

Using Reflections to Gauge Audience Awareness in Business and Professional Communication Courses

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Abstract

This study describes how reflections allowed students to express their audience awareness as they wrote a multiaudience messages packet. We present an analysis of 27 reflections in which students described their experience when responding to the various audiences. Students' reflective depth varied, though deeper reflections demonstrate sophistication in considering audience constraints and values. Students reported difficulty with negative and persuasive messages and indicated concern about their credibility. Reflections can help instructors understand how students are considering audiences for business documents, which instructors can use to improve their instruction and assess how well students consider business audiences.

Keywords

business and professional communication, reflection, audience analysis, pedagogy

Business and professional communication (BPC) scholarship agrees students should be able to analyze and respond to business audiences. For example, Salerno (1988) noted that without helping students develop deeper audience awareness, they will use business communication strategies, such as buffers, in merely “mechanical and obvious” ways (p. 44) that work against the purposes of the message, such as maintaining rapport with employees or maintaining business with customers. But more research can reveal how students actually consider their audience when they write.

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To explore this research area, we analyzed how students considered their audiences when responding to a multiaudience assignment in which they wrote five types of business messages to five different audiences. After students completed this assignment, they completed reflections, answering several questions about their writing experiences. In analyzing these 27 student reflections from two sections of a business communication course, we were able to identify the depth, challenges, and strengths of these business communication students during their writing process as they attempted to respond appropriately to the various audiences.

Though the term “audience” is multifaceted (Ede, 1984; Park, 1982), in this article, we view audience awareness as the process in which writers build mental images of audience and decipher “the culture, traditions, and attitudes that provide constraints and resources for the writers’ work” (Hovde, 2000, p. 396). Furthermore, audience awareness involves the processes and strategies (audience analysis and response) by which writers employ ad hoc decisions, or tactics, during their writing process (Hovde, 2000, p. 396). This process relies on how students actually view the audience as they interpret writing situations (Ede & Lunsford, 1984, p. 158). The reflections students wrote provided an instructional tool for the instructors and us as researchers to understand how students worked through audience analysis and audience response for the assignment. This study can help BPC instructors identify effective ways to promote reflective audience awareness in their students and to better understand how students understand audience analysis.

Literature Review

In this literature review, we review briefly the composition and BPC research on audience awareness. Then, we review the research on reflections, which can help instructors understand how students are considering the audience they encounter in their BPC assignments.

Audience Awareness

Much of the foundational research on audience awareness comes from composition research, which we highlight briefly. Ong (1975) famously argued that the writer’s audience is a fiction because each writer must create their own audience for their writing using their imagination (p. 12). Ede and Lunsford (1984) argued this idea further, noting that writers must construct images of their audience as they write. Indeed, Long (1980) noted that instructors need to ask students to consider what they want the reader to think, do, or feel (p. 225). In considering how and if writers considered audience in this way, Flower and Hayes (1980) found that experienced writers imagined their audiences as they wrote more than the novice writers, who concentrated more on the content of their writing. Using think-aloud protocol as students wrote, Berkenkotter (1981) found that experienced writers consistently used the audience as the driving force behind their writing. Berkenkotter (1981) concluded that professional writers tend to ask themselves about what their audience might want to know (p. 396). As a

result, Berkenkotter (1981) argued that instructors should provide audiences for students to address in order to facilitate this skill (p. 396).

BPC agrees with this foundational composition research in that helping students respond to audiences should characterize course assignments. Brumberger (2004) noted, for example, that in her deployment of a multiaudience correspondence project, her students valued the professionalizing opportunity to think about multiple audiences. Jameson (2013) argued that her use of usability testing in the classroom heightened students' appreciation for the needs of audiences as they composed business documents, an argument Jameson made in light of the research on student motivation and student transfer to the workplace from academia. Holst-Larkin (2008) described how students' use of Schriver's protocol-aided audience modeling helped them conceptualize the audiences throughout their business composition process. More recently, Schieber (2016) noted that students can also bring strategies from other fields (such as marketing) to their conceptualization of audience and employ those strategies during their composing process.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that BPC instructors should deploy assignments that encourage audience awareness skills, but how instructors can understand students' thinking about audience is less clear. Instructors need some method for understanding how well students are working through the process. Brumberger (2004), Jameson (2013), and Holst-Larkin (2008) discerned that students appreciated the assignments through their analyses of postassignment and postcourse research surveys. Also, Schieber (2016) discerned the *invisible transfer* of audience analysis tools from other courses through her deep qualitative investigation of the two students in her study. However, to help instructors better understand their students' learning, a pedagogically reasoned (rather than a research-reasoned) reflection process can more strategically help instructors understand student decisions as they compose business documents.

