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DAVIDA H. CHARNEY, JACK RAYMAN and LINDA FERREIRA-BUCKLEY

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*To help students enter a professional discourse community, teachers must assess how accurately they both understand the community's discourse practices. Our research investigated how job recruiters seeking to fill positions in mechanical engineering or marketing were influenced by the quality of writing in student résumés. The résumés varied in elaboration, sentence style, mechanics, and amount of relevant work experience. The recruiters rated the résumés to indicate their willingness to interview the students. We found that recruiters in the two fields—engineering and marketing—valued quite different writing features. When we subsequently asked students in business writing and technical writing classes to rate the same résumés, we found that they underestimated the importance of various writing features. Generally, however, students' ratings resembled those of the recruiters in their respective disciplines. This study documents how students can improve their résumés and provides insight into the variations of discourse practices in professional disciplines.*

## How Writing Quality Influences Readers' Judgments of Résumés in Business and Engineering

DAVIDA H. CHARNEY

JACK RAYMAN

*Pennsylvania State University*

LINDA FERREIRA-BUCKLEY

*University of Texas at Austin*

**M**ore than a decade ago, Carolyn Miller challenged the widespread disparagement of technical writing in English departments by reaffirming that technical writing, like all writing, is a social act:

To write, to engage in any communication, is to participate in a community; to write well is to understand the conditions of one's own participation—the concepts, values, traditions, and style which permit identification with that community and determine the success or failure of communication. (617)

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To prepare students to write well in this sense, teachers of many technical writing, business writing, and other advanced composition courses have students analyze the professional communities that they are soon to enter and practice the forms of discourse used there, adopting as realistic a rhetorical stance as possible. Although the practice of asking students to write realistic proposals, business letters, research reports, and job applications clearly has many indisputable advantages, teachers may well wonder whether these assignments really help students learn the conditions of participation in discourse communities outside the writing classroom. One difficulty lies in the challenges that such assignments pose for evaluation. To put it bluntly, can English teachers respond to student texts as would the members of their ostensible audiences?

Clearly, in most cases, the answer is no—a fact that will not surprise anyone who considers the range of possible audiences that a roomful of students may at some point address in their future careers. Even in courses that roughly sort students by domain, such as technical writing or writing in the social sciences, the array of potential audiences is hardly narrowed to manageable proportions. How can writing teachers evaluate the rhetorical effect of communications directed at readers so unlike themselves? Confronted with this problem, some teachers assign writing tasks directed only at educated lay audiences—readers more like themselves—on the assumption that professionals frequently write to those who know less than they do (O’Keeffe 90). In fact, of course, professionals spend a substantial proportion of their time writing to readers who are as knowledgeable as themselves, or who are at least familiar with what they do (Anderson 21-22). Asking students to write only to lay audiences, then, neglects a crucial part of the writing that they will do on the job. Other teachers enlist the aid of colleagues in their students’ disciplinary majors as advisors or team teachers (O’Keeffe 92-3). Although such colleagues may certainly provide useful advice, they cannot solve the problem at hand: They may represent only one disciplinary specialty and, as faculty members, may not adequately represent readers outside academia. More important, both of these solutions imply that writing teachers are unqualified to help students write effectively to anyone unlike themselves.

Many would argue that writing teachers not only cannot internalize the standards and expectations of their students’ potential audiences, but that they should not even make the attempt. Given the

widespread critique of the writing regularly produced in business, industry, and other professions, writing teachers may well aim to elevate rather than to emulate the standards of these disciplines. Thus teachers should not act as mere audience members when responding to students' work but should instead draw explicitly on their critical reading skills and knowledge of argumentation and discourse strategies. Obviously, as writing teachers, we should not feel constrained by the conditions of participation of our students' future discourse communities; however, without a clear understanding of these conditions, we cannot critique them constructively.

The goal, as Miller argues, is to help students understand their range of rhetorical choices and the consequences of these choices. Teachers and students alike need to know in specific terms how readers in various communities respond to the different choices a writer may make. For example, students who wish to follow their teachers' injunctions to avoid the passive voice should know to what extent and under what circumstances that choice will set them apart within their discourse communities. Unfortunately, little is known about how variations in specific kinds of texts influence their reception. Most of the information available—whether gained by analyzing texts or by surveying members of nonacademic communities—provides only general characterizations of preferences (see Hairston). Teachers and students need answers to much more focused questions, such as "Will using active voice in a technical feasibility report decrease the chances that its recommendations will be adopted?" or "Will qualifying the claims in a scientific research report increase its chances for publication?" While ethnographers have reported studies showing that such subtle features of writing can indeed have considerable impact on decisions in the workplace (see Odell and Goswami; Myers), such studies are so deeply embedded within a particular setting that it is difficult to draw general implications for teaching professional writing.

To answer the kinds of questions we have posed, a different sort of study is required—one that examines the effect of systematic textual variations on readers in natural rhetorical situations. To provide useful results, such studies must focus on particular genres and particular readerships. This kind of study is used increasingly by business and technical writers to improve the design of computer manuals or application forms (see Wright; Doheny-Farina). However, few studies have been conducted on the reception of persuasive texts, such as

proposals or feasibility studies, that are most commonly assigned in advanced composition courses. (For two recent studies of this type, see Benson and Kessler's study of legalese and Suchan and Colucci's study of bureaucratese.) Even rarer are studies that compare the effects of various textual features on readers across discourse communities or across hierarchical levels within a discourse community.

In the studies described here, we investigated how the quality of writing in a résumé contributes to its overall effectiveness, as measured by a prospective employer's willingness to grant a job interview. We examined responses to résumés from a variety of readerships. First, we compared the responses of recruiters hiring students for positions in marketing to those of recruiters hiring students for mechanical engineering positions. We then compared the responses of the recruiters to those of students enrolled in business writing and technical writing classes.

We chose to study résumés because résumés, perhaps more than any other assignment, underscore the social significance of writing to students, who write them at the very point—and for the very purpose—of entering a professional community. The consequences of the success or failure of the communication are immediate and obvious. When students write résumés, they are unrivaled experts in the subject matter—themselves—but not in the genre and audience. After looking at many sets of résumés submitted in technical and business writing classes, we suspected that students have serious misconceptions about their readers' expectations. Our students seemed to cling to the notion that there is one correct way to prepare a résumé and that the same résumé will suffice for any job for which they might apply. Further, students seemed to believe that their readers were interested only in their technical training—not in their writing ability—and that lapses in standard English usage would be overlooked if their grade-point averages were high enough. One motivation for our study, therefore, was to find out whether recruiters' expectations for writing quality in résumés corresponded to those of our students.

Although many studies have been conducted on résumés, they have not generally considered how writing quality interacts with other factors in a recruiter's decision to grant an interview. Some studies have examined the influence of various content features, such as the job candidate's age, gender, or race (see Feild and Holley; Renwick and Tosi), and other studies surveyed recruiters for their opinions on such factors as mechanics, length, and format (see

Helwig; McDowell; and both studies by Penrose). Writing quality was not systematically varied in these studies, nor were recruiters asked to treat the résumés as if they had arrived in the mail—that is, to use them to decide which candidates to interview. Finally, most of these studies treated recruiters as members of a homogeneous group, rather than looking for differences in the expectations of recruiters in different fields.

The general procedure of our studies was to ask recruiters to indicate their willingness to interview candidates for a job opening by rating the candidates' résumés on a 4-point scale. The résumés were carefully constructed to vary three factors of writing quality that we saw as problematic in many students' résumés: elaboration, sentence style, and mechanics. This selection of writing features was intended to sample a range of writing-quality issues, and our goal was to determine which of these features, if any, strongly influence a reader's overall assessment of a résumé. We chose elaboration to investigate the problem of selecting relevant information and the appropriate level of detail; we chose sentence style to investigate an issue of preference rather than correctness, and we chose mechanics—a feature that other studies have identified as important to recruiters—to investigate more fully its influence on recruiters' choices of interviewees. In addition to varying the quality of the writing, we also varied a fourth factor—technical qualifications—the amount of career-related work experience. Varying this factor allowed us to assess the relative contributions of writing features and technical qualifications to recruiters' overall assessments of résumés. How important, for example, is the use of active voice in résumés as compared to previous work experience? Are readers more tolerant of nonstandard mechanics from applicants who are otherwise exceptionally well qualified?

