy. Specifically, the first article presents a public administrator’s narrative, which illustrates his struggle to persuade a skeptical audience to accept a controversial message. By examining the participant’s narrative, the researcher and participant chose a successful solution which integrated classical rhetorical persuasive methods (ethos, pathos, logos). The primary narrative of the second article describes a federal agency’s concern regarding adversarial behavior between two parties that was impeding compliance with a law. In an effort to facilitate communication between the two parties, an entry-level technical writer was assigned to revise the text of a poster. After reviewing the participant’s organizational narrative, the technical writer eventually used Grice’s cooperative principle to address the challenge, which led to the use of these principles in the revision of future posters and fact sheets. The third article examines the historical narrative of the plain language movement and identifies a gap between the plain language requirements of workplaces and the lack of plain language instruction in business communication courses. In an effort to reduce that gap, this article gathers plain language resources and assignments to assist educators in the integration of plain language principles into business communication curricula. Ultimately, this dissertation illustrates how narratives were constructed in three different situations to address current communication challenges. By highlighting the ways narratives can be constructed as
to address communication challenges in professional venues, research, and classrooms, this
dissertation argues that narratives can be a useful and effective approach for addressing
challenges in the discipline of rhetoric and professional communication.
CHAPTER 1: DECIPHERING CHALLENGES WITH NARRATIVES

In the workplace, every employee has a narrative to tell. A narrative can be a short anecdote about a single event, such as an encounter with a customer, or a lengthy story, such as the details of a long-term challenge affecting the workplace. Narratives—or stories—can shape an organization’s culture, form an individual’s perception, and establish the parameters of how a challenge can be deciphered within an organization. Employees can share narratives during an interview, observation, conversation, or in writing. By using a narrative approach, this dissertation attempts to decipher professional communication challenges that employees in private and public sectors may confront. But, before an in-depth exploration of the ways narratives can be used to decipher challenges, narratives must first be defined.

At a basic level, narratives examine written and oral contexts to discover meaning in the stories people tell within a specific rhetorical situation. Bitzer describes the rhetorical situation as “contexts in which speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse” (1966, p. 1). Within these rhetorical situations, definitions of narratives vary. Scholars identify four elements that characterize traditional narratives: (a) accounts of characters and selective events occurring over time (Forbes, 1999, p. 8); (b) retrospective “stories” from an individual point of view (Ledwell-Brown & Dias, 1994, p. 168); (c) reflections of both private and public spheres of our lives (Graham, 1999, p. 189); and (d) construction of identity and culture (Perkins & Blyler, 1999, p. 3).

Professional communication researchers study narratives to understand social events and experiences from the perspective of individuals in the organization (Bird, 2007; Jameson, 2001; Smart, 1999; Perkins & Blyler, 1999). In the most basic sense, narratives allow the researcher to examine different speech patterns or written blueprints to understand individual and
organizational actions and reactions to events (Graham, 1999; Ledwell-Brown & Dias, 1994). To construct narratives, researchers use several different methods of data gathering: conducting interviews (See Appendix A), engaging in ethnographic observations, collecting historical accounts, and examining professional documents (Perkins & Blyler, 1999; Graham, 1999; Jameson, 2001; Dulek & Fielden, 1990). Some researchers who construct narratives have used their studies to influence professionals (Graham 2006; Jameson, 2001; Dulek & Fielden, 1990). In addition, researchers have used narratives “to find solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives;” however, the studies typically focus on making extensive changes to current practices and consequently also impact the culture of the organization (Stringer, 2007, p. 1; Faber, 2002; Suchan, 2006). As Suchan explains and warns, “efforts to get workers to change significantly their communication practices fail” (2006, p. 5). Although extensive change may be necessary in a given rhetorical situation, small, incremental changes can also benefit organizations, individuals, students, educators, and researchers.

The purpose of my dissertation research is to fill a gap that exists in using narratives in rhetoric and professional communication. Historically, researchers have concentrated on “constructing an organization” or “constructing self” (Perkins & Blyler, 1999, p. 3). This dissertation argues that narratives can also be used to decipher challenges within a rhetorical situation, subsequently, opening new opportunities for researchers to effectively identify, address, and decipher a communication challenge by providing procedures and examples of ways narratives can be used.

In conducting my research, I found that organizations were often more receptive to small modifications of current practices proposed, and in turn, these small changes led to big results, such as a new method for writing reports, posters, or fact sheets, or integrating writing principles
into professional communication pedagogy that reflects current practice. Without the use of narratives, identifying specific challenges may not have been possible. Additionally, because constructing a narrative included the participants in identifying the challenge, this made them more receptive to externally proposed solutions. This study empowers researchers to engage in narratives and offer solutions to challenges that organizations confront by providing a framework that includes (a) constructing narratives from participants and historical accounts; (b) identifying a specific challenge; (c) introducing theories and pedagogical resources to decipher the challenge; (d) observing the participants’ application of the solution; and (e) reporting the results.

To ground this framework, which is used in each article, I offer a discussion of narratives, consider the background of narratives within the field of rhetoric and professional communication, briefly present my narrative of each article, outline the research questions that guided each article, and frame the organization of the dissertation.

**Literature Review: Explaining Narratives**

Qualitative researchers in professional communication have used narratives to understand the “construction of self and knowledge” (Perkins & Blyler, 1999, p. 5). The “construction of self” is examined to gain an understanding of how individuals choose to act and react to events within their cultural and organizational narratives. For example, Graham analyzed the “construction of self” by examining the letters of Margaret Machette and her private and public story during the Civil War. This analysis of the “self” in a male-dominated culture provides a new perspective into how a woman’s worth may have been viewed. More significantly, Graham’s study provides the discipline of professional communication with a framework for constructing chronological and historical narratives.
Organizational narratives focus on how stories within an organization impact the organizational culture and behavior of the characters. As Perkins and Blyler explain, “The concept of culture has always been intimately connected to the concept of narrative” (1999, p. 245). In other words, administrators and managers construct narratives that relay to individuals in the organization the meaning and understanding of how to engage in discourse, be, and, act within the culture. To construct their organizational narratives, both Faber (2002) and Jameson (2001) rely in part on the voices of their characters to tell stories of organizational culture and examine the way narratives influence culture.

Faber’s (2002) action research explores the relationship between cultural narratives and organizational change. In his book, which is a collection of ethnographic studies, Faber details his experiences at a financial institution, ghost town, election campaign headquarters, and a cemetery in order to provide a first-hand account of how organizations create identities through narratives. Yet, when internal and external narratives do not match, the organization’s identity becomes conflicted and change becomes inevitable. To illustrate how stories work as agents of change, Faber discusses case studies of a change management plan he wrote for a city-owned cemetery, a cultural change project he created for a downtown trade school, and a political campaign he contributed to that focused on creating social change.

Narratives have also given researchers an opportunity to “understand” how people act, react, and resolve challenges in organizational cultures as illustrated by Jameson (2001). In this study, Jameson observed and recorded four monthly team meetings to identify how managers used narratives to “resolve conflict, influence corporate decisions, and unify the group” (p. 508). Bird (2007) also used narratives to make sense of how women in a networking community within a large organization adapt stories to network with other professionals.
These studies and many others opened a new method for professional communication researchers to explore and gain an enhanced awareness of narratives. This increased awareness led to more effective ways to motivate others to take action. The three studies in this dissertation build on the narratives discussed in this theoretical discussion while also opening a new opportunity for researchers to use narratives as an approach for identifying and deciphering specific challenges within the field of rhetoric and professional communication.

Background of My Three Studies

When I began my PhD in the Rhetoric and Professional Communication program, I had one goal: to assist organizations and professionals in deciphering current communication challenges. Yet I did not know where, how, or when to begin. I started by selecting organizations, taking comprehensive notes from interviews, and reviewing theories that may assist organizations in deciphering professional communication challenges. However, not everything was included in the narratives, such as the rhetorical situation or my background narrative. As Chase explains, “And yet, because the goal of this narrative strategy is to bring the narrator’s story to the public—to get the narrator’s story heard—researchers do not usually dwell on how they engaged in these interpretive processes. Or if they do, they do elsewhere (Chase, 2005, p. 76). The following section details the rhetorical situation, parameters of the study, and personal narratives in order to introduce the narrative approach used to decipher current professional communication challenges.

First Narrative

My own narrative as a researcher started when I attended my first doctoral-level research methodology course. The students were required to find a site for conducting an ethnographic research project, so the professor introduced our class to several professionals in the community.
The first person who spoke to our class worked for a university agency that received state and federal funds to educate city, county, state, and private employees about highway safety issues. I immediately became interested in observing her co-worker who worked in a small training division that needed to write an assessment report. The representative gave me the contact information for her colleague, whom I would observe while he wrote the assessment report. Before I walked in the door, I presumed I would watch the individual writing a report; however, in the first meeting the writer explained that he was willing to participate in my study as long as I assisted him in conducting and writing the assessment report. So from the very beginning my ethnographic project changed as my expectations as a researcher and participant were delineated and realigned. As a result, my intended narrative (as a researcher) changed. The interaction with the participant also led to establishing my role in the narrative as supportive. More significantly, this narrative occurred over a four-year period, which allowed me as a researcher to focus on specific experiences rather than general concepts that I gathered in interviews. To examine the complete narrative, see chapter 2.

**Second Narrative**

My second attempt to decipher a professional communication challenge began with my own professional narrative. For five years, I worked as a Labor Standard’s Officer for the state of Wyoming. In this position, my duties included enforcing, overseeing, and informing employers and employees about the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). I discovered first-hand the difficulties that were generated by the vague and ambiguous language of this act. Subsequently, I decided to write an analytical paper outlining the adversarial relationships for a graduate course in critical analysis. After researching the latest changes to the FMLA, I discovered that the Department of Labor (DOL) had issued a statement acknowledging “adversarial dealings
between employers and employees” (because neither group understood the legislation) and had advised the FMLA division to “smooth communication” between the parties. So with my university’s IRB approval, I decided to contact the DOL to conduct interviews and gather additional information regarding the FMLA.

Contacting the DOL to gather information about the FMLA proved to be difficult. I called the DOL every day for two weeks until I finally spoke to a unit manager who directed me to a division supervisor who oversaw the FMLA. When I first interviewed the supervisor over the phone, he was hesitant to answer any questions. However, when he found out that I had enforced and overseen the FMLA for five years for the state of Wyoming and was familiar with the new amendments and DOL decisions, he asked if I would be willing to work with one of his staff members to revise the FMLA poster. To assist the organization, I flew out to Washington, D.C. and assisted the DOL for five days—a total of 40 hours.

The day before I arrived at the work site, the supervisor assigned the revision of the FMLA poster to an entry-level compliance officer who had recently been hired. So when I entered the workplace, I was immediately introduced by the supervisor to the participant tasked with revising the poster. The participant was anxious about working on her first project and was also skeptical that she would be able to accomplish the goal of facilitating communication between employers and employees in a poster. Although she was relieved to be working with someone who understood the FMLA, she was concerned about the one-week timeline. Subsequently the participant and I immediately began constructing a narrative that included her impression of the FMLA poster, perspective of the revision task, and strategy for deciphering the communication challenge. The comprehensive narrative detailing the history of the FMLA as well as the process for deciphering the challenge can be found in chapter 3.
Third Narrative

My third narrative began with my interest in plain language (PL). While teaching professional communication courses for ten years, I discovered first-hand that textbooks and curricula omit or only briefly mention the PL, despite recent developments and mandates to incorporate PL in private and public sector documents. In response, I wanted to persuade scholars and instructors to integrate PL into professional curricula by depicting through narratives its long, rich history in the United States. I spent two years researching PL and constructing a historical narrative that incorporates stories from scholars, presidents, and politicians. In using the historical narrative to decipher the communication challenge, I identified and compiled a comprehensive list of resources and assignments professional communication instructors can integrate into their curricula. This historical narrative can be found in chapter 4.

In these three divergent examples, the narrative approach was integral to the deciphering challenges. Based on the effectiveness of this approach that I examined in chapter 5, this dissertation argues for greater incorporation of narratives within the discipline of rhetoric and professional communication as an approach to deciphering challenges.

Research Questions

My research in using narratives to introduce rhetorical theory and pedagogical resources was guided by four overarching questions:

1. How can narratives be used by researchers to decipher professional communication challenges?

2. To what extent can a skeptical audience be persuaded to accept a controversial message? (Kennedy, 1991; Kastely, 1996; Nussbaum, 1996; Cohen, 1998)
3. To what extent can Grice’s cooperative principle be applied to facilitate communication? (Hagge & Kostelnick, 1989; Ewald & Stine 1983; Riley, 1986)

4. How can researchers construct historical narratives to analyze organizational knowledge? (Graham, 1999).

**Method**

For this dissertation, I combined multiple methods of qualitative research as discussed by John W. Creswell in *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. The initial collection of information (hearing the subject’s story) pointed me to other kinds of data necessary to achieve the goals of the organizations. My goal was to obtain accounts of selective events and retrospective “stories” in order to identify and decipher challenges. To accomplish this goal, I conducted interviews, historical research, ethnographic observations, and think-aloud protocols. In gathering narratives, I followed Ledwell-Brown and Dias’ model (2004), which involves gathering data in order to assemble narratives and determine the individual’s construction of “self” and of the organization. The data, as Ledwell-Brown and Dias explain, “provide the means for characters to encode the meanings of their experiences in their own language and also afford valuable insights into the culture that underlies the research setting” (p. 167). In other words, by examining interviews and historical accounts, I attempted to gain an understanding of how individuals view challenges and act in the situation. To verify that my interpretations were appropriate, I asked three peers to review the constructed narratives and conclusions.

The qualitative studies were officially exempted by the Iowa State University IRB. In addition, the professionals and organizations provided full consent for me to use field notes, interviews, writing samples and participant evaluations for research purposes. I also requested
that participants review the final product to ensure that they agreed with the findings and their own representation in the narratives.

**Preview of the Following Chapters**

In this introductory chapter, I discussed narratives as an approach to deciphering challenges, included the narrative of my own studies, and sketched an overview of the questions guiding the studies and my approach to the methods used in the studies. In addition, I established the gap addressed in this dissertation and provided a framework for researchers to follow when focusing on deciphering challenges, which sets the stage for the rest of this dissertation. Now, I will briefly outline the remaining contents of this dissertation, which include the following articles:

- **Chapter 2. Reporting results to a skeptical audience: A case study on integrating persuasive strategies in reports**
- **Chapter 3. Facilitating communication: Revising the Family Medical Leave Act poster**
- **Chapter 4. Meeting required plain language mandates: Integrating plain language principles into business communication curricula**

The closing, chapter 5, will summarize the results of the articles and identify implications of the studies for professional communication instructors, students, and practitioners. The results of this study will provide the discipline of rhetoric and professional communication with examples that illustrate the effectiveness of deciphering specific communication challenges by using narratives. Finally, by highlighting the positive effects of using narratives in research and professional venues, this dissertation argues for the increased inclusion of narratives to decipher communication challenges within the field of rhetoric and professional communication.
References


CHAPTER 2. REPORTING RESULTS TO A SKEPTICAL AUDIENCE: A CASE STUDY ON INTEGRATING PERSUASIVE STRATEGIES IN REPORTS


Abstract

In response to recent budget and program cuts, assessment reports may more than ever determine the viability of government-funded programs. Generated by agencies to justify further funding, assessment reports develop, measure, and detail the knowledge that workshop participants receive. Writing these reports can be difficult, especially if the audience does not see value in continuing the program. This article emphasizes the importance of persuasive strategies in report writing by analyzing a case study of a public administrator’s struggle to write a persuasive assessment report for a soft-skills training seminar. The participant in the case study finds that classical rhetorical strategies (ethos, logos, and pathos) can be successfully incorporated into assessment reports. Ultimately, the article concludes by providing professional writers with a set of guidelines for persuading a skeptical audience.