Reflections and Student Thinking

One common strategy for understanding student thinking is the reflection, which can encourage students to articulate and process what they have learned. Yancey's *Reflection in the Writing Classroom* (1998) is typically considered to be the seminal work on reflections in writing courses. Yancey argued that students completing reflections when they are finished with writing assignments can promote metacognition, which effectively allows students to think about their composing decisions to ultimately promote students' self-awareness as they write, knowing why they are writing the way they are writing ("thinking about thinking" is the common phrase to describe metacognition). Irvin (2004) noted that reflections can enable students to think about their writing development in new media. Other composition instructors studied the use of reflection writing and how to integrate the reflective process into portfolios or eportfolios to help students develop an understanding of how they developed as writers over time (Cambridge, 2010; Ryder, 2002).

In a BPC course, Masui and De Corte (2005) asked students to complete reflections to better gauge where they had succeeded and where they had failed in their

business documents. However, their study ultimately gauged student learning only through grades, rather than what the students had reflected on, arguing that the reflection process improved the grades. McEachern (1999) agreed that reflection adds the metacognitive component necessary to help students in BPC courses to understand how well they responded to their audiences, allowing the instructor to help students with the metacognitive process (p. 82). Later, McEachern (2006) argued that instructors must give careful time and consideration to student reflections. Relatedly, Stevens (1994) called the process of requiring reflections alongside BPC assignments the *double message approach*, because students not only submit their communication product but also a message to the instructor that details the thought process they had, generating for the instructor an understanding of the students' audience analysis and message development strategies. As an example of this approach, Randazzo (2012) demonstrated how reflection can feasibly accompany documents as important and perennial as the résumé and cover letter. Brammer (2011) proposed a more summative approach, arguing that this teaching approach can also help with student business communication portfolios of many kinds of business documents. Lawrence (2013), again, recently argued that reflective writing can help instructors emphasize the process of writing, especially for student writers, who must see themselves as still in the process of improving.

Even though this BPC research consistently demonstrates value for this type of pedagogy, no study in BPC has examined these reflections themselves to understand how students considered their audiences as they produced their BPC documents. Ultimately, reflection not only has pedagogical benefits but also serves as data from which BPC researchers and instructors can grasp student development on various course outcomes, such as audience awareness, particularly through a systematic qualitative inquiry. BPC research should more fully describe how students work through the process of understanding and responding to their audiences in BPC documents. Understanding student learning in this way can thus help BPC instructors anticipate and respond to the challenges students face and to the places where students seem to excel. Thus, we asked the following research questions:

Research Question 1: In how much depth do students express the way they understood and responded to their audiences in BPC documents?

Research Question 2: What challenges do students describe when understanding and responding to their audiences in BPC documents?

Research Question 3: In what ways do students express confidence or lack of confidence in understanding and responding to their audiences in BPC documents?

Method

In the following section, we describe the research site, course context, and the data collection and analysis procedures for the study. These methods helped us answer the research questions, and thus helped us better understand students' audience awareness to inform BPC pedagogy.

Research Site and Data Collection

The study was conducted at a large, Midwestern land-grant university in 2017. Students were from a variety of majors across the university, but all students were required to take the university business communication course that used consistent assignments and course structure across sections. In this course, students completed the assignment we investigated (the messages packet), which was 15% of the course grade. This assignment was case based, which worked well for the purposes of this study about audience awareness. As an approximation of workplace authenticity (Freedman, Adam, & Smart, 1994), the case assignment involves students responding to fictional, but realistic, workplace scenarios so that students can consider workplace problems and develop their BPC skills (Greenhalgh, 2007, pp. 181-182). Beginning in business education, the case assignment typically presents to students a rhetorical situation and allows them to use writing as a problem-solving tool (Rozumalski & Graves, 1995, p. 80). Rogers and Rymer (1998) argued that case assignments, if well developed, can provide the necessary audience, intention, and practical factors to give students room to explore realistic business writing in the classroom, which can provoke students to respond as communicators in a way that is more like workplace writing (p. 8). Though the case assignment allows students to learn how to write various professional communication genres, this assignment focuses on business correspondence messages, especially the multiaudience messages packet, which provided audience variability to gauge students' consideration of audience.