We collected ratings of the résumés from several groups of readers. The readership of primary interest was recruiters, who represent the discourse community to which students actually send their résumés. Although the recruiters who read our résumés knew that they were participating in a study, the task we set them closely paralleled their ordinary process for screening job applicants—as many of them noted afterwards. Because recruiters usually receive résumés from many more applicants than they can or will interview, they are accustomed to selecting a small proportion of interviewees by quickly scanning a large number of résumés. In a previous study (Charney and Rayman), we asked recruiters for jobs in mechanical engineering to rate résumés

from college seniors majoring in mechanical engineering. We found a strong and consistent pattern of responses from these recruiters. To find out whether this pattern of responses was specific to mechanical engineering, we replicated our previous study here using recruiters from a different discipline—marketing—to rate the résumés of fictitious marketing majors (Study 1). We chose marketing to create a fairly strong contrast to mechanical engineering—marketing is both less technical and, perhaps, more obviously dependent on effective communication than mechanical engineering.

We asked undergraduate students to rate the résumés so that we could compare their assessments, as résumé writers, to those of recruiters, as professional résumé readers. Students in business writing classes rated the marketing résumés (Study 2), and students in technical writing classes rated the mechanical engineering résumés (Study 3). By analyzing the ratings *within* the student and professional groups, we looked for systematic responses to the writing features within relatively well-defined discourse communities. By comparing ratings *between* groups, we looked for effects of discipline and professional standing. For example, would the ratings of technical writing students more closely resemble those of business writing students who share their current college environment (and preprofessional standing) or those of engineering recruiters with whom they may share a more technical professional orientation or discipline?

## STUDY 1: MARKETING RECRUITERS' ASSESSMENTS OF RÉSUMÉS

### Method

#### *Participants*

The participants were 47 recruiters representing businesses that typically employ marketing representatives, such as retailers, producers of consumer and industrial goods, and suppliers of various services. The recruiters ranged widely in experience, having an average of 7.3 years of recruiting experience. Most were male (80%), and their average age was 35. All but one were college educated: Just over half held degrees in business with specialties such as finance, marketing, economics, management, or administration—another 20% held de-



grees pertaining to personnel relations in fields such as industrial psychology, human resources, or labor studies. The recruiters participated in the study while visiting Pennsylvania State University to conduct interviews for marketing positions. They were not compensated in any way.

### *Job Description*

To provide a common criterion for evaluating the résumés, recruiters were given the following job description:

Positions are available for sales representatives who will participate in the marketing team, which has full responsibility for all marketing activities, including marketing research, financial analysis, and product development and management. Duties of sales representatives may include introducing new products, evaluating distribution channels, conducting promotional specification work, and developing and implementing merchandising and marketing techniques. Sales representatives will be expected to increase business with the current accounts as well as develop new business. They will be trained to promote new and existing products to increase profit-margin growth within an assigned territory.

This job description is a composite of several descriptions for job openings for marketing majors that had been sent to the Office of Career Planning and Placement Services. It was intended to allow for a range of qualifications and the résumés were designed to fall within this range.

### *Résumé Construction*

We created 36 résumés describing fictitious college seniors majoring in marketing. Certain features of the résumés were standardized to limit their possible influence on the ratings; other features were systematically varied.

*Standardized features.* All résumés listed the same degree program at the same university and listed the same grade-point average. They all had the same traditional format, with labeled sections for objective, education, experience, activities, and references. All were printed on the same kind of paper with the same size and style of type. The job objectives, course titles, summer job descriptions, and honors and



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DEBRA R. STYERS

Current Address:  
375 Harris Drive  
State College, PA 16803  
(814) 555-1212

Permanent Address:  
407 Vine Street  
Drexel Hill, PA 19026  
(215) 555-1212

**OBJECTIVE:** To apply my sales and marketing skills as an entry-level sales representative in a progressive firm.

**EDUCATION:** The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA  
B.S. in Marketing expected May 1989.  
Grade Point Average: 3.2/4.0

Relevant Coursework:

Personal Selling  
Communications  
Marketing Research  
Public Relations  
Sales Management

Consumer Behavior  
Advertising  
Accounting  
Business Writing  
Marketing Policies

**Marketing Project.** Cost Accounting. Calculated the effects on the net income of a ski resort of two proposed changes: keeping the resort open in summer and turning the ski shop into a gift shop. Analyzed occupancy rates and overhead charges to forecast impact. Recommended instituting the changes.

**EXPERIENCE:** Maintenance Supervisor. Northfield County Child Day Care Association. Caleyville, PA. Summer 1987. Supervised eight custodians and four repairmen distributed over six school buildings. Ordered stock, inspected repairs, kept accounting records.

Assistant Manager. Sea Scape Motel. Boothbay Harbor, ME. Summer 1986. Responsible for operating the motel during late and early day hours. Used computer terminal to verify motel guests' telephone calls and to prepare bills and reservations.

Meat Cutter. Kennywood Parks. Palmer, PA. Summer 1985. Responsibilities included cutting and portioning meat, preparing various other parts of meals, as well as freeing the manager of some inventory responsibilities.

**ACTIVITIES:** American Marketing Association  
Penn State Marketing Association  
Intramural Soccer

**REFERENCES:** Available upon request

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Figure 1: Sample Marketing Résumé with No Relevant Work Experience, Method Elaboration, Verbal Sentence Style, and Error-Free Mechanics

EDWARD C. BENZIE

Current Address:  
4705 Elm Road  
State College, PA 16803  
(814) 555-1212

Permanent Address:  
1571 Primrose Circle  
Vandergrift, PA 15690  
(717) 555-1212

**OBJECTIVE:** An entry-level position is desired which will eventually lead me to sales marketing management.

**EDUCATION:** The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.  
B.S. in Marketing expected May 1989.  
Grade Point Average: 3.2/4.0

**Relevant Coursework:**

Corporate Finance  
Consumer Behavior  
Business Writing  
Marketing Research  
Industrial Marketing

Advertising  
Sales Management  
Marketing Policies  
Public Relations  
Computer Science

Marketing Project. Potential Demand for a Retirement Living facility. There was a determination of the need and type of facility which was needed.

**EXPERIENCE:** Assistant Manager. Action Sports. Bellefonte, PA. Summer 1987  
Responsibilities included; persuasive selling, completing inventory, determining re-ordering points for merchandise, did daily deposits of receipts, assembling displays, purchasing merchandise, plus answering of customer complaints, and trained new employees.

Telemarketing. Olan Mills Studio. Guilford, PA. Summer 1986.  
Familiarized residents with a new store, while the attainment of sales above quotas was achieved. I was the only salesman to make quota every week.

Administrative Asst. Youth Services, Bucks County, PA. Summer 1985. There was responsibility for the receiving and processing of the weekly and monthly monitoring reports and the PA. Criminal Justice System's yearend statistics. Helped assist in the preparation of budget.

**ACTIVITIES:** American Marketing Association  
Keystone Honor Society  
Residence Hall Council

**REFERENCES:** Available upon request

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Figure 2: Sample Marketing Résumé with Moderately Relevant Work Experience, Purpose Elaboration, Nominal Sentence Style, and Error-Laden Mechanics

activities were drawn from résumés of actual marketing majors, with fictional names replacing real ones. (See samples in Figures 1 and 2.)

*Experimental variations.* The résumés differed systematically in four aspects of content and writing quality: relevance, elaboration, style, and mechanics.

Relevance: the number of summer jobs listed on the résumé that were relevant for a job in marketing (moderate, low, or none)

Elaboration: the amount and kind of elaboration in the description of a senior marketing research project (title, purpose, or method elaboration)

Style: the types of sentence structures employed (verbal or nominal)

Mechanics: the accuracy of grammar, spelling, and punctuation (error-free or error-laden).

The 36 résumés represented each possible combination of these four factors, reflecting a  $3 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$  within-subjects design.