Introduction

As a result of the current economic concerns in both state and federal governments, agencies face increasing demands to justify soft-skills (e.g. people skills – caring, understanding, and compassion) program funding. With major cuts being considered, the results reported in program assessments may help determine if a soft-skill program will be continued or get cut. Public administrators recognize the importance of developing, measuring, and reporting assessments to justify further program funding since stakeholders (politicians, other agency administrators, and taxpayers) use these reports to determine if a program will receive funding.
However, writing these reports can be difficult, especially if the audience is skeptical about the value of continuing the soft-skill training programs that provide participants’ perceptions, insights, and awareness about specific regulations. Mastracci summarizes the complexity of soft skills as “relational and involve the manipulation and expression of emotions” (p. 124). In other words, soft-skills may determine if and how managers implement regulations. Yet, many public administrators may find themselves in the same position as the primary participant in this case study—trying to persuade a skeptical audience to continue soft-skills programs.

To both address the difficulties public administrators often face while writing and to emphasize the importance of persuasive writing strategies, I will present a case study that details the struggles of one administrator’s attempt to assess and report soft-skills training in a way that could persuade a skeptical audience to continue program funding. His solution was to use classical rhetorical strategies of persuasion: ethos, logos, and pathos; but when he attempted to introduce pathos, he encountered obstacles. To illustrate the usefulness and legitimacy of ethos, logos, and pathos in persuasive writing situations, I will describe how this public administrator overcame the obstacles facing him and I will analyze the success of his persuasive efforts.

The next section briefly describes the parameters of my case study. To begin, I will define and explain the classical strategies of persuasion used to decipher the struggles of the public administrator. Once I have established a foundation for understanding a classical approach to persuasive report writing, I will focus on the case study of the public administrator as he struggled to measure, rationalize, and write persuasive arguments to have his soft-skills training programs continued. The case seeks to answer this central question: How can assessment report writers successfully employ the classical strategies of persuasion (logos, pathos, and ethos) to help continue funding for their programs.
Subsequently, I outline my methodology and explain the implications of my findings for public administrators, soft-skills trainers, and technical writing instructors interested in including soft-skills in performance measurements and reports. Ultimately, I argue that without a comprehensive and clear framework for understanding the legitimate role of all three strategies—logos, ethos, and pathos—organizations may be missing opportunities to persuade audiences.

The Struggle

In the case study that I am about to introduce, you will meet Ted. I’ll describe him later in more detail, but for now, I’ll tell you that Ted oversees a small training division within a state organization that receives state and federal funds to educate city, county, state, and private employees about highway safety issues. At the time of my study, Ted had just received word from the federal agency that he would need to write a report assessing the knowledge that participants were receiving in training workshops to justify further funding. Initially, this seemed like a simple task. However, to compound the issue, his supervisor had informed him that the state and Board of Directors would review the report and that they might not continue funding some of the soft-skills training workshops.

To respond to this situation, Ted needed to (a) gather information to justify his workshops; (b) determine what information should be contained in his report; and (c) write a persuasive report. He first decided to gather information by giving participants pre- and post-seminar tests to assess their knowledge. He believed this process would show that participants were gaining valuable perceptions and insights, and, as a result, these workshops would continue to be fiscally supported.
However, Ted quickly realized that assessing soft-skills was not easy. So, he struggled to find an assessment tool that would show that participants were gaining valuable soft skills. He also searched for a method to report the results of the training in a manner that his audience would accept.

Before I provide more details about the case study, I’ll briefly outline the three classical rhetorical strategies of persuasion—logos, ethos, and pathos. These strategies eventually provided Ted with a framework for developing and writing a persuasive assessment report.

**The Concept of Persuasion in Classical Rhetoric**

Classical rhetoric is not easily defined and has many different overlapping meanings, depending on a given classical scholar’s attitude toward language and, in particular, the use of language to persuade an audience. In this article, I define classical rhetoric as “the ability, in each particular case, to see the available means of persuasion” (Rhetoric I.2, 1355b, 26f). In other words, I consider the viability of using classical, rhetorical persuasive writing strategies to provide public administrators with a set of guidelines for persuading a skeptical audience to accept soft-skills training workshops. To achieve this goal, I will define Aristotle’s system of persuasion, including the three forms of appeal to the audience: reason (logos), the speaker’s authority (ethos), and emotion (pathos).

**Logos**

Aristotle considered logos (rational appeal, or the argument itself) as the most important of the three strategies, but he also recognized ethos and pathos as necessary to achieve effective persuasion (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2001). Aristotle introduced logos in the invention or initial development of a persuasive argument. To Aristotle, logos was the communicator’s tool to prove a “truth” (or an apparent “truth”) by means of argumentation. To generate a rational appeal,
Aristotle directed communicators to consider the common topics, or topoi, to determine the most appropriate form of appeal (e.g., cause and effect or compare and contrast) with which to convince an audience. More specifically, the communicator invents logos in an effort to find the most effective argument to persuade an audience to accept a message. However, according to Bizzell and Herzberg, “rational strategies in classical invention are not designed to be equivalent to scientific demonstration” (2001, p. 4). Rather, rhetoric and the use of logos as explained by Aristotle, allowed the communicator to convey a “probable truth” or message to an audience (Rhetoric I.2, 1356a).

**Ethos**

In persuading an audience to accept an argument, Aristotle also realized the importance of ethos, or evoking personal character to persuade the audience that the message is credible. Aristotle recognized that the speaker’s character could influence the audiences’ willingness to accept a message. In addition, he explained that ethos is especially important in situations where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided (Rhetoric II, 1356a). In order to appear credible, a communicator needs to establish practical intelligence (phronesis), a virtuous character, and good will (Rhetoric II.1, 138a6ff). If the communicator fails to establish credibility or makes ethos transparent by assuming the audience accepts his/her ethos, the audience may not accept the message or may question the communicator’s intentions. On the other hand, if the communicator displays the elements of a good character through the message, the audience should not doubt the information or suggestions.

**Pathos**

Aristotle cited the concept of pathos, or emotional appeal, as a device that communicators could use legitimately and systematically to help persuade an audience. Aristotle explained in the
Rhetoric that pathos is the process of “creating a certain disposition in the audience” (Rhetoric 1356a, 1377b). In other words, pathos influences the ways audiences perceive and act in different situations (Kastely, 1996). In discussing this theory, Aristotle devoted eleven chapters in Book II of the Rhetoric to emotions and their nature and causes. In these chapters, Aristotle characterized emotions as thoughts that influence perceptions and affect judgments:

In Aristotle’s view, emotions are not blind animal forces, but intelligent and discriminating parts of the personality, closely related to beliefs of a certain sort, and therefore responsive to cognitive modification. He calls for cultivation of many emotions as valuable and necessary parts of virtuous agency. (Nussbaum 1996, p. 303)

As a result, the communicator should arouse emotions from the audience because emotions have the power to modify decision-making.

In Rhetoric Aristotle discussed ways of using pathos to put an audience in a “frame of mind” by addressing human emotions, consequently persuading them. Aristotle believed that “speakers evoke more intense emotions from audiences when the audience feels proximity to the subject of the emotion” (Cohen, 1998, p. 174). For example, audiences relate well to familiar circumstances and topics that touch their lives. To Aristotle, the primary influences on his contemporary Greek audience’s emotions included prosperity, morality, and human character (Kennedy, 1991). The central insight to Aristotle’s teachings on pathos can be summarized as:

Audiences bring particular histories and interests with them; ethos and pathos cannot be merely supplementary strategies of persuasion but rather are essential for the making of practical and aesthetic judgments. They are pisteis (strategies of persuasion) in themselves, and Aristotle’s
understanding of their roles in argument has far-reaching consequences. (Kastely, 1996, p. 224)

Significantly, Aristotle considered pathos to be a legitimate and rational form of persuasion that communicators must employ to persuade an audience.

In the contemporary period, pathos is, once again, becoming a valuable element in persuasion. In practical terms for professional communicators, pathos devices can be witnessed in the workplace, and are, in fact, becoming more prominent; Locker and Kienzler remind us that, “[p]eople don’t make decisions – even business decisions – based on logic alone” (2010, p. 475). However, as Micciche explains, pathos is still not widely accepted by scholars as it is viewed as “reductive and disengaged from the complexity of emotion as experience, expression, embodiment, power enactment, and discourse (p. 20). Therefore, a re-envisioning of pathos which embraces classical and enlightenment rhetoric as well as contemporary thought needs to be adopted.

**Paradigm Shift in Persuasive Methods**

The 17th century brought a major shift in scientific, political, and philosophical thought; consequently, rhetoric—specifically ethos and pathos—became secondary in the search for objective, scientific truth through logic. The interest in a scientific persuasive method that highlighted logos began with Peter Ramus (Ong, 1982). Ramus challenged the authority of classical texts by Aristotle, which he believed overstated the importance of rhetoric in general. Ramus shifted the focus of scholastic discourse from classical rhetorical methods to logos, logic, alone (Ong, 1983). As logos, and proof later became the domain of the new science, rhetoric
became increasingly linked to literary prose. In turn, classical strategies of persuasion were increasingly considered inappropriate for the emerging discourse of science.

This scientific revolution centered on the vital concept of logos, and eventually led to the dismissal of pathos and transparency of ethos. Specifically, Peter Ramus and René Descartes limited rhetoric to style and delivery while arguing that persuasion could be found only within deductive logic (Bizzell, 2001). Thus, pathos was connected to oratory, poetry, and literary criticism, which were regarded as aesthetically pleasing, but had no connection to science and truth or practical application, while the importance of ethos was discounted. Today, public administrators follow this paradigm.

The Study

With a foundation for understanding a classical approach to persuasive writing established, I will now explain in more detail the setting and participants of my case study and outline my methodology. Then, I will analyze the case study: The struggle of a public administrator to measure, rationalize, and write a persuasive argument to continue funding for training programs. Following the case study, I will discuss my findings and the significance of the study. I will conclude the article by showing how writers can use the classical strategies of persuasion (logos, pathos, and ethos) to gain support and funding for soft-skills training programs.

Setting

The case study took place at an agency I’ll call “Training Operations.” Training Operations was a small training division (three employees) within a large state organization (fifty employees) that received state and federal funds to educate city, county, state, and private employees on highway safety issues. The employees in this organization were in the process of
writing program assessment reports to persuade an audience of state and federal regulators to understand and accept the value of soft skills in thirty-five different workshops that Training Operations regularly conducted.

The employees in Training Operations used persuasive strategies (logos, ethos, and pathos) in its daily operations, specifically, to convince constituents to comply with federal regulations, and to entice city, county, and private employees and employers to attend training workshops. However, in their written reports, logos was prevalent, while pathos and ethos were less common.

**Primary Participant: Public Administrator**

Ted (a pseudonym he chose) was the Associate Director of Training Operations. Ted wrote performance assessments for the training workshops he conducted and oversaw. In addition to writing reports, Ted’s duties included producing a newsletter, maintaining a reference library, and conducting workshops and teleconferences. Ted had eighteen years of experience in various areas of engineering. His previous positions had included engineer, manager, and deputy director. In other words, for the past eighteen years, Ted had worked both directly and indirectly with the public sector.

Ted established his ethos frequently in meetings and workshops as he briefly outlined his related experience in meetings and interpersonal contact situations. In addition, Ted introduced pathos as a persuasive strategy in these meetings and workshops; he constantly provided examples and anecdotal evidence to support his arguments. However, in written reports that I reviewed, Ted did not exert his ethos or employ any form of pathos; he used logos exclusively as a persuasive method because, as he stated in an interview, “rational strategies [logos] are the most accepted and comfortable method for me to use.”
**Secondary Participants: Director and Workshop Participants**

In addition to Ted, the Training Organization’s director and seminar participants played a part in the case study. The director, Louis (a pseudonym Ted chose), was a long-term public and private supervisor who understood the importance of soft-skills training workshops; however, he also struggled with finding appropriate strategies to assess and report the value of the programs. In an interview he stated, “Soft skills are not tangible and therefore are difficult to measure. We have faith and assume that after employees are trained in soft skills they are better employees.” Louis understood the importance of ethos and pathos in oral communication, but used only logos in written reports.

The participants in the soft-skills workshops ranged in position from supervisors to office administrators to construction workers. Each participant came from a different city, town, or organization and brought a different perspective and skill level to the workshops. The course evaluations the participants completed after each workshop indicated that the majority of them valued the soft-skills gained and responded positively to the information presented.

**Audience: Skeptical Board Members and Federal Government Representatives**

The final players in the case study were the board members and federal government representatives. Both Ted and Louis believed that the audiences were skeptical of accepting the value of soft-skills workshops. They developed their perceptions from meetings, interviews, and memos with/from the audience that indicated that the soft-skills workshops “may be cut since the material being disseminated to the seminar participants may not be of significant value.” In response, this case study attempted to develop a framework for persuading a skeptical audience to continue to fund soft-skills workshops.
Methodology

As a former public administrator, I have experienced first-hand the difficulties of persuading a skeptical audience. This study gave me the opportunity to use narratives to address the struggle of persuading a skeptical audience and to identify possible solutions by examining an agency tasked with persuading an audience to continue financial support of training workshops (Daniels, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994). My university’s institutional review board (IRB) officially exempted this entire study, and the participants provided full consent for me to use field notes, interviews, writing samples, and participant evaluations for research purposes.

In conducting this study, I initiated formal and informal interviews, observed the participant (Ted) on a daily basis for twelve weeks, and performed follow-up interviews for five years. For the first formal interview, I developed preliminary questions to gain an understanding of the performance evaluation system as well as clarify the main concerns of developing, conducting, and measuring the performance measurements. To conduct informal interviews at the end of each observation session, I formulated questions during the observations to clarify information and to corroborate my interpretations. For the final interviews, I developed questions from observations, interviews, and field notes to clarify data and to determine the current status of performance evaluations. As a participant-observer I sought to assist the organization in finding solutions to their perceived struggle. I engaged in the daily tasks and duties of the organization. In this role, I recognized the importance maintaining both descriptive and reflective field notes.

Once I obtained interview notes, observations, field notes, and textual analyses, I transcribed and color-coded them to indicate trends and recurring themes. I also followed Agar’s (1996) advice to “… read the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the
details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” (p. 103).
The primary themes regarding assessment, writing, and persuasion processes surfaced as the main topic of this article after observations, interviews, and textual analyses were coded.