In this messages packet assignment, students composed five messages in response to a particular workplace case at a headphones company. Two customers had their orders switched and delivered to the opposite customer (the problem). Students had five tasks (five messages) to complete to respond to this workplace problem:

1. *Negative Message*: Students had to ask one customer to send back the expensive headphones the customer unintentionally received because the customer had actually ordered a much less expensive pair. They also had to inform the customer that the correct headphones were on their way to the customer.
2. *Positive Message*: Students had to inform the other customer that they could keep the less expensive headphones and that the more expensive headphones that the customer actually ordered were on their way to the customer.
3. *Persuasive Message (short)*: Students had to request that the company shipping manager anticipate the expensive headphones to be returned and send the correct headphones to the customers. Students could also direct the shipping manager to send any other materials as consolations to the customers (coupons, free shipping labels, etc.).
4. *Persuasive Message (long)*: Students had to propose two ideas to the regional manager for preventing such mix-ups in the future. They also had to account for pros and cons to each of their ideas.
5. *Informative Message*: Students had to compose a policy memo telling the shipping department employees about the new procedure that was approved

in response to the long persuasive message. This message entailed at least one major purpose: delivering informative content that enabled employees to understand and enact the new policy.

Each student had to analyze the five audiences and respond to each of them using the various techniques for delivering positive, informative, negative, and persuasive messages as outlined in Locker and Kienzler (2015), the course textbook used across all business communication sections at this university. Students received 5 weeks of instruction about Locker and Kienzler's chapters about these different messages before the assignment was due. While all instructors have their own teaching styles to facilitate their class sessions (and, presumably, the instructors in this study did, too), each student in this study already took online reading quizzes on these chapters as part of the business communication program and, very likely, they had the opportunity to examine writing samples in class. Also, Locker and Kienzler (2015) provide example messages with annotations. After completing their messages packets, students wrote a reflection on their experience writing the messages during an 80-minute class meeting. These reflections served as the data for this study. We did not want to impose rigorous grading as an additional component to participating for our instructors in this study, so we did not require our instructors to grade the reflections.

Research Participants and Data Collection

After receiving institutional review board approval at the university where the students attended, two experienced business communication instructors (they had taught the business communication course at least once before) were recruited and then agreed to participate as instructors in the study, and one of the researchers recruited students from those instructors' course sections (approximately 50 students total). One instructor was male and the other female. The instructors were not present in the room when the researcher recruited their students, and the instructors did not know which of their students agreed to participate in the study. Later, the instructors sent all of their students' messages packets and the accompanying reflections to one of the researchers. That researcher then eliminated and destroyed the messages packets and reflections for those students who did not consent to participate in the study. The researcher then eliminated any identifying characteristics (names, phone numbers, or email addresses [some students used their actual contact information]) for the remaining messages packets and the reflections.

In total, 13 female students participated and 18 male students participated (totaling 31 students). However, only 27 students completed the in-class reflection, perhaps because four students (two males and two females) were absent the day of the in-class reflection. Thus, 27 reflections were included in the data set (11 females and 16 males).

The reflection asked students to identify who they saw as the audiences for each packet, how they tailored their messages for those audiences, and how they worked through difficulties when composing the messages. These reflection questions correspond to our interest in student reflection depth, student challenges, and student

achievements (see the appendix for the reflection prompt and questions). Also, we gave a recommendation to students about how long their answers could be for each question (50 to 100 words) to prevent students from giving short, nonsubstantive answers with no examples from their messages and to keep the assignment from imposing a burden on the instructors. Though students may have felt limited by this approximate word count, the data seem to reveal that students either gave brief responses well below the word count (e.g., 28 words) or met or well exceeded the word count (e.g., above 200 words). Thus, we do not believe the word count affected students' depth of response, because students communicated how they may have naturally done anyway. So, though the reflection gave students an approximation for how much to write for each question, students could feasibly give specific examples within this number of words (as some did) and go over this word count (as some did).

Data Coding and Analysis

To analyze the 27 reflections, the researchers first read through all of the reflections to get a general sense of the students' responses. To condense the data, we focused on sentence units and paragraph units written in the reflections by placing them in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with a corresponding student ID. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) call this process *data condensation*, which they define as the process whereby data are simplified for the purposes of analysis (p. 12). We then used Saldaña's (2013) guidance for qualitative data coding. Saldaña (2013) divides coding into two major stages: first cycle and second cycle coding. First cycle coding methods are codes initially assigned to the data units. Second cycle coding methods generally reduce the first cycle codes into specific categories that are easier to present and consider.