*Relevance.* Each résumé listed three summer jobs, but only some of the jobs were related to marketing. We varied the work experience section to test the recruiters' consistency (e.g., to see if they were more tolerant of poor writing from applicants with substantial relevant experience). To find jobs that constituted relevant experience for a marketing position, we adapted a technique from Oliphant and Alexander, asking two independent raters to score students' summer job descriptions for their relevance to the job description given above. The raters were marketing recruiters who knew nothing about the study. We used the ratings to sort the descriptions into a pool of relevant jobs (e.g., selling products or conducting market research) and a pool of nonrelevant jobs (e.g., working as a mechanic or as a cook at a fast-food restaurant). We then varied how many relevant jobs each résumé listed, creating résumés with three levels of relevance:

Moderate: two summer job descriptions drawn randomly from the pool of relevant jobs and one from the nonrelevant pool

Low: one job drawn at random from the relevant pool and two from the nonrelevant pool

None: three jobs randomly drawn from the nonrelevant pool.

*Elaboration.* Textbooks and résumé guidelines give mixed signals on how much elaboration to include. Some emphasize brevity (e.g., Houpp and Pearsall; Rew). This injunction is consistent with surveys of recruiters' preferences (Feild and Holley) and with Helwig's finding that recruiters prefer traditional, short, list-format résumés to long, highly elaborated, narrative résumés or qualification briefs. Obviously, it is reasonable for recruiters who scan numerous résumés to prefer lists and brief phrases. On the other hand, to determine the value of the applicant's experience, recruiters need detail (Treece; Himstreet and Baty). So, do recruiters simply object to long sentences, or are irrelevant content and unnecessary wordiness their main concerns? Or do recruiters' attitudes shift from case to case, tolerant of elaboration in otherwise weak résumés, but impatient with it when the credentials speak for themselves?

Certainly students are uncertain about how much and what kind of elaboration to include in their résumés. In reviewing their résumés, we often observed references to special projects completed in advanced courses or independent studies. Although the students clearly recognized the importance of such projects, their descriptions of them were erratic. Often students included only the title of the project—some because they simply did not know what else to include, others because they wished to leave something for recruiters to ask about during an interview. In effect, students did not seem to see the project as a rhetorical opportunity to make a case for their credentials and simply avoided elaboration altogether. The question is this: Did their avoidance of elaboration on relevant course projects reduce their attractiveness to recruiters?

To address some of the subtle issues surrounding elaboration, we experimented with both length and rhetorical appropriateness of elaboration. We focused on descriptions of class projects from an advanced marketing research course. This course required students to conduct a marketing research study and write a formal report of the results. Some reports were deliberative investigations into the feasibility of introducing some product or service into a specific market; others were forensic studies of why such a product or service failed. After identifying twelve suitable reports, we wrote three descriptions of each, varying both the amount and kind of elaboration. We thus created a total of 36 descriptions, one for each of the 36 résumés. The examples below illustrate the three types of elaboration:

Title: Purchase and Use of Bindery Equipment.

Purpose: Purchase and Use of Bindery Equipment. Surveyed printers' knowledge of and attitudes toward bindery equipment.

Method: Purchase and Use of Bindery Equipment. Surveyed printers' knowledge of and attitudes toward bindery equipment. Mail questionnaire revealed that most printers know only a few manufacturers. Identified effective features of ad campaigns, recommended changes in promotional strategies for binderies.

The title, purpose, and method descriptions progressively increase in length—in fact, the content of each is subsumed in the next—but differ in rhetorical force. The title merely informs the reader that the student participated in a study on a certain topic. Purpose elaborations describe the goal of the study but add no information about the student's abilities as a marketing researcher and thus add little rhetorical value. In contrast, the longest elaborations—the method elaborations—contribute to the writer's ethos as a marketing researcher by providing information about how the student designed the study and interpreted its results. Thus, if sheer length is the issue, we might expect recruiters to rate method elaborations lowest and titles highest. But if appropriate content outweighs length, then we would expect to find the opposite pattern of ratings.

*Style.* Many guides to résumé writing recommend verbal sentence style (for example, Houp and Pearsall; Eisenberg), a style that favors simple agent-action-goal sentence structures and avoids nominalizations and other sources of wordiness (Williams). The logic of the recommendation is obvious: Verbal style sounds active, direct, forceful, and energetic—presumably attractive qualities in a prospective employee. Verbal style is also more concise than nominal style—an important factor given the length constraints imposed on résumés—and may even increase reading speed and comprehension (Felker et al.; Suchan and Colucci). However, there is little hard evidence that résumé readers are sensitive to differences in sentence style or that they actually prefer verbal style. Given the tendency toward nominal style in some nonacademic settings (see Odell and Goswami; Hagge and Kostelnick; Suchan and Dulek), marketing recruiters might even prefer that style as a signal of membership in their discourse community.

The résumés were cast throughout in either verbal or nominal style, eighteen in each style. Those cast in verbal style employed the active

voice, used agent-action-goal sentence structures, and contained few nominalizations or unnecessary words. The résumés with nominal style often employed passive voice and contained nominalizations, empty verbs, cleft constructions, noun strings, and other circumlocutions. The following examples illustrate each style:

Verbal: Supervisor. Peter John Records. Butler, PA. Summers 1985-6. I worked between 25 and 30 hours per week, scheduling work hours, completing daily paperwork, and opening and closing the store. While on the job, I oversaw the entire operation of the store.

Nominal: Supervisor. Peter John Records. Butler, PA. Summers 1985-6. The hours worked per week were between 25 and 30. Did scheduling, daily paperwork, and store openings and closings. While on the job, the entire operation of the store was overseen by myself.

In creating the résumés, we used *found text* whenever possible; the passages, especially those in nominal style, were taken directly from student résumés and altered as little as possible. When we had to transform passages into nominal or verbal style, we followed the procedure of Hake and Williams (the technique also used by Odell and Goswami).

*Mechanics.* We expected résumés with mechanical errors to receive low ratings because recruiters have consistently reported penalizing résumés that violate standard conventions of writing (McDowell). We were interested therefore in these further questions: How much weight does mechanics carry in recruiters' overall evaluations, and how consistently do recruiters apply their standards? Do they penalize faulty mechanics to the same extent in any résumé, without regard to the applicant's other qualifications, or are they willing to overlook grammatical errors in résumés from otherwise highly qualified applicants?

Half the résumés we created were error-free and half were error-laden. Error-laden résumés contained errors in spelling, subject-verb agreement, tense, coordination, capitalization, or punctuation. The number of errors in a résumé ranged from 5 to 9 with an average of 6.4. The following examples illustrate error-free and error-laden versions of the same paragraph:

Error free: Independent Dealer. Quality Products. B & B Systems. Danville, PA. Summer 1985. Conducted in-home demonstrations of the Rexair

Rainbow and contacted prospective customers. Advertised and promoted various products. Recruited and trained prospective employees. Error laden: Independent Dealer. Quality Products. B & B Systems. Danville, PA. Summer 1985. Conducted in-home demonstrations of the Rex-air Rainbow and contact prospective customers. Advertised and promoted various products. recruited and trained prospective employees.

As with sentence style, we were careful to use a high proportion of *found text*. Further, we attempted to introduce only those types of errors observed in students' résumés.

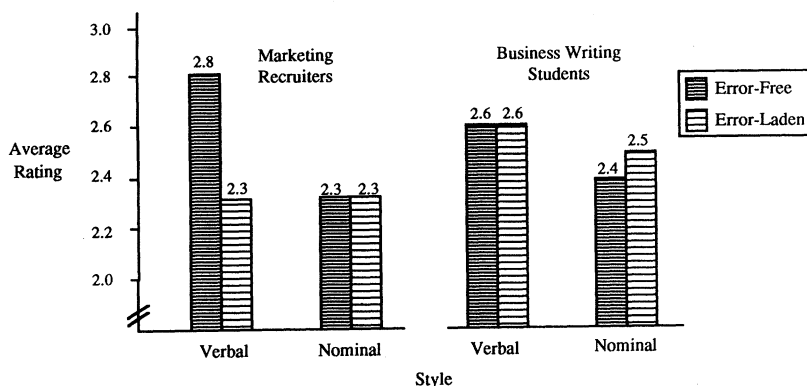
The overall effect of the standardized features and the four experimental factors—relevance, elaboration, style, and mechanics—can be seen in the two sample résumés. The résumé for the fictitious “Debra Styers” in Figure 1 lists no relevant work experience and contains method elaboration, verbal style, and error-free mechanics. The résumé for “Edward Benzie” in Figure 2 lists a moderate amount of relevant work experience and contains purpose elaboration, nominal style, and error-laden mechanics.