**Data Collection**

The data in this study derives primarily from the field notes I hand wrote during observations and later typed from transcripts of tape-recorded interviews, and from actual documents produced. I gathered data from at least five sources to achieve triangulation (Doheny-Farina & Odell, 1985). I obtained data on the primary participant’s writing process of performance evaluations through observing, shadowing, interviewing him while he wrote the assessments, and conducting formal interviews. In addition, I received writing samples from Ted for analysis, conducted an interview with his supervisor, and obtained performance evaluations from a seminar.

My formal interviews with Ted consisted of an initial interview and an exit interview. Developed prior to the interview and approved by the IRB, the initial formal interview questions were open-ended questions designed after extensive research of the organization and public sector assessment procedures. Specifically, the questions addressed Ted’s perceptions of the assessment and writing process. The final interview questions concentrated on Ted’s process of writing assessment reports and Ted’s perceptions of the effectiveness of the changes.

During my first meeting with Ted, I became concerned about the integrity of the data as I quickly found myself positioned as a participant-observer rather than the meticulous observer that I had imagined. He told me that writing the assessments would be my job; he said that he had agreed to my observation because he would be receiving something in return. Since I realized the importance of gaining the trust of the person I was shadowing, I agreed to assist him
in writing the performance measurements. As a result, I found myself acting exactly as Doheny-Farina (1986) did during his own ethnographic study:

I have attempted to become actively engaged with participants in the field.

Yes, I want to observe, but I also want to get to know the native participants personally, and to do that, I need them to know me well. I would like them to know that I am not a threat. (p. 255)

I tried to use this trust to become an accepted member of the organization. Ultimately, through this process, narratives surfaced as the primary data to present in this case study.

**Narrative of the Case Study**

Training Operations received state and federal funds; therefore, a board of directors, a state agency, and a federal agency oversaw its operations. To meet the requirements for funding, the oversight organizations required detailed annual reports from Training Operations. These reports provided stakeholders with a view of the breadth and benefits of the Training Operations programs. The data required for the reports included purely factual information: the number of training sessions conducted, the number of participants attending, the number of hours in session, and data to support the continuation of the training workshops. This type of factual information would be considered logos, or a rational argument, in classical rhetoric. According to Ted additional information not specifically mentioned in the directives are discouraged and therefore he was reluctant to employ additional persuasive strategies such as ethos or pathos.

To gather information for the reports, the agency measured seminar participants’ knowledge, skills, attitudes, and retention. The agency gathered assessment data by administering pre- and post-written exams and verbal quizzes; conducting verbal question and answer sessions; and overseeing job simulations in which participants attempted to properly
operate a road grader, complete a simulated work zone planning exercise, or complete a similar task (Program Assessment Report 8). Training Operations had no difficulties obtaining data from the hard-skills (Mathematics and Route Surveying) workshops. As a result, Ted expressed his satisfaction with including the assessments developed for the workshops measuring hard-skills in his reports. Specifically, in the Math Fundamentals workshop, participants took pre- and post-tests examining the mathematical skills and knowledge they gained during the workshop. The tests showed substantial increases in participants’ knowledge. Therefore, Ted was able to provide the factual information required in the reporting requirements, thereby using logos to make a rational argument for the workshops’ continuation.

At our first meeting, Ted explained that some of the soft-skills training programs he oversaw might be cut since he was unable to support their value. Ted was concerned with gathering and reporting data for the soft-skills based workshops since these focused on soft-skills issues such as “perceptions, insights, and awareness.” Ted summarized his concern when he stated, “The problem is establishing measurements for programs that cannot be measured.” Specifically, Ted explained the difficulties of measuring the effectiveness of a safety workshop: “Many factors other than a training seminar may explain why the number of accidents and injuries has decreased or stayed the same in an area.”

Ted scrambled to find data to support the continuation of several workshops: Work Zone Safety, Legal Issues, Supervisory Fundamentals, and Designing Pedestrian Facilities for Accessibility (DPFA). Developing the evaluations and reporting the results for these workshops became my responsibility since Ted wanted to focus on “teaching, staying on schedule, and on the content of the workshops.” In an informal meeting with his supervisor, Louis, Ted said, “Evaluations are the last thing I do. I come in the office and grab an old one out of the filing
cabinet, white out the top, make copies, and hand them out.” The assessment measurements Ted had been using did not produce the results needed to argue for continued funding of these workshops.

After a board meeting, Louis walked into Ted’s office and impressed upon Ted and me the importance of developing these evaluations since the board was considering cutting some of the workshops due to funding constraints. He wanted us to ensure that we measured and reported the knowledge participants gained in the workshops. Louis stated, “The faith that education is always good is no longer an accepted belief now. We need to measure if the cost of training is really worth the benefit.” Clearly, these measurements and reports show stakeholders the value of the workshops.

After the meeting with Louis, I started to design the assessment tool. While developing the measurements, I tried to identify the hard-skills the participants were gaining in the workshops. My assumption was that if hard-skills measurements worked well in the other workshops, then they should also work in soft-skills based workshops. I came up with the idea of creating pre- and post-tests that would examine the main concepts presented at the workshops. Trainers could administer short multiple-choice tests before and after each workshop; these tests would then quantify and measure participants’ learning. Ted agreed with the idea and wanted to use this measurement method as a “tool” to help both the participants and trainers. Trainers could use the pre-test as an attention grabber in the beginning of the class; therefore, the questions would be somewhat trivial in nature. After the seminar, trainers could administer a post-test that would indicate what the participants had learned.

Once we agreed upon a course of action, Ted and I began developing questions by examining the PowerPoint presentations the trainers used and drawing questions out of the main
points. We developed five true/false questions that trainers would pose to participants before and after the seminar. In practice, we found that writing this test was very difficult since participants could answer many of the questions with common sense; in addition, developing tests for each seminar would be extremely time-consuming. Ted focused on trying to “stump” the participants and making the difficulty level high; by doing so, he hoped to obtain results that showed that participants were learning. As he stated, “If we can stump the tester in the pre-test and then show improvement in the post-test, then the value of training will be illustrated.”

Once we had developed the first test for DPFA workshops, Ted evaluated a workshop held by another trainer. I graded the tests and showed Ted the results. The tests indicated very little difference between the pre- and post-test results. When I asked Ted what he thought this meant, he said that the participants already knew the information prior to the workshop. He added, “Negative information is information.” Ted did not explain this comment further. Unfortunately, the findings contained no data that we could use in the final report to the federal agency.

Ted seemed discouraged by the test results and became frustrated with the evaluations to the point that he didn’t want to work on them anymore. At a workshop later in the week, he stated, “We are trying to establish good measurement indicators for training programs. I don’t know why; no one has been successful yet, so I do not know why we are trying.” I was also discouraged and confused by the test results. I wondered whether participants were really learning anything. However, it seemed clear that participants returned to workshops for a reason. Statistics showed attendance levels were consistently steady for the past five years, despite a major employer’s decision to stop offering training because of budget constraints (Continuation of Funding Report, p. 4). Louis also believed that the workshops were valuable: “I have faith that
the participants were learning, yet faith simply is not enough to save a program.” Ted also
thought the workshops made a difference. Specifically, he told me, “Conducting workshops is
incredibly rewarding, especially when participants talk to me after the workshops and tell me
that the information opened new perspectives.” As a result, I decided to find out for myself what
participants were learning at these workshops, so I attended a 2-day pilot DPFA workshop.

**Workshop: Gathering Data for the Report**

Training Operations offered the DPFA workshop to an audience of public administration
ingenieurs, planners, and designers who had experience designing pedestrian facilities. At the
workshop, participants received continuing education certification, and lunch at no charge since
it was a pilot workshop. In exchange, the participants offered feedback to help improve the
workshop. The two-day workshop addressed disabled pedestrian concerns, legal requirements,
federal policies, field testing, and accessible pedestrian design. After listening to conversations
of the participants, I knew determining what the participants gained from these workshops would
be difficult since this audience was already familiar with the content of the workshop. Yet, I
hoped that if learning could be identified in this workshop, then assessments could be developed
for most of the other soft-skills based programs.

I sat in the back of the workshop room to see what, if anything, the participants would
gain. At the beginning of the meeting, Ted and a federal trainer introduced themselves and asked
the participants to state their employer, position, and background experiences and frustrations
with the Americans Disability Act (ADA) requirements. One by one, the participants told a little
about themselves. While the fifth participant introduced himself, the lights went out. This
participant continued talking as though nothing happened while the other participants listened to
him intently. No one acted as though they noticed the lights. After the participant finished, the
federal trainer mentioned the lights going out and requested the next participant to continue. The participants continued to introduce themselves, express concerns with the regulations, and answer questions. The lights finally came back on, but no one mentioned the inconvenience. The reaction during this introduction period, I believe, illustrates what participants found important. Specifically, the participants wanted to meet other people in the field who were also dealing with the same issues concerning these laws, regulations, and policies.

During interactions and experiences in the seminar, the participants expressed changes in their perceptions of the ADA regulations. Specifically, the participants gave different perspectives to decipher challenges while supporting each other. During the workshop, participants also asked trainers for advice to resolve specific questions they were encountering. As some participants continually asked for assistance and further explanations of the regulations, I realized that the participants had attended the seminar because they were frustrated with the mandated regulations. Many participants pointed out areas where the regulations could not be met. For example, one participant explained that if his organization put in a ramp where the regulations required, then water drainage issues would be ignored. Throughout the seminar, the trainers and participants encouraged each other to find alternative ways to meet the requirements. This exchange of ideas became so important to some of the participants that they chose to delay lunch until 1:00, though the seminar was scheduled to provide a 12:00 lunch break.

After lunch, the participants watched a video that detailed the obstacles disabled individuals experience. The video showed the difficulties disabled people experience when negotiating facilities and streets. In addition, disabled individuals discussed in the video what specific accommodations they needed. Participants seemed very affected by the film. During the break, participants shared with each other their ignorance of the difficulties and obstacles
disabled individuals experience. One participant said that the video made it clear why the Americans with Disabilities Act was established. Seeing the personal experiences of the individuals in the video, in general, put the regulations into perspective for many of the members of the seminar.

Later in the afternoon, the workshop participants engaged in a field exercise to gain insight into the specific challenges disabled individuals encounter when negotiating public streets and walk ways. Specifically, the class went downtown, where many participants used wheelchairs and walkers to negotiate ramps, traffic signals, and crosswalks. As Ted explained, “The participants got to see first-hand the problems they may encounter just crossing a street.” One participant nearly slid into the middle of an intersection, but caught himself. Another participant tipped his wheelchair trying to negotiate a curb. Other participants had problems getting around parked cars and trees that impeded their access. The next day, when the trainers asked the participants their thoughts regarding the field exercise, they all agreed that it was an invaluable experience and should definitely be part of future workshops. Based on these insights, I realized that the assessments needed to encapsulate the first-hand insights and experiences of the participants.

Through lectures conducted by the trainers, the participants gained further awareness of the laws and the reasons behind the regulations. The federal trainer stated numerous times that the workshop offered participants the opportunity to learn from each other and gain insight into why the laws were established. In addition, the federal trainer explained that her goal was to get the best practices for future designs. The trainer advised participants that ignorance of the law was not a defense against non-compliance lawsuits. Yet, according to three participants, the
awareness and threat of lawsuits and/or sanctions were not as compelling as their first-hand insights and experience in urging them to follow the law’s mandates.

During class discussions, participants expressed their desire to accommodate disabled pedestrians. This was quite a contrast to the attitudes at the beginning of the workshop, when I observed participants discussing their lack of desire to comply with the federal regulations.

Donna Kain (2005) summarized this attitude:

The problem is that while the government, through legislation and regulation, has the power to levy remedies that address the needs of people with disabilities, such government action can only regulate specific behaviors. In the long run, legislation may spark a reshaping of perceptions, but it cannot directly or quickly change attitudes, practices, and structures that reflect deeply embedded—normalized and legitimized—beliefs and practices. (p. 380)

The discussions at the beginning of the seminar reflected the dilemma Kain introduced, specifically, that the government addressed the needs of the disabled by passing regulations requiring accessible facilities for disabled pedestrians. These regulations lead to changing structure, but do not change sensitivities, perceptions, or practices. Therefore, workshops such as the DPFA workshop play a large role in trying to change attitudes and beliefs. Specifically, in the beginning of the seminar participants were concerned with complying with the federal regulations and how the regulations effected their organizations, yet at the end participants mentioned wanting to accommodate the disabled rather than focusing on complying with federal regulations. Therefore, the trainers and I believe that the participants gained the soft-skills of empathy, concern, and a sense of urgency first-hand from the presentations and field activities, thereby filling the gap as policymakers’ desire.
At the end of the seminar, the trainer gave each student an evaluation sheet with five open-ended questions ranging from how the participant enjoyed the seminar to the quality of the lunch. A review of the course evaluations confirmed my observational analysis. Participants reported gaining soft-skills such as the fact that there were others who shared their frustration with the laws and regulations, insight into the reasons behind the regulations, and an awareness of the problems disabled individuals face every day. One individual summarized the learning experience: “This is a very good session. I just never thought about some of the issues/problems that disabled people are facing. It will help us on future designs of pedestrian facilities.” Although some participants provided recommendations to improve the workshop, these comments addressed specific data, information, and/or material. The participants did not register any complaints regarding the soft-skills material, such as the video of disabled people or the field test with wheelchairs and walkers. This material had an emotional effect on the participants; in this way, it supported Aristotle’s theory that audiences are moved to act when communication “stirs the emotions” (Rhetoric 1356a). In other words, an argument based on pathos (emotion) had changed many of the participants’ perceptions.

**Reporting the Data: Using the Three Strategies of Persuasion**

I walked away from this workshop understanding that the participants gained valuable soft-skills, but I still did not know how to measure and report this knowledge. The agency faced the dilemma of justifying to the federal government training workshops that provide desired soft-skills while attempting to report the findings by using only logos, or logic, to persuade the audience. I realized that the key to writing performance assessments that would capture soft-skills lay in reporting valuable factual data, such as quantifiable, measurable gains in soft-skills knowledge, as well as including testimonies. To do so convincingly, the information in the
reports would first have to establish the ethos (credibility) of the trainer. The trainer could then establish an argument based on pathos by describing the participants’ reactions, reporting written evaluations of the workshop, and examining the workshop’s ultimate goal.

Once the participant identified the soft-skills learning categories by examining the outcomes of the pilot study, quantitative pre- and post-test assessments could be developed in order to report factual information (logos) for logical arguments. For example, the post-test included a Likert scale of one to five in which the participants were asked to indicate whether they strongly disagreed (1) or strongly agreed (5) with the following five statements:

1. I changed my views in a positive manner about legal requirements, federal policies, and accessible pedestrian designs.
2. I learned new information and concepts about DPFA.
3. I increased my knowledge (and skills) in DPFA.
4. I will use the knowledge I received at my place of employment in the next month.
5. The views and knowledge gathered from this workshop on the legal requirements, federal policies, and accessible pedestrian designs will have a long-term impact on my attitudes towards working on these projects.