The type of coding we used in the first cycle coding was descriptive coding, which "assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase—most often a noun—the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 88). In examining closely the thinking process and experiences of these students, we were able to answer the question "What is going on here?" which is a guiding question Saldaña (2013) noted as characterizing this type of coding (p. 88). The researchers took notes on each reflection and assigned descriptive codes for the first cycle (e.g., *examples, benefits, values, constraints*). As similarities began to emerge, they were then written down separately and organized based on patterns, which was the second cycle (Saldaña, 2013, p. 210). Pattern codes identify major themes from the data. For reliability, we each then checked the pattern categories and each example to ensure it fit in that particular category. The following categories emerged, which served as a way to analyze the depth of the students' analyses:

- Detailed explanation of audience analysis
- Basic explanation of audience analysis
- Vague explanation of audience analysis

We then analyzed the reflections to find evidence for how the students were actually explaining their understanding of audience analysis, even if the responses were vague or basic. For the first cycle, we assigned process codes to distinguish between the types of responses. According to Saldaña (2013), process coding uses “gerunds (‘ing’ words) exclusively to connote action in the data” (p. 96). We could identify what students said they were doing when they wrote. After this first cycle coding, we used pattern coding to develop the following key categories:

- *Identifying* reader benefits and constraints
 - Benefits refer to anything that may be positive to the audience, while constraints are anything that would be problematic for the audience.
- *Considering* reader values and priorities
 - Cardon’s (2015) definitions helped describe this code. He defines values as “enduring beliefs and ideals that individuals hold. Because values are at the core of belief systems, appeals to an individual’s values can have strong influence” (p. 145). Priorities, Cardon (2015) notes, “involve ranking or assigning importance to things, such as projects, goals, and tasks” (p. 145).
- *Estimating* one’s own credibility
 - Students can experience difficulty when demonstrating that they are credible business professionals in writing assignments, so this category looked for evidence of students reflecting on their own *ethos*, or credibility.

We read through the reflection answers of each student and recorded data evidence in a spreadsheet column. We then reviewed the spreadsheet to ensure that the evidence corresponded to that category.

Results and Discussion

The following section outlines the answers to our three research questions.

Research Question 1: Students’ Depth

In the first research question, we wanted to determine students’ level of depth in considering the multiple audiences. As mentioned previously, we found that students gave detailed responses, basic responses, or vague responses. For this coding, categories are mutually exclusive and the percentage totaled 100%.

Detailed Explanation of Audience Analysis. Of the student responses, 32% gave detailed accounts for how they analyzed what their audience members needed from the messages. These responses showed that the students were thinking deeply about their audience and how to communicate with them. One example response demonstrated a student considering many of the benefits, priorities, and credibility issues involved in the five rhetorical situations:

How did you tailor each message to fit the needs of those audience members?

- I cushioned the negative message with good news on both ends—that he would get his new headphones he sent back to him and that he got a discount. I also didn't use "you" so that he didn't feel that the problem was his fault. I made sure he had all the information he needed.
- I told her the good news, informed her of the bad, then stated the rest of the good news. I made sure she knew what was going to happen with the shipping process and when to expect her merchandise.
- When emailing Thom, I made sure that I focused on the shipping aspect and not what the situation was or how I was going to fix it.
- For the memo to the boss, I made sure that she was fully aware of the situation and that she had full control over what idea got picked.
- When delivering the memo to the worker, I made sure that all of their questions would be answered and I gave them all the details I could. I didn't focus on the incident or the choosing process for the policy change, just the things that pertained to them. (Student 12745)

This particular reflection details each specific document. This student wanted to maintain credibility through tone and deference to superiors, and the student wanted to ensure the messages were informative about the situation and directives to the shipping warehouse (priorities). The student also took advantage of the word count (going beyond it) to explain each document and how they met the audience's informational needs. For example, the positive message to the second customer prompted the student to consider the reader's need to know when they would receive their product (values).

Similarly, Student 11407 wrote the following detailed response:

Joey Ramone needed to hear bad news, unfortunately he was sent a more expensive pair of headphones that Headphones, Inc. needed him to return. This meant that he would have to go through the trouble of returning the headphones and also keep up patience while he waited for the correct pair to reply. Pat Benatar needed to hear mostly good news, she was receiving [*sic*] two pairs of headphones for the price of one. Thom Yorke needed an informative work request, he would be fixing the shipping error and needed to know all the correct and clear order information. Debbie Harry needed to be persuaded using pros and cons. I requested that she instate a change-in-policy based on my suggestions. The Employees of Headphones, Inc. needed a positive, informative, and professional memo explaining the new policy change.