### *Rating Procedure*

We instructed the marketing recruiters to read the 36 résumés and rate each one on a 4-point scale: A score of 1 indicated no interest in interviewing the student for the job, a score of 4 indicated great interest. To encourage the raters to make equally fine-grained distinctions, we asked them to assign each rating at least six times. The recruiters knew that the résumés were fictitious but based on those of real students; they did not know anything else about how the résumés were designed. To avoid effects from the order in which recruiters saw the résumés, we created two random orderings (preserved by stapling the résumés into booklets); recruiters were randomly assigned to receive an ordering. Recruiters worked at their own pace, averaging about a minute per résumé. Although this procedure necessarily differed in some ways from the recruiters' normal procedures for evaluating résumés, it was quite similar to their standard practice in most important respects—in fact, several recruiters commented afterward that they treated the résumés just as they would have in their own offices.

After completing the ratings, recruiters filled out two questionnaires: One questionnaire collected demographic information, the other asked them to rate the importance of various résumé features.





**Figure 3: Marketing Recruiters' and Business Writing Students' Average Ratings of Résumés as a Function of Sentence Style and Mechanics**

This questionnaire allowed us to compare the recruiters' ratings to their introspective judgments of what they consider important.

### *Data Analysis*

The statistical significance of the results was determined by means of a  $3 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$  analysis of variance (ANOVA) with the four factors relevance, elaboration, style, and mechanics. Statistically significant main effects and interactions that involved more than two experimental conditions were analyzed further with *t*-tests.

## **Results and Discussion**

### *Mechanics and Sentence Style*

The marketing recruiters gave significantly higher ratings to error-free résumés than to error-laden résumés (average ratings 2.58 versus 2.29, respectively;  $F[1, 45] = 8.4, p < .01$ ). (Note that larger scores indicate greater interest in interviewing the applicant and, therefore, higher-rated quality.) The recruiters rated résumés with verbal sentence style marginally higher than those with nominal style (average ratings 2.54 versus 2.33, respectively;  $F[1, 45] = 3.7, p < .07$ ). A significant interaction between mechanics and style is illustrated on the left side of Figure 3 ( $F[1, 45] = 21.9, p < .01$ )—recruiters gave very high

ratings to error-free résumés that were cast in verbal style. However, résumés with *either* nominal style or mechanics errors sank in the ratings to a *floor* of about 2.3 points. For marketing recruiters, then, verbal sentence style is of no benefit whatsoever if the résumé is full of punctuation and spelling errors; similarly, mechanical correctness is of no use in a résumé full of wordy, passive, nominalized sentences. The recruiters seem to have established a lower bound or floor for such sentence-level problems: Résumés that were *both* error laden and cast in nominal style received the same 2.3 rating rather than sinking even lower.

### *Elaboration*

The elaborations in the résumés varied in both length and content. With respect to length, marketing recruiters gave significantly higher ratings to résumés with longer elaboration (average ratings: title, 2.28; purpose, 2.46; method, 2.57;  $F[2, 90] = 11.9, p < .01$ ). The apparent .11 increase from purpose to method elaborations was not statistically significant. However, purpose and method elaborations were each rated significantly higher than title elaborations ( $t[45] = 3.9, p < .01$  and  $t[45] = 2.3, p < .05$ , respectively).

Because average ratings for résumés with purpose and method elaborations were the same, one might be tempted to conclude that the recruiters cared little about the content of the elaboration. There is evidence, however, that recruiters were highly sensitive to both form and content, indicated by a significant interaction between elaboration and sentence style ( $F[2, 90] = 4.2, p < .05$ ). As illustrated on the left side of Figure 4, recruiters gave uniformly low ratings to résumés in nominal style, regardless of the form of elaboration. For résumés in verbal style, however, the ratings become progressively higher as length of elaboration increases. The average rating for verbal-purpose résumés was significantly higher than for verbal-titles (2.51 versus 2.32, respectively;  $t[45] = 2.1, p < .05$ ). The increase is even bigger for verbal-method (2.80) as compared to verbal-purpose résumés ( $t[45] = 3.3, p < .01$ ).

These results suggest that a strong, well-described class project can increase a student's attractiveness as a job candidate. It is clearly to the student's advantage to give more information about such a project than only a title. We had speculated that purpose elaborations would not increase the ratings because they concerned only the goal of the

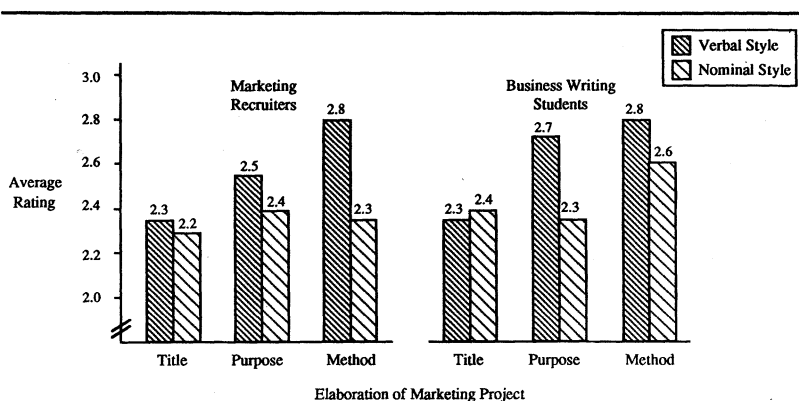


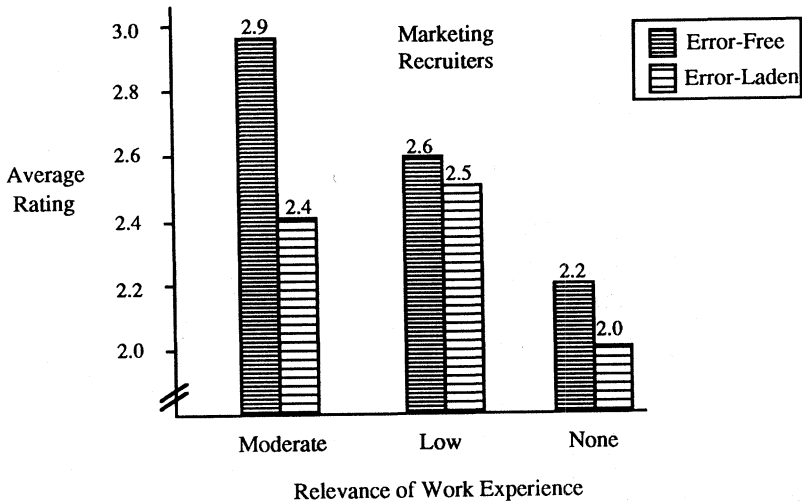
Figure 4: Marketing Recruiters' and Business Writing Students' Average Ratings of Résumés as a Function of Elaboration and Sentence Style

research project itself and said little about the student's overall approach or success. It seems, however, that the marketing recruiters did find this information valuable, although it would be premature to conclude that recruiters have a policy of "the more elaboration the better."

The interaction between style and elaboration underscores the seriousness with which the marketing recruiters regarded formal writing features. Even the most rhetorically forceful type of elaboration was of no avail if the résumé was written in nominal style. The biggest penalty for nominal style occurred for résumés with method elaborations: The difference in scores between verbal-method and nominal-method résumés is four times larger than that between the verbal and nominal versions of the other elaboration types. The marketing recruiters seem to have given more stringent penalties for inappropriate style to the job candidates who are more highly qualified—or at least those who cite additional relevant information. Alternatively, the results may simply indicate that lengthier elaborations provide more opportunity for style to call attention to itself—whether for good or ill.