In addition, two short-answer questions were included to give the participants an opportunity to describe in their own words the knowledge they gained from the workshops. Consequently, participants’ perceptions, insights, and new awareness of the laws could be included in the reports as pathos strategies. I recommended this measurement to Ted at our next meeting, and he seemed willing to try using the concept. He did not make any changes or challenge any of the questions. As a result, Ted decided to give this evaluation to the following workshop’s participants.
I met with Ted a week after the next DPFA workshop. The participants’ responses to the evaluations appeared to provide the information required by the federal agency and to verify that participants acquired soft-skills knowledge in the workshops. Twenty-three participants *strongly agreed* that they received knowledge and changed their attitudes, except one individual who said he already knew the information provided. The evaluations provided the opportunity to use the participants’ beliefs (pathos) to make an argument based on logic (logos) with statistical evidence.

The pre- and post-test assessments used in the DPFA workshop supported the findings that soft-skills were being acquired that provided participants with the knowledge and desire necessary to comply with the regulations. The assessment tool has been successfully applied to other workshops. In addition, the personal accounts of the participants and observations of the trainer (Ted) support that soft-skills knowledge is being acquired in the training workshops. Therefore, Ted used all three persuasive strategies (logos, ethos, and pathos) in his assessment reports. The success of the soft-skills evaluations and reporting procedures resulted in similar evaluations and reporting procedures being used for approximately thirty-five different training workshops during the past five years and in other agencies adopting similar evaluation and reporting practices. To date, the Board of Directors decided to maintain all of the soft-skilled workshops. As Ted expressed recently, “Measuring people’s emotions towards a topic makes sense because uniting with others with the same questions, receiving additional information in workshops, and being aware of your own ruts can make a difference in how and if a mandate is being followed.” Ted also recognized the importance of participants using self-assessments to “glance at themselves, recognize trends in behavior, and appreciate the relationship developed during the seminar.”
Although the self-assessments were developed for the DPFA workshop, the questions can be adjusted for other soft-skills-based workshops. The assessments and reporting procedures can also be used to keep the program accountable. However, it is possible, even probable, that some of the workshops will not provide participants with either hard-skills or soft-skills knowledge. Consequently, Training Operations will need to evaluate the programs individually and determine whether specific workshops should be offered less infrequently or not at all.

**Changing Assessment and Reporting Practices**

As this case study illustrates, it is possible to persuade stakeholders to accept and continue to fund soft-skills programs during tough economic times. By following the five guidelines, public administrators, managers, scholars, and students can integrate multiple strategies to persuade skeptical audiences.

1. Move away from traditional reporting practices

   From the 17th century to date, scholars and public administrators have mostly rejected and dismissed emotional (pathos) strategies as methods of persuasion. Yet, classical scholars such as Aristotle point out the benefits of using all three methods including pathos. Specifically, Aristotle acknowledged the importance of emotional strategies to influence an audience, and Mastracci distinguished the value of emotional work from “rationalized” work. When public administrators embrace the benefits of pathos as well as ethos and logos, rhetoric can, once again, be viewed as an essential persuasive strategy in which emotions, sensibility, and intuition complements communication.

   As this study illustrates, public administrators need to embrace all three strategies of persuasion (logos, ethos, and pathos) when the situation calls for an approach that will persuade a skeptical audience that soft-skills programs should be continued. In the case study, while logos
could be used to support and easily justify further funding for hard-skills workshops, soft-skills knowledge was difficult to justify by using logos alone; the knowledge gained, however, could empower participants to be understanding, insightful, and perceptive to the reasons behind regulations. Soft-skills knowledge, as Louis stipulated, “Empowers employees to act on the information in the workplace.” Through the workshops, participants appeared to gain the desire to take the appropriate actions beyond the bare requirements of the law, acquire a sense of urgency to comply with the law, and understand the consequences of not acting, which is the ultimate goal of legislation and regulation. However, it seems that this goal can be met only by using a different approach to persuade the audience. Explicitly, when logos, ethos, and pathos strategies were integrated, we were able to successfully measure and report soft-skills knowledge gains in our workshops.

2. Establish ethos

Public administrators should establish ethos with their audience by indicating the education, skills, and experience the communicator possesses that will help the audience accept opinions and suggestions incorporated in reports. In public administration, it is commonly assumed that the communicator speaks for the government and therefore the credibility of the speaker is a given. Consequently, reports omit background experience of the communicator and valuable observational material, which could help in persuading the audience to accept a message. However, an ever-growing distrust of public sector workers in general may taint the acceptance of messages. In response, trainers may want to include a section explaining why their background may assist the decision makers. When the communicator establishes proper ethos, the audience may then more willingly accept arguments based on pathos, such as observations, personal accounts, and opinions provided in reports.
3. Develop logos arguments from pathos information

Specifically, public administrators need to continue to include and develop logos arguments, the most important and valued element of the three strategies of persuasion, to support soft-skills workshops. Rather than just including the required logos information such as number of participants and number of hours in session, report writers need to create logos arguments. For example, in this case, the administrator created pre- and post- tests that were quantitative in nature (i.e. a Likert scale) and situation-dependent. In other words, public administrators must adjust the assessments to quantify participants’ opinions, experiences, perceptions, and sensitivities gained in each training seminar. As a result, logos arguments will be developed using pathos information that addresses each training seminar topic, the audience, and the intended results.

4. Gather pathos information

To develop pathos arguments for reports, public administrators need to record observations and comments from participants. The administrator’s notes should include experiences, responses, and suggestions. After the workshops, assessment report writers need to select information that will support the continuance of the workshops including specific soft-skills gained by the participants, such as empathy, concerns, and a sense of urgency to comply with regulations.

5. Embrace pathos as a persuasive method in reports

Pathos as a persuasive strategy needs to be included with logos and ethos in writing assessment reports to justify soft-skills programs. Although strategies based on logos provide the audience with valuable quantitative information, personal accounts, opinions, and intuition can provide the audience with pathos—emotional reasons to continue these valuable programs.
Multiple persuasive strategies (logos, pathos, and ethos) provide trainers, public administrators, and program managers with a well-rounded framework to evaluate and justify programs. The traditional method of using logos exclusively by seeking and reporting only factual information, specifically quantifiable knowledge, needs to be set aside. By embracing all three strategies of persuasion, public administrators can more successfully justify the existence of their programs.

Conclusion

Although this case study is limited in scope, it illustrates one agency’s successful use of the classical approach to persuasion. This study should ignite discussions and opportunities for public administrators to use this method when logos arguments are not enough to persuade a skeptical audience and an integrated approach is necessary. In addition, scholars might develop future studies to measure the success of using an integrated approach to persuade audiences in different situations. As this case illustrates, when the needs of the training participants and the regulators are met, then soft-skills can be viewed as valuable knowledge. Otherwise, programs that benefit employers, participants, and society may face cuts.

References


CHAPTER 3. FACILITATING COMMUNICATION: INTEGRATING COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE INTO THE REVISION OF THE FAMILY MEDICAL LEAVE ACT POSTER

A manuscript to be submitted to the *Journal of Business Communication*

**Abstract**

Department of Labor (DOL) representatives are concerned that if “employees and employers become more *adversarial* [italics added for emphasis] in their dealings with each other over the use of the FMLA leave, it may become harder for workers to take leave when they need it most” (Department of Labor, Executive Summary Statement in the DOL Report on Request for Information, 2007, p. xiii). As a result of discovering adversarial behavior between employers and employees, DOL administrators chose to revise the FMLA poster to begin facilitating communication between employers and employees. This case study will analyze a framework that the Department of Labor (DOL) applied to facilitate communication and alter uncooperative behavior between employers and employees. The analysis will apply Grice’s cooperative principle to examine the ways the original DOL FMLA poster followed or violated Grice’s cooperative principle and thus encouraged or discouraged employer and employee compliance with the FLSA. After reviewing the original FMLA poster used to inform the public of the regulation, I will examine how DOL modified its poster to comply with the cooperative principle that positively affected the discourse between employers, employees, and the government. This article will conclude with the significance and implications of using a modified version of Grice’s cooperative principle to facilitate communication between employers and employees in a poster.
“The success of the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) depends on smoothing communication among all parties. To the extent that employees and employers become more *adversarial* in their dealings with each other over the use of the FMLA leave, it may become harder for workers to take leave when they need it most” (Department of Labor, Executive Summary Statement in the DOL Report on Request for Information, 2007, p. xiii). This statement issued by the Department of Labor (DOL) in 2007 summarized the tensions uncovered between employers and employees in DOL’s Report on the Request of Information regarding the FMLA. The specific tensions included:

- Employers reported “abuse” and “misuse” of unscheduled, intermittent leave by employees.
- Employees contended that they were not receiving adequate notification of their rights under the FMLA by employers.
- Employers desired more communication from health care providers, medical certifications and accommodation guidance.
- Employers reported scheduling and absentee conflicts because of lack of communication with employees regarding intermittent leave (Report on the Department of Labor’s request for information, 2007).

As a result of this study, DOL administrators chose to revise the FMLA poster to begin facilitating communication between employers and employees. (See Appendix A for the original poster.) To examine the revision process, I will present a case study that details how one technical writer used H.P Grice’s cooperative principle, a linguistic strategy derived from Speech Act Theory that describes how people interact with one another, to analyze and revise the FMLA poster.
poster. In an effort to describe the usefulness and legitimacy of adapting the cooperative principle, I will describe how this technical writer overcame the challenge of confronting adversarial behavior between two parties and I will analyze the success of her efforts.

The next section describes the parameters of my case study. First, I will briefly outline the history of the FMLA; describe the study including the setting, participants, data collection, Grice’s cooperative principle; and detail the method of analysis. Once I have established a foundation for understanding the study and the cooperative principle, I will detail the technical writer’s analysis of the original FMLA poster and the revision she made to it. I will then explain the implications of my finding for technical writers, administrators, and professional communication instructors interested in facilitating communications between parties. Ultimately, I argue that the cooperative principle can be successfully used to discontinue adversarial communication between two parties.

**Historical Narrative of the Study**

To fully understand this case study, a brief history of the FMLA is necessary. Basically, the FMLA was signed in 1993 to provide eligible employees with up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave for family and medical reasons. President Clinton eloquently described the purpose of this act in the remark he made while signing the FMLA bill:

> I believe that this legislation is a response to a compelling need—the need of the American family for flexibility in the workplace. American workers will no longer have to choose between the jobs they need and the family they love…The time has come for Federal legislation to bring fair and sensible family and medical leave policies to the American workplace” (Clinton, Presidential Statement, 1993).
With the passage of the bill, the DOL was tasked with enforcing, investigating, and mediating FMLA violations and complaints. As the DOL supervisor stated, “The first years of enforcing the FMLA were difficult since many of the terms and conditions of the law were not clearly defined. As a result, DOL legal representatives issued Final Rules on FMLA to clarify and extend the requirements of the law to include definitions of ‘sons’ and ‘daughters,’ same-sex parents, and military family leave.” In addition, Congress passed laws amending the FMLA to extend leave to military families through the National Defense Authorization Act of 2010 (NDAA) and to adjust the required hours-of-service for airline flight crews through the Airline Flight Crew Technical Corrections Act of 2009 (AFCTCA). After the DOL Final Rules were issued and the new laws amending the FLSA were passed, the FMLA poster needed to be revised. Subsequently, an entry-level technical writer was assigned to perform this revision. With this foundation for understanding the FMLA, I will now describe the setting, participants, and methodology of my case study.

Setting

The case study took place in a division of DOL that is located in a metropolitan area. DOL is a large federal public sector organization employing 15,487 people nationwide. DOL’s thirty-one agencies and offices carry out its mission “to foster, promote, and develop the welfare of the wage earners, job seekers, and retirees of the United States; improve working conditions; advance opportunities for profitable employment; and assure work-related benefits and rights” (DOL). To accomplish this mission, DOL administers and enforces more than 180 federal laws.

To uphold the main tasks of DOL, “the division” (a label I will use for the sake of anonymity) enforces Federal minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and child labor requirements of the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker
Protection Act, the Employee Polygraph Protection Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act, wage garnishment provisions of the Consumer Credit Protection Act, and a number of employment standards and worker protections as provided in several immigration related statutes. Additionally, the division administers and enforces the prevailing wage requirements of the Davis Bacon Act and the Service Contract Act and other statutes applicable to Federal contracts for construction and for the provision of goods and services. Since this division upholds the FMLA, it was tasked with revising the FMLA poster, which leads to the basis of my case study and the introduction of the primary participant.

**Primary Participant: Entry-level Compliance Officer**

TW (a pseudonym she chose) was an entry-level compliance officer at the time of this case study. When I first met TW, she had just started working at DOL. She had recently graduated from a 4-year university with a degree in humanities. As a compliance officer, TW enforced, investigated, evaluated, and arbitrated FMLA complaints. From the beginning, she was overwhelmed by the idea that she was supposed to revise a poster that “may remain on the walls of employers for years.”

In examining the FMLA poster, TW assumed that because laws are mandated by the federal government, they should be followed by the primary parties of the FMLA, in this case employers and employees. Therefore, this article will not address the need, validity, or merits of the FMLA. My main contention is that adversarial relationships can be reduced by administrative agencies if they use a framework that cooperates with both parties.

**Secondary Participants**

The division’s supervisor and TW’s co-workers also played significant roles in this case. The supervisor was a long-time public sector employee who “understood the importance of
facilitating communication” and was optimistic that the process could begin in a poster. In an interview he stated, “Communication is about making a connection with people, and saying something that matters.” This supervisor was confident that TW could accomplish the task of revising the FMLA poster, which he hoped would lead to the revision of other posters and fact sheets issued by the DOL. In addition to TW and the supervisor, seven other compliance officers (two male and five female) worked in the division, and I interviewed two of these female officers for my study.

**Qualitative Research Methodology**

To gather data for this two-year study, I used mixed qualitative research methods as suggested by Creswell (2005), which included an observation interview, formal and informal interviews, and textual analysis. The methods used in my case study followed conventions of qualitative research (Rossman & Rallis, 1998; Stake 1995), interviewing (Creswell, 2005), and observation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell, 2005; Doheny-Farina & Odell, 1985; Katz, 2002). The data derived primarily from field notes that I handwrote during interviews with all participants, telephone contacts, an observational interview with TW, and drafts of the poster produced by TW. My university’s institutional review board (IRB) officially exempted this entire study, and the participants provided full consent for me to use field notes, interviews, and text in the original, draft and final posters.

To collect the data from TW, I conducted two formal interviews (initial and exit), one three-hour observational interview, and twelve informal interviews over the phone. The initial formal interview comprised open-ended questions designed after extensive research of the FMLA and issues surrounding the adversarial behavior among employers, employees, and the DOL regarding the FMLA poster (See Appendix B.) During the observational interview, I
watched TW analyze and revised the poster. At first TW seemed uncomfortable with this process, but after 15-minutes, she started to see the process as an opportunity to talk through the concerns she encountered while revising the poster. At one point she admitted, “I am actually starting to understand the benefits of this (observation/talk-aloud) process; it is making me be accountable for my choices. I think I am noticing elements that I might have otherwise missed.” After TW completed revising the poster, I conducted a final interview with her that concentrated on verifying her perceptions of the revised poster. In addition to interviewing TW, I also conducted formal exit interviews with her supervisor and two of her co-workers to verify the data and to gather their perceptions of the revised poster.

I used the data I gathered to develop a case study to capture the process of revising a poster to achieve facilitate communication between parties. This process enabled me “to understand a larger phenomenon through intensive study of one specific instance,” as described by Rossman and Raillis (1998, p. 68). Specifically, my case study details the general situation of revising a document in an attempt to understand and possibly apply this knowledge to similar occurrences, as recommended by Stake (1995).