This student was also focused on each audience member and specifically detailed what each audience member needed to know (e.g., information about returning a product, information about keeping two products, information about sending orders, information about proposed changes, and information about a new policy). The student was able to process how those needs were different and explained the student's writing choices based on the needs. The student even considered how the audience members might react to the messages (e.g., experiencing inconvenience, asking questions about new policies).

Student 11407 later reflected on tailoring the messages to the various audiences:

For the negative adjustment letter, I started off with the bad news. I kept the bad news and return request short, clear, complete, and concise and then went on to build back some goodwill with the Mr. Ramone by offering incentives and talked about the company in a positive manner. For the positive adjustment letter, I started off with the good news. I put the bad news in the middle because people tend not to remember the middle as well. The email to Thom Yorke had to be professional and polite as I was requesting that he do work for me. My request had to be very clear because it would be awful to have a shipping error when trying to fix a shipping error. In the memo to Debbie Harry, I was speaking to a superior so the message had to be a request rather than an order. The policy change idea would also take some convincing so I used a problem-solving persuasive message.

Not only was this student able to clearly identify tone (positivity), but the student also explained the strategies used for giving the bad news in a detailed way (goodwill). The student also made an interesting distinction about the longer persuasive message (“a request rather than an order”), a categorization that the student did not explain but that suggests the student understood conceptually a distinct way to address the supervisor.

Some of the details that these types of reflections mentioned included tone or wording, audience expectations, and organization (based on audience needs and how they may respond to the content). Some of the students were able to clearly express the way they understood the audience members and explain it to their instructors. Their level of detail shows the process that these students used to respond to and understand their audiences, insight that the reflections effectively captured.

Basic Explanation of Audience Analysis. Of the student responses, 40% were basic but responded to the questions. These responses typically had one or two examples to describe audience analysis. These responses showed some understanding of audience analysis but lacked depth.

For example, Student 11464 described the audience briefly: “Mr. Ramone needed to know how to return the Deluxe Plus headphones and how soon he should return them, as well as when his Deluxe headphones would arrive.” While this student was clear about the basic informational needs of the audience members, this student did not reflect on how to address those needs. Notably, the response was only 28 words. The student did not go further to show a thorough understanding of each audience member and could have expanded here.

Another student example gave a brief response: “I told them the situation and how we were working to compensate them” (Student 21948). Again, the student briefly stated the aim but not how the student explained the situation to the audience or the effect of compensation on the audience.

Vague Explanation of Audience Analysis. Of the student responses, 28% were vague, confusing, or simply did not answer the questions. Students in these cases may not have understood the questions and therefore did not understand how to answer them. Also,

these vague responses appeared to be written quickly and did not demonstrate students taking the opportunity to reflect on the writing process itself. For example, one student wrote simply an overview of what each message in the assignment was: “Each message that was sent to different people obviously had a different purpose. The goal was to get 5 different things accomplished with 5 different messages” (Student 21309). This particular student did not explain any details of audience analysis but wrote the basics of the assignment prompt.

Another student wrote in response to how well they tailored their messages “by addressing their specific needs with accurate information and proper tone” (Student 21691). The student did not explain *how* he or she was able to address those needs or what tone was “proper.” However, the student was able to note that accurate information and tone are important parts of this writing situation.

One student stated, “I portended [*sic*] that I was one of the audience that I am writing to. It helped me think of what they want to hear” (Student 21382). Again, this student was starting to consider audience analysis but did not explain how the mental shift helped the student understand what the audience needed to know.

Most of the responses that were vague or unfinished are not mentioned in the later section about student confidence because they did not contain many references (if any) to any specific audience analysis technique. This finding will not come as a surprise to any instructor who assigns reflections and is a common warning about employing reflections (Downs & Wardle, 2007; Jenson, 2011). However, students clearly had time (an 80-minute class period), space (these vague responses were very short of the recommended word count), and instruction (Locker & Kienzler’s [2015] textbook, their instruction in class, and the reflection prompt, which encouraged specificity in both the directions and the question phrasing).

Because students provided thoughtful articulations about their audience considerations, this study demonstrates how reflections can provide students the appropriate opportunity to showcase how they understand audiences for their professional documents. However, because student depth did vary, reflections also present challenges for instructors to gauge student audience awareness.

Research Question 2: Student Challenges

We also wanted to understand the challenges that students faced in responding to their audience (Research Question 2). To help answer this question, we explored which messages were the hardest for students to write, because it allowed us to identify specific aspects of these rhetorical situations that challenged students. Table 1 describes the totals based on the student responses.