### *Relevance of Work Experience*

As expected, marketing recruiters gave significantly higher ratings to résumés that listed summer jobs relevant to marketing ( $F[2, 90] = 12.1, p < .01$ ). The average ratings for moderate-relevance and low-



**Figure 5: Marketing Recruiters' Average Ratings of Résumés as a Function of Relevance of Work Experience and Mechanics**

relevance résumés (2.67 versus 2.53, respectively) were each significantly higher than the average rating for no-relevance résumés (2.10;  $t[45] = 6.9$ ,  $p < .01$ , and  $t[45] = 5.4$ ,  $p < .01$ , respectively). Ratings for moderate- and low-relevance résumés did not differ significantly. These results are not particularly surprising; they simply validate our effort to vary the relevance of work experience and permit us to look at the relative weight of work experience in the overall ratings as compared to writing features.

In general, we found that marketing recruiters were harsher toward candidates who had more relevant work experience. This pattern appears in Figure 5, which illustrates a marginally significant interaction between relevance and mechanics ( $F[2, 90] = 3.0$ ,  $p < .06$ ). The penalty for mechanical errors was over .5 points for moderately relevant résumés; it shrinks to .2 points for no-relevance résumés. The rating for error-laden, moderately relevant résumés is so low (2.40) that error-free résumés of low relevance (2.61) actually come out marginally ahead. Marketing recruiters may have felt that students who were skillful enough to pursue appropriate work experience should also have realized the importance of carefully written communication in marketing.

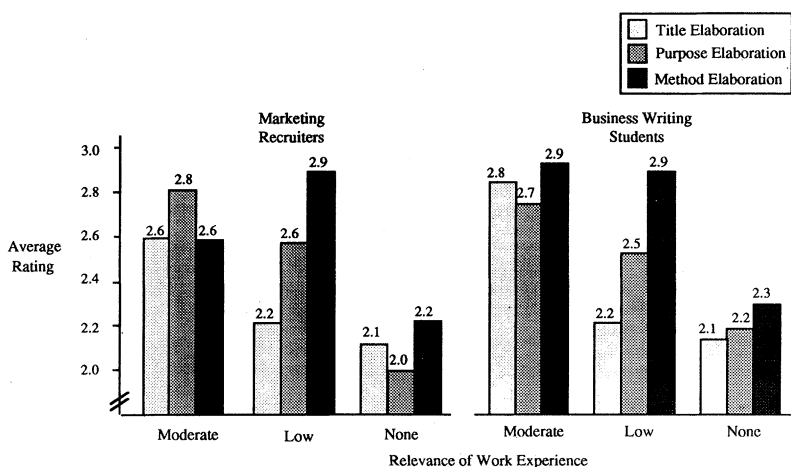


Figure 6: Marketing Recruiters' and Business Writing Students' Average Ratings of Résumés as a Function of Relevance of Work Experience and Elaboration

If students lacked on-the-job experience, marketing recruiters sometimes allowed a senior project to compensate, as indicated by a significant interaction between relevance and elaboration ( $F[4, 180] = 3.8, p < .01$ ). As shown on the left side of Figure 6, the recruiters ignored differences in elaboration when work experience was either moderate or of no relevance. However, for low-relevance résumés, recruiters gave significantly higher ratings if the marketing projects were fully elaborated. They rated low-relevance résumés with purpose elaborations more highly than those with titles ( $t[45] = 3.1, p < .01$ ) and gave even higher ratings to low-relevance résumés with method elaborations ( $t[45] = 2.6, p < .05$ ).

These results suggest that the marketing recruiters set upper and lower bounds for acceptable prior work experience and took the course project into account only for résumés in the middle range. They considered seriously only those applicants who had *some* relevant on-the-job experience. When applicants lacked any relevant experience whatsoever (no relevance), the class project was no help, even if fully elaborated. Conversely, when applicants had sufficient on-the-job experience—at least two relevant jobs (moderate relevance)—a class project became superfluous; elaboration of the project neither helped nor hurt their chances for an interview. However, when applicants had some but not sufficient experience, as in the case of the

low-relevance résumés, then recruiters allowed the project to make up the difference, but only if the description of the project provided enough elaboration.

### **A Comparison of Marketing Recruiters and Engineering Recruiters**

The results presented here suggest that writing quality plays an important part in a recruiter's assessment of a résumé. However, because we focused exclusively on marketing recruiters reading marketing résumés, it is unclear to what extent these results are peculiar to this particular discipline. By comparing these results to those obtained in similar research with engineering recruiters, we can begin to distinguish results that reflect general trends for recruiters from those due to specific needs and expectations of different discourse communities.

In our previous research, we investigated the importance of writing quality to engineering recruiters' assessments of résumés. The basic method of that study was the same as that reported here: Recruiters read a set of résumés and rated them on a 4-point scale. In the previous study, the recruiters had come to campus to fill positions in mechanical engineering, and the résumés described fictitious mechanical engineering majors. The résumés varied the same four factors: relevance, elaboration, style, and mechanics.

One difference between the studies concerned the nature of the class projects involved in the elaboration factor. The descriptions of class projects in the engineering résumés were based on a required senior mechanical design course. In this course, students work in groups to design and construct some device and write a report presenting their work to a prospective manufacturer. As in the marketing study, the descriptions of these projects came in three versions: title, purpose, and method. In this case, purpose elaborations referred to the purpose of the device, and method referred to the student's design strategies. Another difference in the studies was the degree of relevant work experience. In the engineering study, we used higher levels of work experience: high, moderate, and low rather than moderate, low, and none. In the high-relevance résumés, all three summer jobs were drawn from the relevant pool; the moderate- and low-relevance levels were the same as those described previously. A final difference was the number of mechanical errors. The error-laden résumés in the

engineering study contained an average of 8 to 10 errors as opposed to 5 to 9 errors in the marketing study; we scaled down the number of errors for the marketing study, expecting marketing recruiters to be more sensitive to such features.

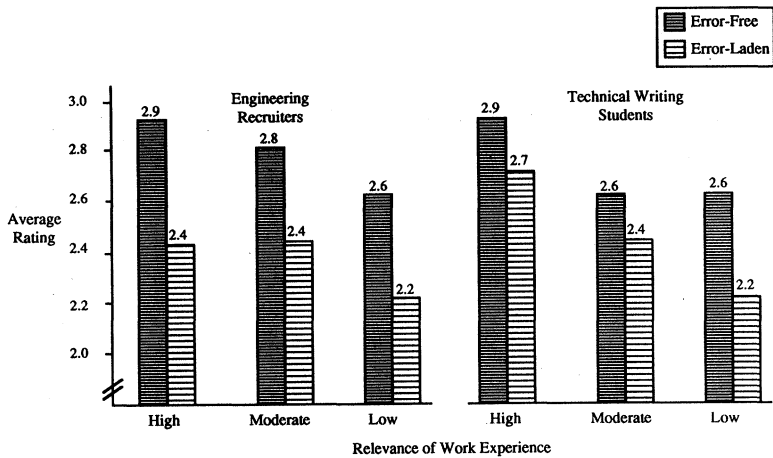
## Results

*Mechanics and style.* Like the marketing recruiters, the engineering recruiters rated error-free résumés significantly higher than error-laden résumés. Unlike the marketing recruiters, however, the engineering recruiters did not systematically prefer verbal style to nominal style, rating résumés in the two styles nearly equally overall. In effect, the use of nominal style by itself was never sufficient cause for lowering an engineering recruiter's estimate of a résumé, although it did have an effect in combination with other factors.