In describing how TW tried to facilitate communication between employers and employees in a seemingly innocuous poster, the following section will (a) establish an analytical guide by providing a brief overview of Speech Act Theory and the work of Grice; (b) review some studies that have applied Speech Act Theory in textual analysis to gain insight into these studies’ methods and findings; (c) examine in detail the case study and the process TW used to analyze and revise the FMLA; and (d) illustrate how Grice’s cooperative principle was successfully adopted to assist in deciphering the conflict issues.
Cooperative Principle

Originally, I had intended to give TW the opportunity to choose a theory that she felt would help her analyze and revise the poster. However, after I explained Grice’s cooperative principle, she chose to use this framework. As I explained to TW, Grice based the cooperative principle on the general premise that communicators should make, “conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (1975, p. 26). In other words, the cooperative principle approaches communication with the understanding that each participant needs to make an effort to cooperate in a communication exchange (Grice, 1975). As writers of a message make cooperative efforts, readers determine the implication of words exchanged, which is also labeled “conversational implicatures” (p. 26). If the communication exchange contains the necessary “cooperative efforts,” the conversational implicatures will be understood and the conversation will be successful (Grice, 1975, p. 26). Grice categorized these “cooperative efforts” into four “maxims,” or set of rules

1. Maxim of Quantity: Enough information to understand the message
2. Maxim of Quality: Substantiated or “trustful” evidence
3. Maxim of Relations: “Relevant” information

When a writer violates one of these maxims, the reader may misinterpret an implicature, which can lead to misunderstanding the message. However, writers that follow Grice’s principles establish good faith and cooperation from readers. However, TW questioned if the cooperative principle could be successfully applied in practice.
Applying the Cooperative Principle

The cooperative principle can be used successfully to interrogate and revise texts, as Ewald and Stine (1983) and Riley (1986) illustrated in their articles. Specifically, Ewald and Stine analyzed a fictional business letter that clearly “flouts numerous conventions of business letter writing” to determine if non-conventional business communication principles could be used to analyze business communication correspondence (1983, p. 242). After analyzing the letter using the cooperative principle, the authors concluded that the cooperative principle provided “both a theoretical framework for discussing business communication conventions and a practical means for analyzing individual message” (1983, p. 247). In another application of the cooperative principle to business writing, Kathryn Riley demonstrated how conversational implicatures can be used to understand “how readers are able to interpret unstated messages” (1986, p. 308). Specifically, Riley examined the text of business letters for violations of conversational implicatures and thus illustrated how Grice’s principle can be used to locate areas in the text where readers may be misinterpreting the intended message.

While studies such as these argue for using the cooperative principle to evaluate and write texts in organizations, this linguistic approach to such analysis has its critics. In particular, Augustine and Winterowd warn that when Speech Act Theory is used to analyze written and electronic communication, the researcher must recognize the limitations of non-face-to-face communication (1986). As they explain, “The problem is that rhetorical intentions are more highly subject to misinterpretation by readers than by listeners, for there are no live cues to rely on in facing a page of print” (1986, p. 195). For writers, therefore, it is especially difficult to convey messages in a manner that will not be misinterpreted by readers. This challenge may be
exacerbated when revising a visible poster for the public when adversarial behavior has already been identified, specifically as in the FLMA poster.

In addition, Hagge and Kostelnick caution that when linguistic theories are used to evaluate text and writer behaviors, researchers need to apply the theory in context (1989). Hagge and Kostelnick discovered this lesson when they tried to determine the reasons writers in a accounting firm continued to violate business communication principles. In this study, the researchers noticed that writers in “the Firm” they analyzed violated Grice’s Maxim of Quality by employing politeness strategies when they did not have “adequate evidence” to support a finding (p. 326). Specifically, the writers deliberately used hedges in letters to relay findings and conclusions that they did not have “absolute evidence to corroborate,” yet were obligated to report (p. 326). By using the hedges, the writers avoided negative reactions from readers. According to Hagge and Kostelnick, writers also violated the business principles guiding the use of passives, nominalizations, and expletive constructions to meet “the complex demands of potentially threatening interactional situations” in an effort to deflect blame(p. 312). Hagge and Kostelnick conclude that business communication pedagogy needs to align the prevailing business principles in textbooks and curricula with the context of the communication.

Researchers can also experience problems when applying guidelines and formulas, including Speech Act Theory, to artificially change an organization’s discourse (Suchan, 2007). In his study, Suchan assessed the effectiveness of internal documents such as performance appraisal reports. During his research, he discovered that researchers need to understand the culture of the organization in order to change communication patterns. Suchan concluded that many efforts to change organizational communication fail because researchers and consultants
who initiate change do not take into consideration that the organizational culture itself needs to change before communication changes can be effective.

After discussing the previous studies with the researcher, TW chose to analyze and revise the FMLA poster using the cooperative principle. As she explained, “the cooperative principle seems most appropriate for this task because it provides a framework based on implicit maxims of cooperation that readers rely on to understand the information they are receiving and thus cooperate with the other parties in the conversation.” Yet, TW also needed to follow DOL’s conversational custom of “simply, regurgitate the law in an effort to avoid adjusting the language of the regulation” in other words, use the exact phrasing of the law. Despite being bound by this somewhat rigid tendency to “regurgitate the law,” TW applied Grice’s conversation theory to determine where the poster violated the cooperative principle and revised the text accordingly.

**Narrative of Case Study: Analyzing and Revising the FMLA Poster Using the Cooperative Principle**

To begin the revision process, TW analyzed the poster through the lens of the cooperative principle. Once she identified the violations in the maxims, she revised the text of the poster to remedy those violations. During her analysis of the poster, she identified some overlaps where the violations of the maxims occurred, which will be identified below. To detail TW’s findings, I will provide a general overview of each of the four cooperative maxims introduced, discuss the violations in each maxim that she identified, and outline the revisions she made to remedy the violations. (See Figure 1 for the original poster and Figure 2 to review the revised poster as you review TW’s revision procedure below.)
Maxim of Quantity

According to the Maxim of Quantity, communicators should attempt in good faith to make their contributions to the conversation as informative as necessary without omitting or giving more information than necessary (Grice 1989, p. 28). After reviewing this maxim, TW quickly recognized that the original poster violated the Maxim of Quantity in two ways: (1) it provided more information than required, and (2) it also omitted important information. As TW explained, “by repeating information, the poster provided more information than required.” Specifically, the first paragraph contained three different topics—basic leave entitlements, eligibility requirements, and leave options—which led to repetition of information under each heading. In addition, TW found an overwhelming amount of information in the “For Additional Information” section, which led to her concern that “employees may not know how to contact the agency since the information provided in this section was very wordy and confusing.” In addition, TW also discovered that the definition of a “serious health condition” was omitted, which she believes could lead to misunderstandings between employees and employers. (See Appendix A.)

To remedy the poster’s failure to meet the Maxim of Quality, TW reorganized the information into categories and ensured that the reader received enough information. In addition, she tried to clearly define the term “serious health condition.” (See Appendix B.) While working on fixing the problems associated with the maxim, TW began to see the benefits of following the cooperative principle: “I can already understand how defining terms and making sure that the text of the poster provides enough information for the reader to understand the message can establish a cooperative relationship. When all parties understand the information, then compliance will be much easier for everyone involved.”
Maxim of Quality

According to the Maxim of Quality, communication in good faith does not include anything that the communicator believes to be false or for which the communicator lacks adequate support. Initially, TW did not identify an explicit break in the Maxim of Quality since, as she explained, “the DOL created the poster based on legislation, which automatically makes the information provided credible.” However, TW did acknowledge that the agency may appear to break the Maxim of Quality because the reader may not consider the information to be “trustful since in the past the FMLA had been explained so ambiguously and vaguely that the readers came to mistrust the information.”

After revising for the Maxim of Quality, TW also recognized the importance of adhering to all of the maxims in an effort to maintain the trust of the reader rather than depending on the credibility of an organization. Most notably, she cognitively tried to maintain the Maxim of Quality as she continued to analyze and revise the poster.

Maxim of Relation

The Maxim of Relation stipulates that a message should “be relevant” to the reader. As TW explained, “the FMLA poster targets employees since the law requires employers to display the provisions of the act in a prominent location where employees can see it.” However, TW did note that contents of the original poster were organized into six categories with most of the pertinent information placed under the title heading, Your Rights under the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, which in her opinion made it difficult for readers to identify relevant information. (See Figure 1 for the original poster.) As a result of this analysis, TW revised all of the headings, reorganized the information, and verified that each section was
relevant to employees (See Figure 2.) More significantly, TW recognized the importance of understanding the context in which the reader interacts with the document.

Maxim of Manner

The Maxim of Manner relates to *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. In other words, writers need to be clear about what message is being sent without using obscure expressions, ambiguity, unnecessary wordiness, and disorganization that can lead to a misinterpretation of the message. At this point in her revision process, TW focused once again on the title of the document *Your Rights under the Family and Medical Leave act of 1993*. She became concerned that the message being sent by this title could lead employees to the conclusion that they received rights under the FMLA without any responsibilities, which, as she stated, “would be inaccurate.” Subsequently, TW revised the title to *Employee Rights and Responsibilities under the Family and Medical Leave Act*. In addition, she wrote a new paragraph detailing the responsibilities of employees. In addition, TW identified additional vague and ambiguous terms in the poster such as “certain circumstances,” “covered employees,” and “eligible employees.” As a result, she improved the definition of these terms.

**Lessons Learned and the Success of the Revision Process**

After revising the poster, TW explained that “remedying all of the violations of the maxims was difficult, if not impossible, given the rigid legal and political contexts that anchor the poster to already vague and ambiguous legislation.” She did agree that by analyzing the FMLA poster through the lens of the cooperative principle, she was able to identify text that could be misinterpreted by readers and to construct a framework to follow while making revisions. However, after working with TW and the division, we agreed that additional maxims were needed to assist writers in revising additional DOL posters and fact sheets.
Initially, I was apprehensive about adding maxims to the cooperative principle since this framework has withstood the test of time and testing, as illustrated by Ewald and Stine (1983) and Riley (1986). However, after working with TW and her DOL supervisor, I discovered first-hand the importance of applying frameworks in context as discussed by Hagge and Kostelnick (1989) and Suchan (2007). Specifically—in the context of this case study—an enforcement agency needed maxims that would support facilitator communication among employees, employers, and the DOL.

After observing TW analyze and revise the FMLA poster, I determined that the limitations of non-face-to-face communication that surfaced in documents needed to be addressed as suggested by Augustine and Wintertowd (1986). While researching for the standard conversation practices that posters and fact sheets may lack, I turned to Grice’s foundation of the cooperative principle and discovered that he based his maxims on the precept that “talk exchanges seemed … to exhibit, characteristically, certain features that jointly distinguish cooperative transactions.” These features included communicators having “some common immediate aim” and contributions being “dovetailed, mutually dependent” (1975, p. 29). Yet, Grice’s foundation seemed to be missing in non-face-to-face exchanges such as posters or fact sheets where a third party (in this case the DOL) transmitted information to two outside parties (in this case employees and employers). I recommended adding the Maxim of Aim (“some common immediate aim”) and the Maxim of Expectations (“contributions being dovetailed, mutually dependent”) to TW and her supervisor (Grice, 1975, p. 29). Both participants agreed that these maxims were necessary to facilitating communication in documents.

In particular, the Maxim of Aim is based on the cooperative transaction of encompassing one “common aim or goal” between the parties (Grice, 1975, p. 29). In talk exchanges, these
Aims between parties are more explicit and therefore do not need to be articulated up-front. However, when a reader begins to interpret a poster, the main goal of the regulation may not be clear; therefore, the goal (in this case, family leave) should be clearly stated in the poster. I also recommended adding the Maxim of Expectations based on Grice’s recognition that contributions, expectations, and responsibilities of all parties involved should be balanced or “dovetailed” (p. 29). For example, in this case study, the responsibilities of employers, employees, and the DOL should be clearly outlined and mutually dependent.

**Maxim of Aim**

This maxim requires writers to articulate the common goals of the regulation up-front. For example, in my case study the common aim of the FMLA requirements is to ensure that employees receive basic leave entitlements under the act. As TW explained to me, the original poster “violated the Maxim of Aim because it assumed that both parties understood the main goal.” This assumption may have led to adversarial behavior because the first sentence outlines employer requirements under the law without explicitly labeling the main goal of the act—employee leave entitlement. TW remedied this break by simply adding the heading, **Basic Leave Entitlement**, which clearly stipulates the common goal of the act and primary message of the poster. Although TW identified the omission of the FMLA goal while revising for the Maxim of Quality, TW and the supervisor wanted to add the Maxim of Aim to ensure that the primary goal of a regulation would not be overlooked while revising other DOL publications.

**Maxim of Expectations**

Under this maxim, writers should try to articulate equally the expectations and/or responsibilities of each party. For example, in this case, the original poster listed only the responsibilities of the employer, yet employees also have responsibilities. Because the poster
omitted the responsibilities of employees, readers could misinterpret the message and place all of the responsibilities of the Act on the employer. This result may have contributed to the adversarial behavior between employees and employers detailed in the introduction. To remedy the violations related to the Maxim of Expectations, TW changed the main heading from Your Rights Under the FMLA to Employee Rights and Responsibilities Under the FMLA and added sections titled, Employee Responsibilities and Employer Responsibilities. Similar to the Maxim of Aim, TW had already remedied this break, but TW and the supervisor wanted this maxim added to ensure that responsibilities and/or expectations of all parties involved were outlined in all revised DOL publications.

Significance and Implications

After TW revised the FMLA poster, the supervisor and DOL legal representatives approved the poster for distribution. After the distribution of the poster in 2009, the supervisor told me that the number of opinion letters being requested by the public and issued declined approximately 70% in one year. In other words, employers and employees are asking the DOL legal department substantially fewer questions about the FMLA requirements. The supervisor also found evidence of employees and employers understanding the FMLA requirements after he examined phone logs that indicate a 72% decline in phone calls to the agency in 2010. In addition, the number of employees filing cases against employers and the number of identified violations has steadily declined since the distribution of the poster. A DOL compliance officer praised the poster revision in an interview when she stated, “Enforcement of the FMLA has become easier since both parties understand their rights and responsibilities.” As a result of the success of using the modified cooperative principle, the supervisor provided the framework to other officers to use when revising 28 posters and 76 fact sheets.
The case study I have discussed here gives scholars, practitioners, and instructors an opportunity to view one technical writer’s application of the cooperative principle and to determine if additional maxims should be added in context. In addition, the modified cooperative principle provides a framework that professional writers can use to determine why readers may be responding adversely to non-face-to-face mediums such as documents and offers guidelines for fixing the misunderstood communication. Specifically, Grice’s cooperative principle makes explicit the expectations that communicators need to meet in order to cooperate in a communication (Grice, 1989, p. 26). In addition, this framework may also serve instructors in illustrating to students how the cooperative principle can be used to analyze and revise text.