The students noted that the negative message was the most difficult for them to write. This result was not very surprising to us because the research on negative or bad news to audiences has a long history of tension about best practices for doing so. Cardon (2015) described such messages as “stressful, since you do not want to let [the audience] down, and you know that your success depends on their business” (p. 343). Recent research on negative news and how to deliver it suggests that authors can feel

Table 1. Students' Responses to the Most Difficult Message.

Type of message	No. of students
Negative message	11
Persuasive message (long)	7
Persuasive message (short)	3
Positive message	2
Informative message to coworker	1
Total	24

Note. Three reflections gave no definitive response to this question. One student described the entire assignment as hard, and two others did not answer the question.

befuddled by the best way to deliver it given the emotional responses to having to deliver the information and the various social situations in which such news must be delivered (Manning & Amare, 2017). As Creelman (2012) described it, we need more definitive research that communicates “a process that helps students see the variety of options available to them in responding to what can be an emotionally charged rhetorical situation” (p. 187). As her literature review on negative messages ultimately implies, no one-size-fits-all answer for delivering negative messages exists, though resources do give recommendations (such as Locker & Kienzler, 2015). Despite these frameworks, students in this study clearly felt the tension of composing such a message given the audience presented to them.

Specifically, several students noted that they had a difficult time trying to keep a positive tone while still giving bad news. Students also mentioned that they were not sure how to compensate customers for the company mistake they were explaining in the negative message, or they felt generally uncomfortable giving the bad news. They also noted it was hard to communicate goodwill while giving bad news. Furthermore, they found it difficult to maintain credibility while doing so. One student mentioned that it was most difficult “trying to connect with people without being negative” (Student 21595). One student even mentioned that the student did not agree with the company’s policy choice to have the customer return the expensive headphones, and therefore had a hard time writing that negative message. Another student reflected similarly, noting that it seemed like “we were at fault, it felt a little greedy to be asking for them back, even though the company was the one who made the mistake” (Student 21948).

The second hardest message for students to write was the request for a policy change to their supervisor. Students noted that it was difficult for them to write to their supervisor and sound credible when they came up with ideas. One student wrote,

Debbie Harry was the hardest to write to. She is a superior and as I previously stated, I need to work on addressing superiors. She also need the most information. The message addressed to her was very difficult. Although, I think I got all of my points across effectively. (Student 11407)

Creelman (2008) and Reave (2002) agreed that the process of writing persuasively in an internal scenario (from an employee to a superior) presents the appropriate challenge for students to think through the way they present their own credibility, the claims they make, and the evidence they use to support those claims.

For this proposed policy change to the supervisor, many of the students noted that it was hard for them to think of options or pros and cons to explain to her. Students noted that what made writing this message difficult was that the supervisor “needed the most information,” and one student noted that it was so difficult to write because “I needed quite a bit of information, and I had to present it in such a way that I sounded more persuasive and less bossy” (Student 12762). This particular audience was difficult to write to mostly because students felt the rhetorical situation called for more message development, and given their relationship with the audience, they did not feel that they had the authority to give the supervisor a proposed change, noting they could not be “bossy.”

In summary, students reported the most challenge with negative messages and the longer persuasive message, which suggests that reflections provide instructors a way to gauge how to better help students, especially in subsequent semesters, with the types of genres or rhetorical situations they want students to consider. Without this insight into student thinking, instructors might only anecdotally perceive this challenge or underestimate the challenge without knowing about specific challenges, which could manifest in the way they teach such material. Students noted that in composing the negative message, they struggled in maintaining a positive tone, providing appropriate compensation, maintaining credibility, and disagreeing with their company’s policy. Students noted that in composing the persuasive message, they struggled in providing pros and cons to each proposed solution, providing all the supervisor’s information requirements, and maintaining the appropriate tone in writing to the supervisor. However, in highlighting these struggles through student reflection, students themselves could identify where they need to develop their writing skills or where they need to develop confidence.

Research Question 3: Student Confidence

We were interested in the way students demonstrated confidence in analyzing and understanding their audiences (Research Question 3). To identify student confidence, we located the kinds of evidence students gave when describing how they understood the audiences. These signals of understanding the audience highlighted where students felt competent, assured, and certain about how they were addressing their audience. These categories were not mutually exclusive (e.g., a student could identify reader benefits and constraints *and* estimate their own credibility), and so the percentage does not sum to 100%.