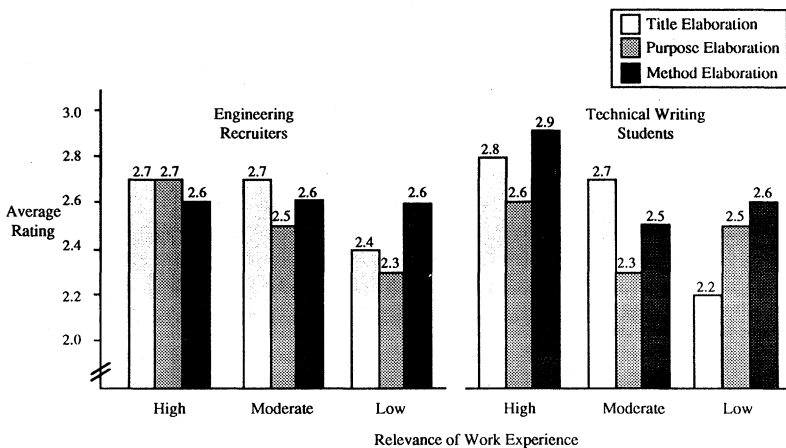
Like marketing recruiters, engineering recruiters rated more highly résumés that listed more relevant work experience. As in the marketing study, error-free résumés listing less relevant experience came out ahead of error-laden résumés listing more experience (see left side of Figure 7). However, unlike marketing recruiters, engineering recruiters applied more consistent writing standards, regardless of other qualifications. As shown in Figure 7, the ratings for error-free and error-laden résumés differed by about .4 points regardless of the degree of relevance. In contrast, marketing recruiters seemed far less tolerant of poor writing quality from applicants with the most relevant work experience (see Figure 5).

*Elaboration.* Like marketing recruiters, engineering recruiters showed no inclination to penalize résumés with longer elaborations. The engineering recruiters, however, more clearly discriminated among the kinds of elaboration, preferring title or method elaborations to purpose elaborations (see left side of Figure 8). The results indicate that the critical issue was not length per se, but rhetorical appropriateness; the engineering recruiters gave lower ratings to purpose elaborations that provided details only about the purpose of the device but that gave no indication of the student's ability to design and build it. Method elaborations supplied that kind of information, and title elaborations at least refrained from supplying irrelevant information. In contrast, the marketing recruiters' ratings tended to





**Figure 7: Engineering Recruiters' and Technical Writing Students' Average Ratings of Résumés as a Function of Work Experience and Mechanics**  
 SOURCE: Charney, Davida, and Jack Rayman. "The Role of Writing Quality in Effective Student Résumés." *JBTC* 3.1 (1989): 36-53.



**Figure 8: Engineering Recruiters' and Technical Writing Students' Average Ratings of Résumés as a Function of Relevance of Work Experience and Elaboration**

increase with the length of the elaboration (Figure 6). Thus the marketing recruiters seemed to see more value in the purpose elaborations than did the engineering recruiters.

Why might the engineering and marketing recruiters have differed on the value of the purpose elaborations? The marketing recruiters do not seem to have been less sensitive to rhetorical appropriateness than were the engineering recruiters. Instead, marketing recruiters may simply have considered the purpose elaborations to be perfectly appropriate rhetorically, even though the engineering recruiters did not. If we consider the projects in their professional contexts, this interpretation seems quite reasonable. Mechanical engineers take the idea for a device or object and figure out how to design and create it—they may not be the source of the idea itself, so a description of the purpose of the device or object may not reflect any credit on them. Their skill lies in the elegance, efficiency, and efficacy of the design and its execution. In contrast, formulating the purpose of a marketing study is a crucial part of the work of the marketing researcher. Although we had intended the purpose elaborations in the two studies to be functionally equivalent, their role in the two contexts may have been quite different. To test these possibilities, further research is needed. A study might consider, for example, whether marketing recruiters are as tolerant of lengthy elaboration in other parts of the résumé, particularly where the information was less relevant to marketing, or the purpose elaborations might be revised to focus on the actual product or service being researched.

The marketing recruiters also took elaboration into account in another way. When applicants had some but not enough work experience, marketing recruiters gave higher ratings to résumés with well-elaborated student projects. In contrast, engineering recruiters did not in any case allow the senior project to compensate for a lack of relevant work experience. In summary, although both groups of recruiters were highly sensitive to writing quality in their evaluations of résumés, they differed in several subtle but important respects—in particular, in their sensitivity to style and elaboration.

In the following studies, we compare the ratings from engineering and marketing recruiters to those from undergraduates in technical and business writing classes. Although the résumés that students submit in class may suggest that they fail to appreciate the importance of writing quality in résumés, this conclusion may be too hasty. The students may be perfectly well aware of the same writing features that

recruiters value but not know how to apply them appropriately, or they may forget to apply them. Alternatively, students may miscalculate the relative importance of these features; they may value correct mechanics but believe it is outweighed in recruiters' minds by an excellent record of work experience. Herrington's research on chemistry students writing lab and design reports is consistent with this possibility. She found that students *can* adjust their writing for different discourse communities or *forums* in school contexts, but their perceptions of the writing conventions appropriate to each forum differed somewhat from those of their professors. Therefore, to help students adjust their writing appropriately to meet their readers' expectations, it is important to know how accurately students have anticipated those expectations.

By asking engineering and business students to rate the résumés, we hoped to learn more about their adherence to different discourse communities. Would the ratings from business writing students, for example, more closely resemble those of their fellow undergraduates in technical writing, who are their peers in the larger academic and social community of the university, or would their ratings follow disciplinary boundaries, more closely resembling the recruiters representing the professional community they wish to join?

## STUDY 2: BUSINESS WRITING STUDENTS' ASSESSMENTS OF RÉSUMÉS

In this study, we asked business writing students to rate the marketing résumés and compared their ratings to those of the marketing recruiters. The students in most business writing classes are a diverse group with wide-ranging career goals, some interested in balancing budgets, some in promoting products, and others in running organizations. It is an open question whether the students in a typical business writing classroom are representative of some general business discourse community or even of the discourse communities of their individual disciplines. As students, they may not yet have had sufficient experience with those communities to have adopted their attitudes toward writing. Our first goal, then, was to find to what extent these students agreed among themselves on what constitutes an effective résumé.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 42 undergraduates (12 female and 30 male) enrolled in two summer session sections of business writing. A large proportion of these students (74%) were majoring in business (for example, accounting, economics, marketing, finance, management); the rest had declared no major or were liberal arts majors.

### *Procedure*

The study was conducted early in the semester, before discussion of the résumé assignment. The students were instructed to rate the résumés on a 4-point scale according to how strongly they believed the applicants described in them deserved job interviews. The study took place during a single 50-minute class session; no students had difficulty finishing the task within this time. The students were not compensated for participating in the study.

## Results and Discussion

### *Mechanics*

The most surprising result of this study was that the business writing students did not distinguish between error-free and error-laden résumés in their ratings; the average rating for error-free résumés was 2.50 and that for error-laden résumés was 2.55 ( $F < 1$ ). Furthermore, mechanics did not enter straightforwardly into interactions with other factors, such as style (see right side of Figure 3). Mechanics interacted significantly with both relevance and elaboration, but neither interaction was interpretable. In particular, in each case, the ratings for error-laden and error-free résumés were indistinguishable in every experimental condition except one, in which error-laden résumés inexplicably received higher ratings than did error-free résumés. We will argue in what follows that the students' failure to discriminate between error-laden and error-free résumés was not due to extraneous factors, such as failing to understand how the rating system worked or general ignorance of the importance of effective language.

### *Relevance of Work Experience*

Business writing students were sensitive to differences in relevant work experience ( $F[2, 76] = 10.4, p < .01$ ), giving significantly higher ratings to moderately relevant than to low-relevance résumés (2.84 versus 2.54, respectively;  $t[41] = 6.2, p < .01$ ) and significantly higher ratings to low-relevance than to no-relevance résumés (2.54 versus 2.19, respectively;  $t[41] = 3.3, p < .01$ ). The students' success at discriminating among the various levels of relevant work experience argues for their understanding of the rating system and for their efforts to rate the résumés conscientiously.

### *Style*

As shown in Figure 3, business writing students rated verbal style résumés significantly higher than those in nominal style (2.62 versus 2.43, respectively;  $F[1, 41] = 13.6, p < .01$ ). For both business writing students and marketing recruiters, then, verbal style produced an overall ratings advantage of about .2 points. These results argue for some degree of sensitivity in these students to formal features of writing.