The framework discussed in this article can also be applied to professional organizations that experience adversarial responses from readers and as a result need to facilitate communication between parties. Although Grice’s model must be applied in context, the body of literature that uses the framework suggests that Grice’s maxims can pertain to most organizations wanting to facilitate communication. So, the next time a reader resists a message, students, and professional writers may have a framework for deciphering communication challenges.
References


Maxim of Manner
Title may mislead readers.

Maxim of Quantity
Text provides too much information in first paragraph.

Maxim of Quantity
Text does not provide enough information such as definition of "serious health condition."

Maxim of Relation
Headings do not clearly relate to employees.

Maxim of Manner
Organization of message makes finding information such as employee responsibilities difficult.

Maxim of Aim
Text does not outline main goal of the act.

Maxim of Manner
Text includes vague and ambiguous terms such as "certain family and medical reasons."

Maxim of Quality and Expectations
Responsibilities of employees are not clearly defined.

Maxim of Quantity
Text includes overwhelming amount of information in this section.

Figure 1. Text of original FMLA poster with call-outs identifying violations in the modified cooperative principle.
EMPLOYEE RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES
UNDER THE FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE ACT

Maxims of Manner and Expectations
Employee responsibilities added to main heading.

Maxim of Quantity and Manner
Paragraphs and information reorganized.

Maxim of Relation
Headings revised to target primary audience: employees.

Maxim of Manner
Information reorganized into categories and avoided repeating information.

Maxim of Manner
Terms redefined to avoid vague and ambiguous language.

Maxim of Quantity
Contact information revised.

Figure 2. Text of revised FMLA poster with call-outs identifying revisions made to meet the modified cooperative principle.
CHAPTER 4. INTEGRATING PLAIN LANGUAGE PRINCIPLES INTO BUSINESS COMMUNICATION CURRICULA

Article submitted to Business Communication Quarterly

Abstract

In response to current federal mandates requiring selected businesses and government agencies to use plain language (PL) when reporting information to the public, this article advocates the integration of PL principles, resources, and assignments into current business communication curricula. Despite recent PL mandates and advances, many current business textbooks and curricula omit PL principles. Students must become familiar with PL principles in their business communication courses in order to apply PL effectively in the workplace. To accomplish this goal, the author focuses on defining PL, outlining the history and recent developments of PL, and describing assignments that instructors can use to incorporate PL principles into business communication courses. Finally, the article explains how organizations, students, and instructors can benefit from integrating PL resources into business communication curricula.

Introduction

Gobbledygook example: Hereafter, not withstanding, and from this time forth, public officials and the public are seeking future transactions to citizens developed by both the private and public sector to be comprised of plain language due to the fact and in accordance with the passage of Plain Writing Act of 2010 which was hereby signed by the President of the United States as well as survey reports from the public requesting actions to be implemented and taken in order to put to the end excessively hard to understand or even incomprehensible language
in public documents with the exception of regulations in order to make
information to the public accessible.

Here’s a plain language (PL) version of the gobbledygook above: Current appeals from politicians and the public have led to increased demand for the use of PL in public documents developed by both the businesses and government agencies (in hopes of avoiding passages like the gobbledygook above). Specifically, President Obama signed the Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility, and Disclosure Act of 2009, which mandates all credit card statements and forms to be in PL. President Obama also signed into law the Plain Writing Act of 2010 requiring federal agencies to “improve the effectiveness and accountability of Federal agencies to the public by promoting clear government communication that the public can understand and use” (Sec. 2).

Despite the recent PL mandates and advances, many current business communication textbooks and curricula omit or briefly mention PL principles (e.g. Guffey, 2010; Bovée & Thill, 2010; Markel, 2009; Locker, 2010). Although these educational resources provide valuable writing and visual design strategies, PL principles need to be addressed directly and organically in order to address the current needs of employers, employees, and students. Several communication scholars have published articles on PL (Barnes, 2007; Byrne, 2008; Campbell, 1999; Kimbel, 2003; Mazur, 2000); however, these studies focus on clarifying PL, debunking PL myths, and countering opposition to the PL movement, but overlook the essential link between business communication pedagogy and PL.

Business instructors can assist in linking business communication curricula and PL by supplementing current textbooks and curricula with PL resources and assignments. By introducing PL to students, business communication instructors will not only improve
students’ writing, but also empower them to become change agents in their workplaces which will also society. To accomplish these goals, I focus on defining and outlining the history and recent developments of PL and describing assignments that instructors can integrate into business communication courses. Finally, I will explain how organizations, students, and instructors can benefit from incorporating PL into business communication curricula. By identifying the disconnect between PL requirements in the workplace and the lack of PL instruction in business communication courses, as well as providing a history and pedagogical strategies for educators, this article seeks to redress the current deficit in PL instruction.

**Defining Plain Language**

Government agencies, businesses, and legal communities use the terms “plain language,” “plain writing,” and “plain English” interchangeably to represent improved communication from organizations to the public. For the purposes of this article, I will use the most commonly used term, “plain language” (PL) although I recognize that “plain writing” is the term used in the most recent legislation.

What is PL? The definition varies in relation to the rhetorical situation, specifically, the audience, purpose, and context. No one characteristic defines PL. Rather, PL (and plain writing) is “defined by results—it is easy to read, understand, and use” (PLAIN, 2010, para. 1). PL incorporates both textual and visual design elements as most current PL resources include document and web design guidelines to contribute to the usability of documents and web sites. The legal definition of PL, as Banoff and Lipton predict, may eventually be connected to Justice Potter Stewart’s comment on defining “pornography” in his concurring opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 (1964), “I know it when I see it.” (2010). In contrast, some scholars call for the following standard definition, “if your readers can find the material they need, understand it
the first time they read it, and use that information to perform their task (or the task you want them to perform), it’s plain language” (Schriver, Cheek, and Mercer, 2010, p. 26).

The Plain Writing Act of 2010 defines PL as “writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience” (Sec. 3, 3). The use of PL provides several tangible benefits (Byrne, 2008; Kimble, 1995; Muir, 2008):

- Users understand and find information easier
- Users prefer PL
- Users locate information faster if the communication is in PL
- PL documents are easier to update
- PL principles can be used to train employees to write more clearly and concisely
- PL documents are more cost-effective
- Modes of communication, including websites and software, are more usable and navigable if they use PL

Although many positive reasons can be cited for adopting PL principles, PL mandates have been criticized for lacking a clear definition; being too difficult for agencies to adopt; missing the ability to be enforced; not applying to regulations drafted by Congress; and being too costly to put into practice (Banoff and Lipton (2010); Anonymous, 2009; Cheffetz, 2010; Scott, 2010; Byrne, 2008; Baron, 2002; Mazur, 2000; Baldwin, 1998).

Scholars also clarify that writers may violate PL principles for “good reasons” (Banoff and Lipton, 2010; Hagge and Kostelnick, 1998). In particular, Hagge and Kostelnick discovered while conducting a textual analysis study that a bureaucratic organization they refer to as “The Firm” continually violated accepted business communication principles “for a reason: in
response to the complex demands of delicate interactional situations” (1989, p. 313).

Specifically, auditors in “The Firm” continually avoided the use of nominalizations, used passive verbs that impersonalized it by deleting agents of action, hedged phrases, and violated many other principles in an effort to “minimize potential impositions on clients by playing down ‘The Firms’ recommendations” (1989, p. 317). In other words, in violating the principles, the writers were actually using linguistic politeness strategies to avoid unnecessary confrontations with their client (Hagge and Kostelnick, 1989).

Other reasons can also contribute to why writers may choose to break PL principles. For example, Banoff and Lipton contend that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) may not comply with the Plain Writing Act for four reasons. First, IRS writers may not be able to write the tax code in plain language, based on the acknowledgement of the courts that the “Code is incomprehensive without the assistance of a qualified expert in tax law” (382). Second, IRS writers may be able to use a loop-hole in that the law that requires documents to be written to “the intended audience” since the “the intended audience” of tax returns may be tax advisors and tax return preparer, not the public. Finally, the act may not be enforceable since there will be no judicial review of compliance or noncompliance with any provision of the Act, nor an opportunity for administrative or judicial action (Banoff and Lipton, 2010). In summary, the Plain Writing Act may be difficult, if not impossible, to apply in some documents and/or organizations.

The introduction and application of communication principles can present also challenges to the effected organizations. As Suchan explains, “Efforts to get workers to change significantly their communication practices often fail” (2006, p. 5) According to Suchan, this failure is a direct result of consultants and internal communication specialists viewing the new communication
strategies and principles as simply new communication skills rather than “altering the way
workers habitually think and talk about communication” (2006, p. 5). In an effort to familiarize
future employees with PL, educators should introduce students to the terms and principles of PL;
consequently, addressing some of these criticisms and concerns that will be discussed in the
benefits section.

**Historical Narratives of Plain Language**

A brief overview of the contemporary interest in PL and the recent scope of PL initiatives
can create a foundation for understanding current PL principles. In this section, I trace the history
of PL in United States, recent mandates, and developments in businesses and scholar support.

**History of U.S. Plain Language Principles**

Communication scholars have traced contemporary interest in PL to former U.S.
Representative Maury Maverick when he wrote a memorandum dated March 24, 1944, as
Chairman of the Smaller War Plants Corporation to everyone in the corporation requesting that
“lengthy memoranda and gobbledygook language” be replaced with short memorandums and
“plain English” (1944). Specifically, Maverick requested that, employees “stay off
gobbledygook language. It only fouls people up” (1944). In an effort to emphasize his point,
Maverick coined the term gobbledygook from “thinking of the old bearded turkey gobbler back
in Texas who was always gobbled-gobbling and strutting with ridiculous pomposity. At the end
of his gobble there was a sort of gook” (Rawson, p. 174). On March 30, 1944, the published an
editorial declaring the memorandum Maverick wrote as the “most refreshing—and effective, I
predict—memo ever written in the Federal service” and stating that the “President would be wise
if he took Maury’s memo and issued it as an order to all federal agencies” (KIllutz, 1944, p. 3).
Despite the appeal, the President Roosevelt did not take any actions regarding the memo.
No further events regarding PL occurred until 1953 when Stuart Chase (an American economist and engineer) attempted to continue the PL campaign when he wrote *The Power of Words*, which included a chapter dedicated to gobbledygook (Redish, 1985; Schriver, 1991). In that chapter, Chase detailed Maverick’s campaign to end gobbledygook, highlighted examples of gobbledygook, and provided suggestions to reduce the “gobble.” Despite Chase’s efforts, scholarly reviewers in linguistics and science overlooked the gobbledygook chapter (Birdwhistell, 1955; Hoijer, 1954; Johnson, 1954). No reported changes took place in business or government writing as a result of Chase’s book.

An official call for PL did not gain much momentum until the 1970s, when President Nixon required that the Federal Register be written in “layman’s terms” (Dorney, 1988). Congress passed several acts and regulations that required warranties, leases, and banking transfers to be clear and readable. Specific legislation included the Magnuson-Moss Warranty-Federal Trade Commission Act (1975), the Consumer Leasing Act (1976), and the Electronic Fund Transfer Act (1983). One federal agency, the Federal Communications Commission, issued regulations for Citizens Band Radios in PL (Locke, 2004).

PL initiatives continued in 1978 when President Carter issued an executive order requiring government agencies to reduce the costs and burdens of federal paperwork by making “regulations as clear and simple as possible” (Exec. Order No. 12044, 1978, para. 1). In 1979, Carter issued a second executive order that required agencies to keep forms “as short as possible [while] elicit[ing] information in a simple, straightforward fashion” (Executive Order 12174, 1979, par. 2). However, only a few agencies responded to these orders. In 1981 both orders were rescinded when President Reagan signed Executive Order 12291 in an effort to reduce government regulation. Nevertheless, some agencies continued to simplify their documents, and
eight state governments passed statutes requiring state documents to be written in PL (Schriver, 1991).

In 1994, a small group of federal employees from various agencies and backgrounds organized the Plain English Network, which later was renamed the Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN). The network wanted to promote the use of “clear communication in government writing” in order to “save federal agencies time and money and provide better service to the American public” (PLAIN, 2010). PLAIN’s activities included conducting monthly meetings and creating a website with PL guidelines (Haller, 2006).

However, PL efforts were not formally restarted until 1998 when President Clinton issued an official memorandum addressed to heads of executive departments insisting that federal agencies use PL in government communications. The purpose of this memorandum was to “make the Government more responsive, accessible, and understandable in its communications with the public” (1998, p.1). As explained by Clinton in the memorandum, PL uses “common, everyday words, except for necessary business terms; ‘you’ and other pronouns; the active voice; and short sentences” (1998, par. 3). In a guidance memorandum which accompanied Clinton’s memorandum, federal agencies were requested to appoint one senior official to join PLAIN in an effort develop PL guidelines agencies could follow. Today, communicators in businesses and government agencies continue to use this resource and others to develop PL documents. Educators and students can also use these resources. (See Table 1 in the Appendix.)

Recent Mandates

In 2008, then-Senator Barack Obama cosponsored the U.S. House of Representatives Bill H.R. 3548 [110th]: Plain Language in Government Communications Act, which continued
the drive for PL principles. Essentially, the bill formalized Clinton’s 1998 memo and tried “to enhance citizen access to government information and services by establishing PL as the standard style for government documents issued to the public, and for other purposes” (H.R. 3548). This bill passed the House, but it stalled in the Senate; therefore, it died at the end of the 110th Congress in January 2009. Two more PL bills were introduced in 2009 and 2010. Specifically, S.574: Plain Communication Act of 2010 requiring the use of “plain communication in every document issued to the public, including documents and other text released in electronic form” and H.R. 946: Plain Language Act of 2009 (later changed to H.R. 946: Plain Writing Act of 2010) requiring clearly written documents issued to the public.

On March 11, the bill passed through the House by a vote of 386-33 and consequently was placed on the Senate calendar. On September 28, 2010, H.R. 946 passed the Senate by unanimous consent. Finally, on October 13, 2010, President Obama signed the bill into law. Generally, it requires agencies to (a) appoint an official to oversee the use of PL, (b) explain and train employees in PL, (c) oversee compliance, (d) “create and maintain a plain writing section of the agency’s website that is accessible from its homepage,” and (e) respond to public input on the agency’s use of PL (H.R. 946, 2010).

However, H.R. 946 does have critics. As Cynthia Lummis, Wyoming Republican Representative, wrote in an email:

Current policy already requires government agencies to write in language that is easily understandable to readers. H. R. 946 needlessly duplicates existing practices of the federal government and uses taxpayers' hard-earned dollars to do so. Our nation's fiscal situation has forced many individuals, families and businesses to make sacrifices and cut back on their budgets. Washington should
learn from their example. The federal government's continued and wasteful spending will only add to our nation's economic troubles. This is why I voted against H. R. 946 when it came to the House floor for a vote (2010).

Lummis’ voice represents the 33 Congress members who voted against H.R. 946. Specifically, Lummis makes the argument that the $5 million dollar price tag and requirements of each agency to designate a PL coordinator, establish agency internet pages related to the use of PL, review its compliance with the legislation, train employees to use PL, and prepare reports to Congress on compliance with the legislation places an undue hardship on agencies and tax payers. Despite the concerns of the representatives opposing this bill, the bill passed.