Identifying Reader Benefits and Constraints. Of all the student reflections, 52% discussed reader benefits/constraints and were able to clearly explain them. For example, one student asked, “What information was beneficial for them to get the next task done?”

and noted, "I offered options to all audience members so each member could choose what they wanted to do . . . I made sure members were informed with information that would benefit them the most" (Student 12693). Another student mentioned the importance of giving audience members benefits:

Without the presence of benefits, I'm sure this policy might have flopped or been less successful. It needed the positive spin on it to make sure the policy performed at its best because at the end of the day all those employees are people and needed to be treated as such. (Student 12433)

While some students specifically mentioned benefits, others used the term "pros and cons," such as the student who noted, "The memos had different audiences, but mainly focused on delivering complete information and pros and cons to persuade them regarding the policy change" (Student 12408). Another student specifically wrote some kinds of benefits that the company could offer to their customers: "to one customer the message may entail coupons or discounts for placing a similar order when returning the headphones" (Student 21377). These results suggest the way students interpreted what goods they could highlight for their audiences, such as how the new policy would benefit the company or how benefits would outweigh the negative news.

Another student wrote, "The customers needed more information that [*sic*] the rest as they are worried, stressed, and needed to know when their package would arrive and what exactly they needed to do" (Student 21338), suggesting that the student considered the constraints under which the customer would receive the message.

Students may experience difficulty understanding what constraints audiences have and what benefits their audiences may want if they do not really understand those audience members. However, these students showed some creativity in that they were able to put themselves in their audiences' positions and find a way to respond to them by considering their constraints and highlighting benefits to the readers.

Considering Reader Values and Priorities. Only 33% of the students discussed and focused on their readers' values. For instance, one student noted that the message to the superior needed to be respectful because it was going to someone in a higher position: the "letter to Debbie Harry required a certain degree of deference" (Student 11348). That student realized that a level of respect in the writing would be something that the superior would value. Similarly, another student wrote, "The memo to Debby Harry I believe, needed to show professionalism as well as persuasion in regards to the policy change as we were shown in a position that was below her jurisdiction" (Student 12433).

Another student mentioned the same audience member, noting "Debbie Harry needed to be given ideas to choose from to fix the problem of the company, and the other customers needed to know the idea that would be implemented into company policy" (Student 11926). This student was able to see the difference between what the supervisor valued (fixing company problems) and what the customer would value (fixing a company problem that would affect the customer in the future).

Another student clearly stated what the priorities of the customer were: “Their needs were to get them the products they ordered as quickly and conveniently as possible” (Student 21948). Another student mentioned the customers, noting, “With these letters, I needed to be complete, answer their possible questions, and end the messages on good terms” (Student 12408). Words such as “quickly,” “conveniently,” and “good terms” suggest the student could identify customer values.

Many of the reflections that focused on values and priorities indicated not only what the students’ audiences needed to know but also what was most important to their audiences. The students who mentioned benefits, values, or priorities wanted their clients to feel valued, and they were also aware of how their supervisor might view them if they did not write in a professional manner.

Estimating One’s Own Credibility. Students may experience difficulty in expressing their credibility because they are student writers. However, 52% of students stated that they were aware of their own credibility (or perhaps a lack of it). For example, one student mentioned, “my proposals to Debbie Harry would have been more concrete if I had given more consideration to day to day activities of warehouse” (Student 11348). This particular student reflected on what they could have considered further to succeed in communicating with the supervisor, specifically about the way operations would be affected.

Another student noted that they wrote the negative message by using a “positive and polite tone to soften [the] negative message” (Student 11407). This student leveraged their audience awareness to create a specific tone that would make the audience more receptive to the negative news message. Another student wrote, “I also had to be able to say this is a message with a professional and personal feeling to it for myself to be satisfied with it” (Student 11690). These students were aware of how their words sounded to their audience members. One other student noted attention to the credibility of the company the student represented: “I tried to stay to the point while also making the company and the message look as good as possible” (Student 21338). This student understood and explained how their word choice could affect the reputation of their company, which was something that impressed us.

Students also discussed the goals of the particular document and how they used their own writing to achieve that goal. For example, one student reflected on how much message development would be necessary: “I could not just write a simple email with very little wording as my goal was to convince her why a new policy change was needed” (Student 12164). One student also mentioned how important it was to not use blaming language with clients: “I also didn’t use ‘you’ so that he didn’t feel that the problem was his fault” (Student 12745). So, even though students were deeply aware of their novice position as student writers in these workplace situations, as indicated in the student challenges, 52% of students indicated confidence in portraying their own credibility by considering the workplace context and by attending to their wording.