Business writing students were more apt to penalize résumés for nominal style when they listed more relevant work experience, as suggested by a significant interaction between style and relevance ( $F[2, 82] = 4.8, p < .05$ ). As illustrated in Figure 9, the difference in ratings between nominal and verbal style for moderately relevant résumés was large—.37 points ( $t[41] = 3.9, p < .01$ ). The differences between nominal and verbal style for the other relevance levels were in the same direction but were much smaller and not statistically significant. Thus, when they were sensitive to a feature of writing quality, the business writing students seemed to set higher standards of writing ability for applicants with better credentials, a tendency similar to that of the marketing recruiters (compare Figure 9 with Figure 5).

### *Elaboration*

Business writing students again resembled marketing recruiters in giving higher ratings to résumés with fully elaborated descriptions of marketing projects ( $F[2, 82] = 8.8, p < .01$ ). Although the average ratings for title and purpose elaborations did not differ significantly

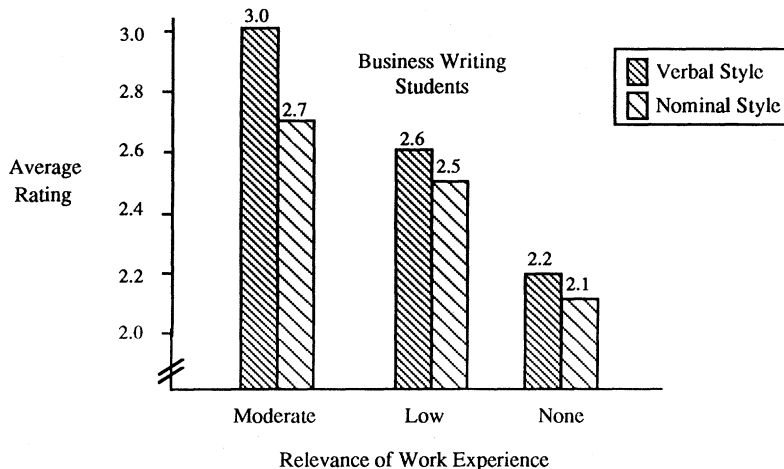


Figure 9: Business Writing Students' Average Ratings of Résumés as a Function of Relevance of Work Experience and Sentence Style

(2.39 versus 2.49, respectively), method elaborations (2.69) were rated significantly higher than both title elaborations ( $t[41] = 3.7, p < .01$ ) and purpose elaborations ( $t[41] = 3.0, p < .01$ ). In contrast, the recruiters had sharply distinguished between titles and the two longer forms of elaboration.

Again like the recruiters, the students' ratings revealed a significant interaction of elaboration with style ( $F[2, 82] = 7.9, p < .01$ ). As the student ratings on the right side of Figure 4 indicate, when résumés were cast in nominal style, elaboration had no significant effect. The advantage for longer elaboration emerges for verbal style résumés. This interaction is very similar to that found for the marketing recruiters (left side, Figure 4), although the recruiters were more consistent in penalizing nominal style across all three levels of elaboration.

Elaboration also significantly interacted with relevance ( $F[4, 164] = 4.85, p < .01$ ), as illustrated on the right side of Figure 6. This interaction was again remarkably similar to that observed for the marketing recruiters. For both students and recruiters, the only significant differences among the three forms of elaboration occurred when the résumés contained low-relevance experience. Students gave significantly higher ratings to low-relevance résumés with purpose elaborations than to those that listed a title only ( $t[41] = 2.1, p < .05$ ). Sim-

ilarly, low-relevance résumés with method elaborations were rated significantly higher than those with purpose elaborations ( $t[41] = 2.7$ ,  $p < .05$ ). We argued previously that this pattern of results suggested that marketing recruiters had set upper and lower bounds of acceptable work experience. The similarity between the recruiters' and students' ratings suggests that they both had similar expectations.

### *Summary*

Business writing students and marketing recruiters were sensitive to many of the same features of writing quality in rating résumés. Although the students failed to take mechanics into account in their assessments, their preferences for verbal sentence style and longer forms of elaboration were very similar to those we observed for the marketing recruiters. The students and marketing recruiters were also similar in adjusting their writing standards to the applicant's other qualifications, showing less tolerance for ineffective writing from candidates with greater work experience and some willingness to allow well-elaborated student projects to compensate for insufficient work experience. In sum, in spite of their failure to distinguish between error-free and error-laden résumés, the business writing students responded much more like the marketing recruiters than had the engineering recruiters.

We can only speculate about why business writing students ignored mechanics. Their results generally indicated that they understood the rating system and were sensitive to other writing features. Either the students failed to detect the errors or they detected them but decided they were not important to their assessment. Evidence from the questionnaires does not rule out either possibility. The questionnaire asked participants to rate the importance of various aspects or parts of résumés, including holistic aspects (neatness, length, layout, correct spelling and grammar, and clear language) and particular parts (job objective, work experience, references, and so on). Of the twelve aspects or parts queried, the marketing recruiters considered work experience, correct spelling and grammar, and clear language to be the three most important. Over 90% of the marketing recruiters rated each of these as "important" or "very important." Their opinions of the other features did not approach such unanimity. Interestingly enough, these three features were also the top three for the business writing students. However, whereas about 90% of them



considered work experience and clear language to be "important" or "very important," only 76% rated correct spelling and grammar in these categories. So although the students clearly did consider mechanics important, the degree of importance that they attached to it was much lower than that of the recruiters. We cannot determine from this evidence whether students failed to detect the errors or whether they detected them and gave them small or inconsistent penalties.

Given the overall similarity between the evaluations by business writing students and those of marketing recruiters, the next step was to consider whether evaluations by technical writing students resemble those by business writing students or by engineering recruiters.

### STUDY 3: TECHNICAL WRITING STUDENTS' ASSESSMENTS OF RÉSUMÉS

#### Method

##### *Participants*

The participants were 42 undergraduates who were enrolled in two sections of technical writing in the spring semester. Although specific majors are not available for these two sections, most students who enroll in technical writing are either engineering majors (55%) or science majors (38%). Mechanical engineering is typically the largest single major represented in technical writing courses, accounting for 10% of the total enrollment.

##### *Materials and Procedure*

The original set of mechanical engineering résumés rated by the engineering recruiters consisted of 72 résumés, two of each possible combination of factors. Because the students had to complete the task within a 50-minute class session, they rated only 36 of the résumés, selected randomly but representing one complete replication of the experimental design. Like the students in business writing, the technical writing students were instructed to rate the résumés on a 4-point scale according to how clearly the students described in them deserved job interviews. The students were not compensated for participating.

## Results

### *Mechanics and Style*

The technical writing students were highly sensitive to mechanical errors, rating error-free résumés significantly higher than error-laden résumés (average ratings 2.69 versus 2.43, respectively;  $F[1, 41] = 13.7$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As such, they were as alert to mechanics as the engineering and marketing recruiters. However, their penalty for mechanical errors averaged only .2 points, half the size of the engineering recruiters' average penalty. These students, then, differed from their business writing counterparts who failed to distinguish between the error-free and error-laden résumés. Conceivably, technical writing students were simply better students or had better verbal ability than business writing students. To investigate this possibility, we compared the average grade-point averages and verbal SAT scores of students in four randomly selected sections of technical writing and four sections of business writing. Our analyses revealed no significant differences between the students on either measure. The technical writing students may have had an easier time detecting mechanical errors than the business writing students because the error-laden engineering résumés contained an average of two more errors than the marketing résumés (as described previously). The errors in the marketing résumés, then, may have been too few in number to pass some awareness threshold for business writing students.

Neither the engineering recruiters nor technical writing students systematically preferred verbal sentence style to nominal style overall. In contrast, both marketing recruiters and business writing students gave higher ratings to résumés cast in verbal style.

### *Relevant Work Experience*

Like all other participants in these studies, technical writing students gave significantly higher ratings to résumés that listed more relevant work experience ( $F[2, 82] = 15.3$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As shown on the right in Figure 7, technical writing students gave higher ratings to high-relevance than to moderate-relevance résumés (2.80 versus 2.49, respectively;  $t[41] = 4.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but the difference between the average ratings for moderate- and low-relevance résumés (2.49 versus 2.40, respectively) was not statistically significant.