President Obama has also introduced additional PL initiatives. For example, on his first full day in office, he issued a memorandum outlining principles for “transparency and open government” (Obama, 2009). Specifically, he called for government agencies to work with the public “to disclose information rapidly in forms that the public can readily find and use” (Obama, 2009a, para. 2). In other words, Obama was mandating that government documents be in PL so the public can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use what they find to meet their needs. In addition, the president requested government agencies to “solicit public feedback to identify information of greatest use to the public” (Obama, 2009, para. 2). Hence, the president opened the door of communication between the government and the public by advocating the creation of readable and usable documents and requesting agencies to solicit and evaluate feedback on the information being provided.

In addition, President Obama called for federal agencies to overhaul the recruiting and hiring practices of the federal government by using “simple, plain language applications” (Obama, 2010). Peter Orszag, Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), lauded
the initiative as “a significant step towards making our hiring process more competitive and
candidate-friendly” (2010, para. 8).

**Developments in Businesses and Scholar Support**

The political call for PL has also been extended to businesses. For example, Obama
signed the Credit Card Accountability, Responsibility, and Disclosure Act on May 22, 2009,
which requires all credit card statements and forms to be in PL. This Act states that creditors
must “give consumers clear disclosures of account terms before consumers open an account,
and clear statements of the activity on consumers’ accounts afterwards” (Office of the Press
Secretary, 2009). In addition, in a speech outlining economic reform efforts, the president
encouraged corporations to be “open and transparent, and to speak in plain language investors
can understand” (Barack Obama, 2009a, para. 1).

Business administrators are also joining in the efforts to use PL without mandates.
Examples of PL in the private sector can be found in revised instruction manuals, updated
websites, improved billing statements, and other readable documents. The Center for Plain
Language (CPL) recognizes businesses such as Healthwise, Aetna, Health Dialog, Periscope
United Health Group, and First Choice Power for successfully using PL in websites and
documents to the public (CPL, ClearMark Awards, 2010). Yet some businesses can still
improve their communication as identified by CPL’s Wondermark awards. These awards are
given to organizations that present to the public the “least usable documents. The sort of
documents that make us shake our heads and say: ‘We wonder what they meant. We wonder
what they were thinking’” (2010, para.1). For example, the Department of Homeland Security
Commission received the 2010 Grand Prize award for the “I-94W Form: Nonimmigrant Visa
Waiver Arrival/Departure Record Instructions” that U.S. visitors are required to complete when they initially visit the U.S. See Appendix A (CPL, Wondermark Awards, 2010).

Consumers also desire “clarity and simplicity” in business “in order to make informed decisions,” according to a Siegel+Gale Simplicity Survey (2010). The survey reported that 84% of the consumers questioned were “more likely to trust a company that uses jargon-free, plain English in communications” (Siegel+Gale, 2010). As a result, many businesses are turning to organizations such as Siegel+Gale to assist in revising documents in PL (2010).

Communication scholars also continue to support PL (Barnes, 2007; Byrne, 2008; Campbell, 1999; Kimbel, 2003; Mazur, 2000; Williams and James, 2009). Most recently, Williams and James found that when organizational documentation such as training material, inspection procedures, and correspondence to the public are written in PL, the public becomes involved in enforcing the compliance with regulations (2009).

Moreover, as business communication scholars, politicians, agency administrators, and the public continue to advocate for PL in public documents, educators will need to integrate PL resources into business communication courses. The following section provides PL resources and assignments that educators can use to supplement current business communication curricula.

**Current Plain Language Resources and Assignments**

Currently, PLAIN encourages businesses and government agencies to follow PL principles. To assist writers in creating usable PL documents and websites, PLAIN developed a public website. Other available resources include the CPL website, various federal agency websites, PL textbooks (Baldwin, 1998; Johns, 2003; Myers; 2008), and an online handbook published by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (1998). To assist instructors in
choosing resources for business communication courses, I created Table 1 in the Appendix to list selected web sites and the resources instructors can access at virtually no cost.

I also developed the following assignments that instructors can adapt, modify, and/or develop further to supplement business communication textbooks and course materials. In addition, these particular assignments make important connections between PL and basic grammar, document revision and visual rhetoric.

**Definitions**

The top business communication textbooks address writing and basic grammar elements in the beginning chapters (Guffey, 2010; Bovée & Thill, 2010; Markel, 2009; Locker, 2010). However, these textbooks do not connect the valuable business communication principles to PL; therefore, students entering into the workplace may not realize that they have been equipped with the essential foundation to successful meet the PL expectations of employers and customers.

Instructors can assist in connecting PL to business communication principles by introducing students to the definition of PL. After discussing with the students the various definitions of PL expressed by Shriver, Cheek, and Mercer (2010) and Banoff and Lipton (2010), ask students to develop their own definitions of PL for their current or future employer. Then, compare the students’ definitions to those provided on the various websites listed in Table 1. Finally, develop a class definition of PL that could be used in the workplace.

**Before and After: Document Revision**

Revision is a vital element to achieving PL and business communication principles. Instructors typically address the revision process in the beginning of class and include revision requirements in their syllabus. However, in my experience, when students are asked to revise an assignment, they tend to edit a few sentences. In addition, students in my classes have related
revision as a class activity that does not relate to actual workplace writing. By introducing assignments that illustrate the revision process in the workplace, students may gain a clearer understanding of the definition of revision and a realization that the revision is not just a class activity, but a valuable approach to successfully achieving PL.

Therefore, instructors should begin by exploring a definition of the revision. In developing a definition of revision, consider Faigley and Witte’s statement that, “Successful revision results not from the number of changes a writer makes but from the degree to which revision changes bring a text closer to fitting the demands of the situation” (1981, p. 411). Using this definition, provide students some before examples of written correspondence from PLAIN and the CPL websites. Then, ask the students to revise the correspondence as they focus on the audience of the document. Once the students have revised the before example, show them the after example. Finally, hold a class discussion about the results and/or ask students write an analysis of how their revision differs from the organizational revision, answering the following questions:

1. How closely does your revision meet PL standards, compared to the organizational version?
2. How do audience, purpose, and context need to be considered in revising for PL?
3. What are the most difficult steps in revising a passage in PL?

If some students’ revisions demonstrate significant improvement over the organizationally revised correspondence, consider having the students email the revision directly to the agency, including a short message explaining the changes and citing PL guidelines.
Audience

Professional communicators “don’t just create information for information’s sake; they design and present information to people to be used” (Redish, 2000, p. 163). In other words, successful writers adapt their messages to the audience (Guffey, 2010; Bovée & Thill, 2010; Markel, 2009; Locker, 2010). To give students an opportunity to write and design to an audience, introduce this assignment to the class. Begin by asking students to bring to class a local business advertisement, brochure, posters, or document around their school and/or workplace that needs to be revised into PL. After reviewing the guidelines developed by PLAIN, ask students to revise the documents. Then, request students to share their findings with the class. Once the documents are revised, ask students to write a memo to the manager of the business describing the changes made to the original document and persuading the manager to use the new document. In addition, ask student to share the revised document with the original creator(s) of the documents to create collaboration with local businesses and your class.

Visual Rhetoric

As the top business communication textbooks discuss and illustrate, good communication goes beyond writing texts (Guffey, 2010; Bovée & Thill, 2010; Markel, 2009; Locker, 2010). Students also need to become aware of the importance of visual rhetoric or the process of using images to create meaning or construct an argument using three elements—audience, purpose, and context (Kostelnick & Roberts, 1998). To facilitate students’ awareness of using visual rhetoric effectively to achieve PL, students can review the award winning websites and documentaries at the CPL website (www.centerforplainlanguage.org). After the class has reviewed the samples, find a passage that has been revised using visual rhetoric at http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/before_after. Provide students with example before the
revision. Ask students to use visual rhetoric to clarify the message. Once the students have drawn their solution, compare and contrast the students’ drawing to the after example on the website.

**Personal Checklist (Course Review)**

In a final effort to reinforce the connection between PL and business communication principles reviewed throughout the semester, ask students to review the checklist provided by www.plainlanguage.gov and create a personal list of PL guidelines. Students can develop this personal list by examining their course textbook, PL guidelines, and supplemental resources used throughout the semester. After students have compiled a list, ask them to share their personal list of guidelines with a small group. More significantly, this list can be used in future courses and workplaces. The assignment can also be extended by asking students to interview practitioners in their chosen field to determine the principles they will use in their chosen career field.

**Benefits and Risks of Using Plain Language Resources in Business Communication Curricula**

As this article suggests, PL resources can be used to supplement business communication textbooks and curriculum materials that can benefit instructors, students, professionals, and organizations. Additionally, business communication instructors can play a large role in countering some of the criticisms of PL as well as accrue additional benefits described below.

**Define and Clarify Plain Language**

Instructors can assist students in defining PL by reviewing the definitions provided by the Plain Writing Act of 2010, Federal Plain Language Guidelines, and other resources. By examining these definitions and positive examples of PL documents, students can begin to define PL for themselves and their future employment organizations. In addition, instructors can clarify PL concepts. As the CPL explains, “the problem isn’t that we don’t know how to write in plain
language, but that we don’t follow our own good advice. These ‘rules’ aren’t hard to understand. But, it will take effort to change bad writing habits” (PLAIN, 2010). Business communication instructors can assist in breaking these “bad writing habits” by giving students an opportunity to write and revise their own documents in the classroom before they get to the workplace.

**Ease the Difficulty of Adopting PL**

As Kimble acknowledges, PL signifies, “a new attitude and a fundamental change from past practices” (1994, p. 1). Instructors can cultivate these new attitudes and changes by creating an awareness of PL resources. For example, instructors can show students that many private and public organizations already have PL programs. In addition, students can find principles and examples in many of the resources discussed in this article. Once students are able to discern personal preferences and definitions of PL for themselves, they will be able to transfer this knowledge to their own writing and eventually to their future workplace, thereby easing the process of adopting PL into organizations.

**Assist in Enforcing the Plain Writing Law**

As CPL explains, the “real enforcement” of the Plain Writing Act “will have to come from U.S. citizens demanding documents that are easy to understand” (2010, *Time for plain writing: Myths and reality*). Educators can ease the process of enforcing the law by creating an awareness of PL and clarifying PL principles.

Many students, instructors, and citizens are not aware of available resources and expectations for PL principles because most business communication textbooks and curricula do not include PL principles. When students are educated in using and identifying PL effectively, they will help enforce the current law by demanding that documents meet the intended principles.
Reduce Employer’s Costs to Train Workers to Use Plain Language

By training students to use PL principles in business communication courses before they enter the workplace, employers can save time and money on training costs. Realistically, all of the expenses associated with adopting a new law cannot be relieved by educators. However, the benefits of PL outweigh the costs as Representative Braley, the chief sponsor of the Plain Writing Act, explains, “Citizens will see substantial savings as we reduce the time that Federal agencies spend responding to requests for information” (Braley, 2010).

Start Conversations and Working Relationships between Students and Workplaces

When students and professionals begin conversations, both parties can benefit from the results. Specifically, business administrators are given the opportunity to discover what students are being taught in business communication courses while also receiving assistance in revising current documents. In addition, students can also benefit by meeting professionals and becoming acquainted with current business writing practices. Ultimately, both professionals and students are being given an opportunity to network and create new working relationships.

Review Key Business Communication Concepts

Many current business communication curricula and textbooks include the primary principles covered by PL, such as style, organization, audience, visual rhetoric, revision and research without the label of PL (Johnson-Sheehan 2009; Oliu, 2009; Markel, 2009). By introducing PL resources separately from the textbook and set curriculum, instructors can provide students with an additional opportunity to review and understand the importance of key business communication principles.

For example, instructors can emphasize the importance of visual rhetoric concepts by introducing PL examples and illustrating how these concepts are incorporated in workplace
documents. In addition, instructors can use these principles and resources to emphasize the importance of revising documents before delivering gobbledygook information to the public, which will also save organizations time and money.

**Accept Some Violations of PL Principles**

Educators and practitioners need to remember that principles are meant to be violated for “good reasons as explained by Hagge and Kostelnick (1989). In particular, when writers are being “extremely sensitive to the needs of their readers, even though they constantly use many varieties of locutions that traditional business communication pedagogy considers the antithesis of reader-oriented prose” (1989, p.330). As a result of discussing when the violations of the PL principles may be warranted, students and organizations will hopefully embrace violations of the principles when they are for “good reasons.”

**Identify Risks of Integrating PL principles into Business Curricula**

Although students, professionals, and administrators will gain many benefits from instructors integrating PL principles into the classroom, instructors will experience challenges when adapting lesson plans. Most significantly, instructors may be concerned or overwhelmed with the idea of including PL resources into a full semester of important topics and essential skills included in Business Communication courses. In addition, as Suchan explains, classrooms are also organizations that can also be impacted negatively from change (2006). In particular, students may resist the change; administrators may not agree to the change in curriculum; and students may use only some of the principles which can lead to documents that are inconsistent in style, design, and organization. Despite these risks, educators need to take the lead in training students in PL in order to benefit society.
Conclusion

As this article has reported, politicians have started to pass laws and initiatives to establish PL principles in public documents. Despite these efforts, more changes are still needed to include PL in regulations, reports, and internal communication practices. In addition, the public needs to be educated in developing PL principles, identifying and using PL, and enforcing PL principles since many citizens will be responsible for executing the laws.

Business communication instructors need to assist in the efforts of private and public sector organizations to adopt PL principles into professional documents by bringing PL resources into the classroom. In response, this article provides brief descriptions of valuable, free, and accessible resources and assignments that can be easily integrated into current business communication curricula. Although many changes to PL resources will take place in the next year as organizations officially begin to apply the new law, the current resources remain important to supporting the latest efforts to adopt PL into the workplace. Together, citizens, government, businesses, instructors, and students can learn, revise, and work collectively to improve communication.
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Usability.com: Your guide for developing usable & useful websites. (http://usability.gov)


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<th>Resources: Websites and Agencies</th>
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| **Plain Language Action and Information Network (PLAIN)** *(http://www.PlainLanguage.gov)* | • Tips on writing and designing documents  
• PL definitions  
• Federal PL principles  
• Current PL initiative updates  
• Guidelines and tips for using PL in documents  
• Hyperlink list of two free online training opportunities  
• List of additional resources including journal articles, books, and other websites that may provide valuable information about the PL principles  
• Hyperlink list of federal agencies that have PL program websites  
• Examples of documents before and after the use of PL principles  
• Additional references, guidelines, and dictionaries |
| **Center for Plain Language** *(http://www.centerforplainlanguage.org)* | • Tips to making government and business documents clear and understandable  
• Current news articles on PL  
• Definitions of PL  
• Guidelines for creating PL materials  
• Approaches to starting PL initiatives in organizations  
• List of winners of the ClearMark Award  
• List of winners of the WonderMark Award  
• Highlights best and worst examples of written communication |
| **Federal Agency Resources**  
- Environmental Protection Agency  
- Federal Aviation Administration  
- Fish and Wildlife Services  
- Health Resources and Services Administration  
- National Archives  
- National Institutes of Health  
- Office of the Federal Register  
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services | • Definitions of PL  
• PL guidelines for each federal agency  
• Examples of documents for each agency |
| **Howto.gov** *(http://www.howto.gov)* | • Web site assistance in  
  o Federal web requirements and policies;  
  o Technical assistance in computing, applications, data and web infrastructure tips  
  o Online citizen interactions through social media and open government;  
  o Web content management, usability, and design |
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<th>Resources: Websites and Agencies</th>
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• Comprehensive handbook  
• Definition of Plain English  
• Guidelines detailing the importance of knowing your audience  
• Tips explaining why the writer needs to understand the message being conveyed  
• Descriptions on how to reorganize a document  
• Instructions on how to design a document  
• Tips for saving time in designing documents  
• Details on how to use readability formulas and style checkers  
• Tips on evaluating documents |
| **State Plain Language Resources** | • Summaries of individual State regulations and policies  
• Definitions of PL  
• PL principles for each state, if applicable  
• Examples of documents for each state agency |
| **Usability.gov** ([http://usability.gov](http://usability.gov)) | • Definitions of usability and PL  
• Research-based web design and usability guidelines  
• Step-by-step visual map to guide viewers through the user-centered design process  
• Blog where website managers can interact with other users  
• Website templates  
• List of government initiatives requiring usability efforts  
• Examples of websites before and after applying usability and PL principles |
| **WebContent.gov** ([http://www.usa.gov](http://www.usa.gov)) | • List of requirements and “best practices” for the web  
• Tips for content management  
• List of usability and web design principles  
• Blog forum where web managers can share, learn about “best practices” of web design  
• Information on improving websites |

**Table 1: List of websites and resources**
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS: USING NARRATIVES TO DECIPHER PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES

Now, as this dissertation process concludes, I will reflect on the lessons I have learned, summarize implications for professional communication practice and pedagogy, detail the limitations of the studies in this dissertation, and outline suggestions for future research. Throughout this conclusion, I will argue—based on the preceding studies conducted—for using narratives to decipher professional communication challenges. By focusing on narratives and specific challenges, the researcher, practitioner, and student can (a) identify a challenge; (b) introduce a theory or pedagogical approach to fixing the challenge; (c) observe the application of the suggested approach; and (d) consider the results of the process. In the following section, I will describe three professional venues that used narratives.