Students noted confidence in identifying their audiences’ benefits, constraints, values, and priorities. They also expressed confidence in maintaining their own credibility. Beyond the practical conclusion that instructors can use reflections to gain more

insight into their students' strengths, these results suggest that reflections allowed students to identify specifically their strengths in composing such business communication so they could build on those skills.

Implications for Teaching

Having students reflect on their rhetorical choices helps them process the role that audience plays in composing business documents. The existing BPC research has enthusiastically recommended employing reflections in the BPC course, but no study has explored how students express themselves in these documents. This study provides implications for teaching.

We found that students had varied depth in writing their reflections, which many BPC instructors may have experienced. Instructors must push depth in student reflection, nevertheless, for the process to benefit students. Instructors can use a clear grading rubric for each reflection, so students know what is expected of them. Depth itself could be a coding schema within such rubrics, which this study identified. Also, instructors can show examples of effective reflections that are detailed. We urge instructors to consider the deeper reflection excerpts we provided in this study as a beginning point.

Also, based on the challenges and confidence students expressed in their reflections, instructors can gain insight into their students' writing experience about various writing outcomes that instructors may have in their course, not least of which is audience awareness. Instructors can use reflections as a way to gain insight about challenges and achievements students had when trying to succeed in a BPC assignment. Such insight can help instructors in their evaluation of students' writing assignments, insight that they may not have without asking students to reflect on their writing. Furthermore, students themselves can benefit from reflections because they can develop the self-awareness of their business writing, which can transfer to workplace writing, which the research on reflection and transfer has demonstrated.

Implications for Research

Future research should further explore the usefulness of reflections in BPC to understand students' growth in audience awareness. This study found reflection helpful for gauging student successes on one business communication assignment; however, future research could explore how students reflect on other types of writing or even with multiple assignments in a portfolio. Brammer (2011) recommended this approach, but quantitative or qualitative research could affirm it. This study revealed the process of students from various majors; how specific majors (e.g., business majors) process audience analysis may reveal further insight, similar to how Schieber (2016) found unique strategies from marketing students. Also, the placement and administration of reflections should be studied. For example, future research could explore the effects of reflections written on the students' own time or compare reflections before and after an assignment is completed. Furthermore, reflection through instructor-led discussions or group discussions might afford the same benefits as written reflections. Overall, future

research studies could explore such pedagogical variants involving students' thinking about their audience and how to respond to it. Last, we intend to present a triangulation analysis of these students' work by identifying the strategies students employed in their actual business messages. Such a study, taken together with this present study, can yield greater insight into how students operationalize their audience awareness.

Conclusions

This study demonstrated how students reflect on how they responded to audiences in a multi-audience BPC assignment. Though reflective depth varied, students expressed challenges with negative and longer persuasive messages to a supervisor. They also indicated that they could express their own credibility and the different audiences' benefits, constraints, values, and priorities. This study provides insight for BPC researchers and instructors about the depth of the student reflections they may require students to complete and about the challenges and successes of students as they considered their audiences. Ultimately, we conclude that while reflection does bring challenges in terms of students' reflective depth, it provides an effective teaching method for instructors to understand students' consideration of audience. We found that students could ably use key audience analysis terminology or ideas (e.g., benefits, constraints, and values) to describe how they approached a specific workplace communication problem. While students may struggle with writing business communication for workplace audiences when they first begin, given their limited experiences with workplaces, the opportunity for students to reflect on their development can help students grow into the task.

Appendix

Reflection for the Messages Packet

Name:

Instructor:

Date:

Think back over the last assignment (the messages packet for Headphones, Inc.) as you answer these questions. Please be as detailed as you can (about 50-100 words per question). Also, please point out specific principles you employed from your learning about positive, negative, and persuasive messages.

1. Explain how each audience member in this project had different needs (or, what did each audience member need to know?).
2. How did you tailor each message to fit the needs of those audience members?
3. Did some audience members need more information than others? Example?
4. How well do you feel you achieved the goal of giving each audience member the information they needed? What made you feel that way?
5. Was there anything that you wish you could revise/change on that assignment?
6. What was the hardest part of this assignment for you?

7. Please explain how you knew when you were done with each section of the assignment.
8. Which audience member was the hardest to write to? Why?
9. Which was the easiest? Why?

Authors' Note

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Iowa State University (Approval No. 16-579). Student comments are reproduced by permission.

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