Overall, technical writing students penalized less relevant work experience more severely than did engineering recruiters (deducting an average of .4 points versus .2 points, respectively). Because the engineering recruiter's penalty for lack of work experience was smaller than their penalty for mechanical errors, they rated low-relevance résumés that were error-free slightly higher than error-laden, high-relevance résumés (left side of Figure 7). In contrast, technical writing students tended to give higher ratings to résumés listing highly relevant work experience even when they were error-laden.

### *Elaboration*

The technical writing students also differentiated significantly among the forms of elaboration ( $F[2, 82] = 4.5, p < .05$ ). Like the engineering recruiters, they gave their lowest ratings to the moderately long but rhetorically less appropriate purpose elaborations (Figure 8). The students' ratings for method elaborations were significantly higher than for purpose elaborations (2.66 versus 2.45, respectively;  $t[41] = 3.17, p < .01$ ). Their ratings of résumés with titles (2.58) were intermediate, not differing significantly from either purpose or method elaborations. These results are like those of the engineering recruiters: Lengthy elaboration is acceptable as long as it is rhetorically appropriate.

For the technical writing students, elaboration interacted significantly with relevance of work experience ( $F[4, 164] = 9.8, p < .01$ ), as indicated in Figure 8. The interaction centers on the relative ratings of the purpose and title elaborations. In particular, in résumés with moderately relevant work experience, technical writing students significantly preferred title elaboration to purpose elaboration ( $t[41] = 4.5, p < .01$ ). But when résumés listed low-relevance work experience, students gave purpose elaborations significantly higher ratings than title elaborations ( $t[41] = 2.6, p < .05$ ). In other words, the students' objections to the rhetorically inappropriate purpose elaborations disappeared when the résumé has little to offer in the way of relevant work experience, and in the same circumstances, their preference for title elaborations also disappeared. Thus the students apparently believed that any elaboration on a senior project is worthwhile in an attempt to compensate for a lack of relevant work experience. In contrast, engineering recruiters tended to favor method and title elaboration, even for low-relevance résumés. They seemed not to weigh the

senior project any differently for applicants with different amounts of relevant work experience.

Overall, these results suggest that technical writing students' and engineering recruiters' criteria for effective résumés do not differ much in kind, but do differ in degree and in consistency of application.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In the studies reported here, we considered how writing quality in résumés influenced the assessments of four groups of readers: marketing recruiters, engineering recruiters, business writing students, and technical writing students. The groups differed along two dimensions: discipline (engineering versus business) and professional standing (recruiter versus student). In looking within the four groups, we wished to determine which writing features, if any, systematically affected a reader's overall assessment of a résumé. In looking across the groups, we wished to see whether the patterns of ratings conformed to groupings of readers along either dimension.

Our results confirm some pieces of traditional wisdom about résumé writing. Résumés that do not follow standard conventions for mechanics will not be taken seriously, even if the candidate has other strong qualifications. In general, students failed to appreciate the importance of standard mechanics. Business writing students either failed to detect violations or grossly underestimated their impact; technical writing students detected the problems, but their penalty was half as big as the recruiters'. One obvious implication of our results, then, is that teachers should continue to emphasize the importance of mechanics to students in both technical and business writing, encouraging the use of computer-aided error-detection programs or encouraging students to seek additional help. On the other hand, our results do not support those textbooks that overemphasize brevity to the exclusion of timely elaboration. Our results clearly indicate that length of elaboration is much less a concern than rhetorical appropriateness, although disciplines obviously have different criteria for determining relevance. Finally, the results on style were mixed: Verbal style was apparently an important consideration for marketing but not for mechanical engineering. These features are not, of course, the only ones of interest for résumés; further research might investigate

other stylistic variations, such as the use of bulleted lists as opposed to sentences, or graphic design issues, such as layout and typography.

Although students differed in some ways from the recruiters, the important dimension for differentiating the results is clearly disciplinary. In general, the ratings of the business writing students more closely resembled those of the marketing recruiters than they resembled those of the technical writing students, just as the ratings of the technical writing students more closely resembled those of the engineering recruiters than they resembled those of the business writing students. Thus our findings suggest that upper-level undergraduates already show signs of belonging to their respective professional discourse communities. This finding is consistent with the psychological literature (e.g., Holland) which suggests that the personality characteristics of different occupational group members are shaped or socialized by both educational and work environments. Indeed, the socialization process that occurs during the period of career choice and development has been characterized by some psychologists (such as Super) as the *implementation of a self-concept*. The similarity of evaluations along disciplinary lines seems to reflect this socialization process. Although we did not set out to study this socialization process, our study certainly supports its existence. It is clearly beyond our scope to determine whether the similarities of assessments within the disciplines result from the socializing effects of courses in an academic major, whether they reflect the attitudes or skills that lead students to select a particular major (or profession), or whether both factors play some role.

Whatever the source of the groupings of assessments, it is clear that the particular business and engineering communities we studied did not value the same writing features or apply the same writing criteria. Although the business community clearly favored verbal sentence style, this feature was largely ignored by the engineering community—a finding consistent with the differences other researchers have found in attitudes toward sentence style in various professional settings (Benson and Kessler; Suchan and Dulek; Hagge and Kostelnick). The business community gave stiffer penalties for infelicitous writing to résumés listing more relevant work experience, whereas the engineering community gave equal penalties across the board. Finally, the business community gave higher ratings to candidates who elaborated on relevant coursework when they lacked relevant work experience. Although the engineering recruiters did not allow such course-

work to compensate for a lack of work experience, technical writing students apparently believed they should.

These disciplinary differences merit further study, especially given the current debate over the benefits of merging business and technical writing courses into courses on professional writing. Both text-analytic and experimental studies are needed to investigate discourse conventions within and across disciplines, as in the recent research of Herrington and Odell and Goswami. Other more process-oriented studies are also needed—both to examine in more detail how readers in particular disciplines react on-line to rhetorical and stylistic strategies (see Charney) and as a tool for sensitizing students to readers' needs and expectations (see Schriver; Sitko). As a result of such broad-based research, we may find important differences within technical fields, such as between scientists and engineers or between physicists and biologists. Certainly, we would expect writing standards to vary within any given discipline according to the demands of the rhetorical situation. So, for example, although we might expect recruiters to apply the writing standards we identified here to job application letters, they might set quite different standards for in-house memos or technical reports.

Understanding how different readers of résumés respond to variations in writing quality is important for both teachers and students in technical and business writing. The implications of this research, however, point to more general issues of reading and writing. Did the business writing students really read the *same* résumés as the marketing recruiters? Clearly, in our study, as in all rhetorical situations, the readers' expectations and beliefs helped to constitute the texts they thought they were reading. The purpose of studying professional readers should *not* therefore be construed as a reductive exercise in drawing up specifications for writing to a given type of professional in a given type of situation. Instead, the goal should be to assess our presuppositions about writing in fields other than our own to discover whether we are assuming similarities among these disciplines that do not in fact exist and to discover, if possible, what forces shape the role of writing in professional work. Our goal may also be didactic: The current discourse practices of some professions may be ill-suited to their communicative needs. The role of writing teachers is to create effective and critical thinkers and communicators, not to enshrine received practices. As discourse specialists and as teachers of future

writers in the disciplines, writing teachers must study as well as shape writers' expectations and practices.

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*Davida Charney, an assistant professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, teaches business and technical writing, the rhetoric of science, and research methods. Her research has appeared in Research in the Teaching of English, JBTC, Information Design Journal, Human-Computer Interaction, and Memory & Cognition. She and Marie Secor are coeditors of Constructing Rhetorical Education, forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press.*

*Jack Rayman, an affiliate associate professor of counseling psychology, is Director of Career Development and Placement Services at Pennsylvania State University and a*

*Fellow of the American Psychological Association. His research has appeared in JBTC, Journal of Counseling Psychology, Journal of Vocational Behavior, and Career Development Quarterly.*

*Linda Ferreira-Buckley, an assistant professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, has taught courses in rhetorical theory, as well as freshman composition and business writing. She is at work on a manuscript, Arnold and Ruskin on Cultural Literacy: A Continuation of Belletristic Rhetoric.*