Results of Using a Narrative Approach

Each article in this dissertation used narrative as an approach to decipher a communication challenge. In all of the narratives detailed in this dissertation, I made decisions about how to translate and transcribe the stories. In addition, like other narrative research, the narratives were both enabled and constrained by the rhetorical situation (Chase, 2005). The following section addresses the different rhetorical situations, details the findings of each study, and describe how narratives were used to decipher challenges.

First Narrative

The first narrative detailed a university employee’s task of persuading a skeptical audience (federal and state representatives and board members) to continue funding soft-skills training seminars. In this rhetorical situation, I viewed my research and narrative voice as a supportive active-participant. By interviewing and observing the participant for an extended
period of time, I was able to construct a narrative that focused on specific experiences rather than on general concepts I had gathered during the initial interviews.

To begin identifying the professional communication challenge the participant was confronting, I listened to his narrative—or story—of the situation. The participant’s narrative included his ethos, objectives, perspectives, and concerns regarding the gathering of information and writing the assessment report. Specifically, he needed to write a report that supported the funding of both hard-skills (e.g. mathematics, engineering concepts, and highway procedures) and soft-skills (e.g. compassion, understanding, and teamwork) seminars the trainers in the agency taught. The participant was concerned that his soft-skills training programs would not be continued if he could not find a way to persuade board members and state and federal officials that students in the programs were gaining valuable skills through the programs. At first, I suggested using pathos—emotional appeals of persuasion—but he immediately rejected the idea since it did not fit into what he considered to be the normal practice of the university. So I observed the administrator struggle as he tried to use only rational appeals of persuasion (logos), which he regarded as the university’s accepted method. But his attempts failed.

After the participant and I constructed the preliminary narrative detailing the challenge and efforts to solve the challenge, he expressed concerns that we would not be able to find a method to persuade the skeptical audience that the soft-skills training seminars were worth continued funding. Even more disconcerting, the participant wanted to stop trying to solve the challenge. That is, he wanted to give up.

As a result, I reviewed the preliminary narrative with the participant. We discussed his successful efforts to support hard-skills seminars such as pre and posttests, but as he was aware these efforts did not work for the soft-skills seminars. While we examined the narrative, I asked
the participant to explain why he thought the soft-skills training seminars were valuable. He answered that he could see the evidence in the narrative that detailed the students’ experiences, perceptions, and reactions. Therefore, we decided to include these pathos strategies such as personal opinions, anecdotal evidence, and comments from both the trainer and students in the assessment reports. Without the construction and review of the narrative, the participant may not have been able to recognize the main issue—that a new method of persuasion was needed—or been able to recognize his options.

Today, the training division continues to use pathos strategies in reports to support soft-skills training programs. In addition, similar organizations in other states have also adopted these rhetorical strategies to maintain support for their seminars. More significantly, I learned through this experience the importance of constructing a complete narrative before introducing solutions.

**Second Narrative**

The second narrative describes an entry-level employee’s assignment to revise the FMLA poster in an effort to facilitate communication between employers and employees, with the ultimate goal of achieving family medical leave for eligible employees. When the DOL supervisor asked me to assist in revising the FMLA, I researched the FMLA and possible approaches to deciphering the communication challenge before I entered the work site. In particular, I constructed the historical narrative of the FMLA. This historical narrative assisted the participant in understanding the background of the law, context of the “adversarial dealings” between employers and employees, and recent changes to the act.

When I met the participant, I had already obtained an authoritative role in the interaction. As the participant stated, “I am so glad you are here to direct me in revising the poster since I am unfamiliar with the FMLA and do not know where to begin revising the poster.” However, I tried
to mute this authoritative voice as a researcher and narrator as much as possible in order to produce a story that highlighted the process of deciphering the communication challenge.

After reviewing the historical narrative of the FMLA, the participant asked me for my input on how to decipher the communication challenge. Although I intended to give her multiple options, the participant chose to use my first suggestion, Grice’s cooperative principle, a linguistic theory, to successful communication to analyze and revise the poster. While the participant used the cooperative principle to analyze and revise the FMLA poster, I observed, listened, and wrote down her comments. Listening to the participant’s process in analyzing and revising the poster allowed me to produce a narrative that detailed her perceptions, concerns, and comments. As a result, the narrative became an important part of deciphering the communication challenge as she reviewed the text of the narrative to verify that each maxim violated had been addressed.

As a result of these efforts, the FMLA poster was successfully revised and evidence indicates that the communication challenges have been reduced. Moreover the supervisor informed me that the cooperative principle has been used to revise 28 other posters and 76 fact sheets in the DOL, Wage and Hour Division. Most significantly, I learned the importance of recognizing and embracing the narratives of the researcher, the organization, and the participant in order to apply a workable solution.

Third Narrative

The historical narrative of PL details the researcher’s, scholars, senators, and presidents’ perceptions regarding PL. In addition, this narrative follows Chase’s recommendation to include “emotions, thoughts, and interpretations” (2005, p. 65). Most importantly, this narrative details the rich and long history of PL in the United States in order to persuade educators and scholars to
integrate PL into professional communication curricula. As a result of my findings, I compiled a set of resources and assignments instructors can use to introduce PL to students and subsequently meet the needs of students, and professionals (and their organizations). In addition, I learned how to construct a historical narrative to persuade an audience to modify current pedagogical practices. Therefore, the narrative in this case will hopefully persuade Business Communication Quarterly readers to integrate PL into current curricula.

Lessons Learned

During the process of conducting interviews and observations, constructing narratives, and, finding solutions to professional communication challenges, I learned many lessons. First, I learned that some qualitative studies may require active participation from the researcher in order to gain access to the organization. Second, I discovered how researchers can use narratives to decipher challenges. Third, I realized the importance of fusing the researcher’s voice into the organizational narratives, solutions, and results. Most importantly, I recognized the advantages of focusing on specific challenges professionals faced.

During my research process, I examined three different venues, introduced solutions from classical rhetoric to linguistics and observed how theories and pedagogical materials can be applied in practice. I watched how the theories we discuss in professional communication classes can be applied to specific challenges employees encounter and how narratives can be used as an approach to introduce solutions to practitioners and instructors. In the first organization, I described how an administrator persuaded a skeptical audience in a report to accept a controversial message by integrating the rhetorical methods of persuasion (ethos, pathos, logos). Then, I recounted how an entry-level writer used Grice’s cooperative principle to analyze and revise the text of a poster to facilitate communication between two parties that have a history of
adversarial dealings. Finally, I chronicled a narrative that revealed the rich history of plain language and the need to integrate PL into current professional communication curricula in order to assist students, practitioners, and employers.

After I constructed the above-listed narratives, I learned the following specific lessons and tips for the most effectively using narratives to decipher challenges: (a) suggest solutions after constructing a complete narrative of the challenge; (b) recognize and embrace the narratives of the researcher, organization, and participant to find a solution that will work for the organization; and (c) provide multiple options with the benefits and limitations of each option clearly listed when suggesting solutions to specific challenges in order for participants to make the final choice and consequently maintain a vested interest in the evolution of the organization if the rhetorical situation permits.

Implications

The three articles I’ve presented here have implications for professional communication scholars, practitioners, and educators as each (a) outlines a process for using narratives to decipher challenges; (b) constructs narratives from participants and historical accounts; (c) introduces theories and pedagogical resources to organizations in an effort to decipher specific communication challenges; (d) depicts how participants can be observed while applying a theory; (e) illustrates how researchers can embrace and report their participation in deciphering challenges; and (f) provides instructors with two case studies detailing effective incorporation of narratives and PL resources and assignments.

In addition this dissertation offers opportunities for rhetoric and professional communication scholars to collaborate with practitioners. Such collaboration can provide practitioners with suggestions for deciphering challenges while researchers can gain insight into
the challenges practitioners face and create case studies from these experiences to introduce to their students.

**Limitations**

The narratives contained in this dissertation are not intended to serve as a basis for generalizations about the ways to decipher all professional communication challenges, but rather provide a guideline for ways that narratives may enhance the research and practice of rhetoric and professional communication. The narratives in this dissertation reflect the limitations found within all narrative approaches: (a) the scope is limited (Bird, 2007; Fine, 1993); (b) the time commitment for future studies may be too prohibitive (Perkins & Blyler, 1999); and (c) researchers may impose their own interpretation of the participants and organization (Fine, 1993; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). These are some of the same critiques I received from one reviewer during the peer-review process when I submitted an article from this manuscript to a refereed journal. Thankfully, other peer-reviewers argued that the article contributed to the discipline and the piece was subsequently published. This example of feedback that was critical of narratives further illustrates the marginal position narratives still hold. The negative response to the narrative approach only serves to highlight my argument for greater inclusion of narratives.

In my role as an active participant and reflexive practitioner, I recognized the challenges of getting the story right. I tried to construct the narrative of an individual or an organization from the perspective of the participants, but I also recognized the importance of including my own narrative when I contributed to the deciphering process. This involvement of the researcher breaks the conventions of narrative in that the researcher becomes an active participant in the study (Fine, 1993) and crosses the line of disengagement (Fine, 1993; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). However, by disclosing the interactions, suggestions, and participation, the researcher
becomes part of the narrative in a way that may assist other practitioners with similar challenges and provide students with the opportunity to learn how individuals within an organization apply the theories we discuss in classes.

Future Studies

Future research needs to analyze professional communication challenges and the use of narratives that construct the process of deciphering challenges beyond the three situations I have explored. For instance, different organizations will exhibit new challenges that call for a variety of theories or pedagogical solutions. In addition, we need answers to the following questions:

- To what extent can researchers resolve professional communication challenges by introducing and applying theories and pedagogical resources?
- To what extent can researchers introduce theories to resolve challenges without changing the culture of the organization?
- To what extent can pedagogy solve professional communication challenges?

Narratives offer opportunities to answer such questions. By providing a framework to identify a research site’s rhetorical situation and construct a narrative to identify communications challenges within organizations, researchers can assist participants in reviewing the narratives, finding the specific issue, and deciphering communication challenges. Additionally, reconstructing historical narratives of current professional communication topics such as plain language provides practitioners and educators with contexts and insights into new subjects that can be integrated into professional communication curricula. The three studies I conducted illustrate just some of the benefits derived from incorporating narratives into research, pedagogy, and the practice of rhetoric and professional communication. By using narratives proposed and demonstrated in this dissertation, future research and practice will continue to highlight the
potential of constructing narratives that focus on the deciphering communication challenges into the field of rhetoric and professional communication.
References


APPENDIX A. CHAPTER 1 SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How many training programs does your division conduct in a year?
2. How many ADA training and soft-skill training programs have you conducted in the past year?
3. How many ADA and soft-skill training programs do you foresee presenting in the next year?
4. Four years ago you constructed performance evaluation procedures for soft-skilled training programs. Do you currently still use those procedures?
5. In your opinion, what is the most difficult part of accessing soft-skilled training programs?
6. In your opinion, what elements are the most important to include in assessments of soft-skilled training seminars?
7. What advice would you give someone in a similar position that needs to establish and implement assessments of soft-skilled training seminars?
8. Where is LTAP in the process of establishing and using the performance evaluations of soft-skilled training programs?
9. What have your experiences been in the past four years regarding the government’s acceptance of LTAPs soft-skilled training programs?
10. In the past four years, has the government denied funding or supporting any soft-skilled training programs, if so, what and why.
11. Would you like to add any information?
APPENDIX B. CHAPTER 2 SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Who designs and writes public documents (fact sheets, posters) for your agency?
2. How are public documents assigned?
3. What factors do you take into consideration before and during the writing and designing of writing fact sheets and posters to disseminate to the public?
4. What elements must be included in a public document?
5. What factors, elements can you omit from a public document?
6. Who do you consider to be your primary audience?
7. How many audience members do you think read your public documents?
8. What do you see as the primary purpose of the public document?
9. What is your primary consideration when developing a public document? Design or writing? Explain why?
10. How many writers are involved in the writing of a fact sheet or poster?
11. What do you see as your role and responsibility as a public sector writer?
12. What is the editing and revision process of a public document?
13. What is “good writing” for public documents?
14. What is the most difficult obstacle in creating a poster or fact sheet?
15. What do you enjoy most when preparing public documents?
16. Who makes the final decision to approve a public document?
17. Who is ultimately responsible for errors in public documents?
18. Do you think the current FLSA, posters and fact sheets need revisions? If so, what would need to occur (amendment or supervisory approval) for revisions to be approved?
19. How did you learn to write in public documents?
20. Any additional information you would like to add.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During this dissertation process, I learned the hard way that a dissertation cannot be written alone, it takes collaboration with many people. To begin, I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. David Roberts, for his patience, understanding, and encouragement throughout this process. I would also like to thank my committee, Barbara Blakely, Charles Kostelnick, Barbara Schwarte, and Alex Tuckness, for their support and valuable input.

In addition, I would like to thank the following people for their assistance, support, and encouragement during my adventure at Iowa State University and on this dissertation:

**My family**
Mark Greer
Breann Greer
MyKalynn Brook Greer

**My parents**
Mariann Richardson
Earl Richardson

**My friends, mentors, and colleagues**
Michael Mendelson
Abhijit Rao
Dorothy Winsor

I also extend a thank you to all of the research participants from my research sites. The studies would not have been possible without their generous cooperation and assistance.

Thank you all for supporting me through this process.